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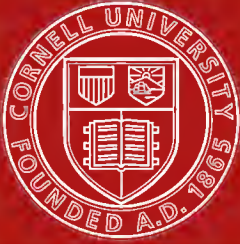
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THE
YOUNG DUCHESS;

OR,
MEMOIRS OF A LADY OF QUALITY.

A SEQUEL TO "ELLEN PERCY."

BY
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WITH FIFTY-THREE WOOD-ENGRAVINGS.

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THE YOUNG DUCHESS;
OR, MEMOIRS OF A LADY OF QUALITY.



CHAPTER I.

IMOGEN.

WE are about to introduce the reader to a small and plainly furnished room, in a house situated in one of the streets behind Astley's Theatre, at the No. 1.

foot of Westminster Bridge. This little parlour, though humble in its appointments, was nevertheless of a most scrupulous neatness and cleanliness. As the warm weather was setting in and fires could be dispensed with, an ornament of variegated papers concealed the grate: a nosegay of violets and primroses in a glass standing upon the table, rendered the atmosphere fragrant; and

a green venetian blind, or *jalousie*, lowered completely down inside the open window, shut out from the view the dingy brick buildings on the opposite side of the street. There was a good looking-glass over the mantel, which likewise displayed some pretty china ornaments. On a side table stood a work-box and a writing-desk, and there were some twenty or thirty volumes on a shelf in a recess. A lithograph portrait of a beautiful female in a strange fantastic dress, was suspended to the wall facing the mirror; and the original of that portrait was now reclining on the sofa, listlessly following with her eyes the movements of a little girl of about four years old who was playing about the room.

Fantastic indeed was the dress of that female. A small Greek cap, with a couple of pheasant's feathers, rested with an air of unstudied coquettishness upon a head of faultless formation. The features were purely Grecian: the complexion was beautifully clear and transparent; and though the cheeks were pale, yet they exhibited that freshness of the skin which is characteristic of health. Her eyes, of a beautiful blue, had a look which was alike vivacious and languishing; and her hair, of a rich dark brown, was lustrous with its own natural gloss. Her lips—the upper one being fuller than the lower—had an expression half smiling, and half serious, which corresponded with that of the eyes, and thus confirmed the general aspect of this beautiful countenance. She was a little above the middle height, but seemed taller than she really was because her figure was so striking and brilliant. With a certain robustness of limbs, all her proportions were nevertheless adjusted to the most perfect symmetry, tapering at the extremities into beautifully formed hands and elegantly shaped feet. Her's was a figure which conveyed the impression of strength blended with agility—a rounded fulness of the contours sufficiently developed for personal beauty, but not to be inconsistent with the liness and flexibility of the entire form.

And now, to revert to her costume, we must proceed to observe that a light under-garment, with a very short skirt, was confined at the waist by a crimson sash, or rather folded scarf, after the oriental fashion. The upper garment consisting of a purple velvet jacket made to button over the bosom at will, but now left open. The jacket itself was sleeveless; but the light under-garment before mentioned had short sleeves reaching not so far as the elbow; and thus the white well-modelled arms were left almost completely bare. She wore breeches made to fit loosely, and fastened just below the knees, with long pendant ribbons. Flesh-coloured silk stockings made the lower part of the leg seem bare down to the well-made and tight-fitting cloth boots, which without the slightest seam or wrinkle adjusted themselves each to the precise shape of the rounded ankle and the long narrow foot. Bracelets were upon the wrists, and there were rings to ornament the small, flexible, exquisitely chiselled ears: but truth compels us to add that all the jewellery thus displayed by the young female would not have amounted to the value of many pounds sterling.

Who was she? We have already said that her portrait was suspended in the room; and beneath it appeared the name of *MADemoiselle Imogene*.

But there were two or three notes lying upon the table; and one was addressed to *Mademoiselle Imogen*—the final e, be it observed, being omitted. The other letters were addressed to plain *Miss Hartland*; and as the young female had opened and read all these letters when they arrived, we naturally infer that she was Miss Hartland in private life, but *Mademoiselle Imogene* in some public capacity. In respect to her age, it would not have been very easy for even the shrewdest observer to fix it with any degree of precision; for while the well-developed form and matured contours seemed on the one hand to indicate the ripe womanhood of three or four and twenty, yet on the other hand the delicacy of the features and the air of youthful freshness that invested her would engender the surmise that her age could barely exceed twenty.

Nothing could transcend the infantile loveliness of the little girl who was playing about the room. She was, as we have already said, about four years old; and a luxuriant profusion of soft and fine flaxen curls set off a countenance the complexion of which was formed of milk and roses. The eyes were of a clear azure; and the little lips, thin and delicately cut, were as vivid in their hue as wet coral. The child was dressed with the utmost taste and neatness,—her entire appearance indicating that she was the object of the most scrupulous care.

The portrait to which we have before alluded, represented *Mademoiselle Imogene* in precisely the same dress which we have described: but it gave her the air of a Greek *Bacchanal* at a masquerade, placed in a lounging position against a seat in the box of a theatre, and smoking a cigarette. On the other hand, at the moment when we introduce her to our readers, she is half reclining upon a sofa in a small but neatly-furnished room; and she has no cigarette in her hand. Her eyes are listlessly following the movements of the child: but her countenance grows gradually more and more serious, the half-smile fading away from her lips. She becomes completely absorbed in thought; and her eyelids droop—not because drowsiness is coming over them, but because all her attention being now concentrated inwards, is shutting out from itself as it were every external object.

Thus some minutes passed: and then all of a sudden a strange light flashed in the deep blue eyes under the half-closed lids; and with a quick spasmodic start, she flung her looks upon the child, muttering, "Little wretch! you are the cause of all I suffer!"

The child did not catch the sense of the words—she only heard their sound; and she was at the same time frightened by the sudden start which the female gave. Thinking therefore that she had in some way provoked her anger, the child threw down her doll and burst into tears.

"Dear, dear little thing!" cried *Mademoiselle Imogene*: and then this strange creature of sudden impulses caught the child up in her arms and pressed it to her bosom. "Don't cry, my love! for heaven's sake don't cry! I was not angry with you! Oh, pray don't cry—dear, dear little Annis!"

The child went on sobbing as if its little heart would break; and nothing could exceed the pain which *Mademoiselle Imogene* evidently experienced while endeavouring to soothe that grief.

"Don't cry like this, my dear little Annie!" she said in a voice that was even piteously entreating. "Oh, to think I should have drawn forth all these tears from those sweet azure eyes! Little dear innocent! Good God, how could I have done this!"—and then the strange impulsive creature herself sobbed and wept even more convulsively and bitterly than the child.

The latter now threw its little arms round the neck of the female, who pressed the child again and again to her bosom, until in a few minutes the little one sank off into slumber; and then Mademoiselle Imogene gently opened the door and conveyed Annie up to a neatly furnished chamber overhead, and where there was a little bedstead by the side of a larger one. Upon the snowy quilt of the little bedstead did Mademoiselle Imogene softly lay the child, at the same time tenderly yet cautiously pressing her lips to its cheek. Then descending from the chamber, she rang the parlour bell; and a neatly dressed, respectable-looking servant-woman, about thirty years of age, answered the summons.

"I have taken little Annie upstairs," said Mademoiselle Imogene, "and have laid her down. Go and stay with her till she awakes, and then put her to bed. Ah! and here is a nice piece of cake for her; and—and—you may tell her that to-morrow she shall be sure to have a new doll."

It was by means of these lavishing demonstrations of kindness towards the child, that this female of strange impulses endeavoured to atone for that momentary paroxysm of rage which had almost seemed to be replete with a bitter burning hatred towards the object of these marvellous inconsistencies.

Fanny, the servant-woman, hastened up-stairs to sit with the child; and Mademoiselle Imogene glanced at a clock which was ticking at the end of the passage. The dusk was now closing in: it was only just light enough for her to distinguish how the hands pointed upon the dial; and she mentally ejaculated, "It is nearly time to set out."

At that moment a low double knock at the front door reached the young female's ears.

"I will answer it, Fanny," she said, thus speaking up the staircase to the servant. "I daresay it is one of the young ladies of the establishment."

The front door was opened; and a lady, closely veiled, appeared upon the threshold. She was dressed with the utmost plainness; and the black veil was so folded and so retained over her countenance that it was impossible to catch the slightest glimpse of that face, especially with the dusk closing in. But that she was no ordinary person, was evident from the style in which her apparel was fashioned and worn; as well as from a certain air of distinction in the gait and carriage which were no doubt habitual. Mademoiselle Imogene had a quick eye; and it was therefore at a glance that she discerned this much in reference to the fine tall form of her veiled visitress.

But the visitress herself seemed to be transfixed with astonishment on beholding the fantastically dressed female by whom the door was opened; and not a syllable came from her lips.

"Whom did you want?" Mademoiselle at length asked, in a courteous tone; and her voice was singularly soft and pleasing.

"I—I beg your pardon," faltered forth the lady, who seemed to be almost overwhelmed with confusion: "but I fear that—that—I must have made some mistake. Perhaps those whom I sought are gone to live elsewhere——"

"Or perhaps, madam, you have come into the wrong street—or if the right street, to the wrong house?" and Mademoiselle Imogene spoke with the utmost courtesy, because she felt more than ever convinced by the speech and manner of the veiled visitress that she was indeed a well-bred lady.

"No—this is the street and this is the number of the house," said the latter: "but still—I am sure—at least I think those whom I seek can be no longer here."

"Whom do you expect to find here?" inquired Mademoiselle Imogene.

The veiled stranger continued silent for nearly a minute: she seemed to be hesitating whether she should give a reply; and at length she timidly and falteringly said, "Some people of the name of Hartland used to reside here."

"Walk in, madam," exclaimed Mademoiselle Imogene. "I see that your business lies with me."

The stranger-lady again appeared to hesitate: then as if suddenly making up her mind, she crossed the threshold: but scarcely had she done this, when evidently seized with a fresh fit of irresolution, she made a movement as if to beat a retreat.

"Come, madam," exclaimed the fantastically-dressed female, in an impatient tone, "for heaven's sake make up your mind one way or another. This hesitation on your part is but little courteous to me, as if you fancied that you were invited to enter a house where your person would be scarcely safe. As for your character, whether it might suffer or not, can assuredly be of little moment, inasmuch as you wear that thick black veil as its defence-work."

"But tell me—tell me," said the lady, in a low and faint voice, "what have you to do with the family of Hartland?"

"My name is Hartland," was the reply: and the speaker's tone became courteous once more.

"You—you a Hartland?" said the lady, in scarcely articulate accents: and she staggered visibly under the influence of some strong emotions which were overpowering her. "Is it possible—you—in this garb? My God!"—and she suddenly burst into tears.

For a moment Mademoiselle Imogene was about to explode in a violent fit of indignation: but all of a sudden a suspicion of some kind struck her—a light seemed to flash in unto her mind; and she said in a quick tone, "Walk in, madam—walk in. If you are afraid of the darkness I will soon procure a light—though something tells me that you need not be afraid to be with me."

"No—I am not afraid," said the veiled lady, suddenly recovering her self-possession—or at all events a sufficiency of it to enable her to decide upon the course which she should pursue. "Lead the way. I follow."

Mademoiselle Imogene closed the front door, and conducted her veiled visitress into the parlour. There she at once lighted a couple of candles, and courteously bade the stranger-lady to be seated,—at the same time setting the example,

There was a silence of upwards of a minute, during which the veiled lady was evidently surveying the fantastically clad female with the utmost attention; and then it was equally visible that through the thick folds of her veil she slowly sent her regards travelling round the neatly-furnished parlour. Mademoiselle Imogene watched her narrowly, but with a seeming carelessness, as if she were waiting in a sort of easy indifference for the moment when it might please her visitor to enter into further explanations.

"And your name is Hartland!" the latter at length broke silence, but without making the slightest movement towards withdrawing her veil; and it also struck Mademoiselle Imogene that she was speaking in a feigned tone.

"Yes—my name is Hartland," replied the young female.

"Miss Hartland therefore, I presume?" was the next query.

"Yes—Miss Hartland," was the response.

"But the rest of the family—your father—your mother—your brother——"

"My father and my mother," said Imogen Hartland—for such was really her name—"are dead."

"Dead?" ejaculated the veiled lady. "How long have they been dead?"

"Two years have elapsed," responded Imogen, "since they both perished within the same week, of the fever that ravaged this neighbourhood. As for my brother——"

"Did he die too?" asked the veiled lady; "how many died within this house?" she demanded in accents which denoted a feverish anxiety.

"Only two died within these walls," answered Imogen,— "my father and my mother. My brother has gone to sea; for we were left in poverty."

"Poverty?" echoed the veiled lady; and she started and shuddered visibly as she spoke the word.

"Yes—poverty," said Imogen. "My father had been foolish enough to speculate with some money that he had; and the worst of it was that the money could scarcely be called his own—as perhaps you, madam, have already more than conjectured."

"I?"—and the veiled lady gave another start more abrupt than the former one.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Imogen, with a tone and manner of easy carelessness. "Proceed, madam. You shall continue to be the questioner."

"Your brother, you say, has gone to sea?" continued the veiled lady. "And you——"

"Oh, surely you can see what I am," ejaculated Miss Hartland, with a smile that seemed to be good-humoured, but which notwithstanding might have had a tincture of bitterness in it. "Perhaps you may have heard of me? There is my portrait. My real name is Imogen: but when I first entered the Circus, the manager stuck an e on the name—put a *Mademoiselle* before it—and coolly announced me as the celebrated Mademoiselle Imogene of Franconi's in Paris, although there perhaps never was any Mademoiselle Imogene there at all, but still more certain that I myself never was there. However, the thing took; and hundreds came every night to see Mademoiselle Imogene who would never so much

as traverse the street much less cross Westminster Bridge to see plain Miss Hartland."

"Do—do I understand you right?" said the lady, who spoke as if she were gasping and half-suffocating behind her veil,— "do I understand you right—that—that—you are an equestrian performer at Astley's Circus?"

"That is exactly, madam, what I am," replied Miss Hartland, with a cool easy off-handedness of tone and manner. "I am a great favourite at the amphitheatre. This is my principal character," she continued, glancing down at her costume. "I perform the part of a Greek bandit pursued by a host of troops. Of course I fly before them. I am a sort of female Dick Turpin for the nonce; and I light a cigarette, which I smoke while standing upright on my horse with an air of cool unconcern, although the animal is galloping round the circus at the height of its speed, just as if it were really over the plains of Greece."

"And therefore," murmured the veiled lady, "you are well paid doubtless?"

"Oh, well paid indeed!" laughed Imogen, displaying two rows of brilliant teeth: "who ever heard of people in our profession being well paid? But so long as I can keep a roof over my head and maintain those who are dependent upon me, I care not. Three guineas a week do not go very far; and yet they accomplish all that I need for the present."

"Ah!" said the lady; "those who are dependent upon you? Then you mean perhaps—you mean——"

"My servant for instance," replied Imogen,— "a worthy creature who has lived for the last ten years beneath this roof. And then too——"

"And then too?" repeated the lady. "You were about to say——"

"Hark!" ejaculated Imogen, rising from her seat and opening the parlour door. "There is another who is dependent upon me!"—for little Annie, having now awakened up, was crying—though she soon ceased when the good-hearted Fanny placed a piece of cake in her little hand.

"Good evening, Miss Hartland—good evening—I must go," said the lady. "Another time I will come and call upon you—to-morrow evening perhaps—You may think my conduct strange——"

"So strange," interjected Imogen, "that I do not choose to put up with it:"—and at once closing the parlour door, she placed her back against it.

"Good heavens! what do you mean?" murmured the veiled lady, tottering back two or three paces as if she had been stricken a blow. "You bar my way? Oh, let me depart, I beseech you! Ah, I forgot it was my intention to offer you my purse, Miss Hartland! But my brain is so confused——"

"Sit down and compose yourself," said Imogen coolly. "You and I will not part thus. You have had your turn as questioner: it is now for me to have mine. Tell me therefore——"

"Ask me nothing now!" cried the lady entreatingly: "ask me nothing now! I am not equal to the scene! I have mistrusted my own powers—But I will come to you to-morrow——"

"What guarantee have I for that?" demanded Imogen. "I know you not——"



MADemoiselle IMOGENE.

"Guarantee?"—and now the fine form of the veiled lady was drawn up to its full height; and though the countenance was concealed, yet did the keen-witted Imogen full easily comprehend how a haughty indignation had suddenly inspired her visitress.

"Ah! you must be some great lady!" ejaculated Imogen,—“greater perhaps than I could possibly have suspected! But we will see.”

The lithe supple form of the equestrian actress bounded forward—the clutch upon that dark veil with her long taper fingers was made in the twinkling of an eye—and as a shriek rang from the lips behind it, it was torn away from the countenance which it had concealed. And Ah! what a beautiful face was this that was now disclosed to the daring Imogen,—who, dropping the veil in all the wild amazement of a most unexpected recognition, ejaculated, “Good heavens! is it possible? The brilliant Duchess?”

“Silence, woman! silence!” said the Duchess—for such indeed was the exalted rank of the lady who had come so mysteriously to that house. “Silence!”—and she spoke in a voice that was hoarse with mingled rage and terror.

“I have no wish to expose your Grace—no wish to betray you,” replied Imogen, who, having recovered from her astonishment, now displayed a calm self-possession. “You and I understand each other thoroughly. When shall I see your Grace again?”

“Soon—very shortly—in a day or two—I will write and let you know,” faltered forth the Duchess, as she stooped to pick up the veil.

“At your Grace’s own leisure. It is of no consequence to me, now that I have discovered—”

“Enough! enough!” interjected the young Duchess; for the age of this beautiful patrician lady did not exceed five-and-twenty. “But, Ah! I had forgotten something. My purse—”

“Keep it, lady—keep it!” cried Imogen, almost disdainfully. “It is not thus that I am to be treated. I am no mean-spirited covetous wretch to be bribed into keeping a secret or to have a purse tossed to me as if it were a sop. But I act upon principle; and so long as I receive fair treatment from others, my own demeanour is equally candid and generous in return. Your Grace now understands me.”

“Singular being that you are!” exclaimed the Duchess, gazing with interest and almost with admiration upon the female in the fantastic dress who stood before her.

The next instant the Duchess again adjusted the veil over her countenance. Imogen opened the door—and the patrician lady quitted the house. The moment she was gone, Imogen threw a capacious mantle over her shoulders, and made the best of her way to Astley’s theatre,—entering it by means of the stage-door, which was only a minute’s walk from her own abode.

CHAPTER II.

THE COTTAGE.

THE scene now shifts to a beautiful little village at no great distance from Tunbridge Wells in

Kent; and as we have certain reasons for concealing the real name of that village, we will, with the reader’s permission, denominate it Addington. Our story, both as it relates to the preceding chapter and the present one, opens in the month of April, 1847. Nothing could be more delightful than the picture presented by the rural scene of Addington and its neighbourhood when the trees were putting forth their verdure, and when the hand of Nature was beginning to scatter flowers upon the meadows and on the outskirts of the groves.

A little way apart from the group of houses forming the village of Addington, stood a cottage in the midst of a pleasant garden, which was fronted with palings and had the remaining sides protected by high hedges. Nothing could be more picturesque than the spot which we are describing, with a crystal streamlet meandering and murmuring at a little distance on one side, and the grey old tower of the village-church peeping up above the yew-trees at a little distance on the other side.

It was at about five o’clock in the evening, that a tall handsome young man, whose age might be about six or seven-and-twenty, alighted from a coach which plying between Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells, passed through Addington. Hastily he bent his way towards the cottage which we have just been describing; and there was the animation of joy upon his countenance as if he expected to behold those who were dear to him. A very few minutes and he reached the garden-gate, when with a cry of delight a beautiful creature of about eighteen came rushing forth to welcome him.

“Alfred! dearest Alfred! you have returned at last!” she cried as he folded her in his arms.

“Yes, dearest Ethel,” he said; “punctual to the day, and almost to the hour of my promise! A fortnight’s absence—Oh, how long it has seemed! But where is our dear babe?”

At this moment a neatly dressed nursery-maid appeared from the cottage porch, bearing in her arms an infant about ten months old; and as the father, taking it for a few minutes from the attendant, fondled it with every evidence of the most dotting love, the young mother looked on with tears in her eyes. But Ah! though all tears are alike, yet from what different sources may they flow!—and these tears which now bedewed the peach-like cheeks of the charming Ethel had their origin in a fount of purest rapture.

We may avail ourselves of this opportunity to observe that Ethel had dark hair floating in rich redundancy over her shoulders—that her eyes were hazel, calm and soft in their expression—and that her figure was admirably modelled. Her looks were replete with innocence and artlessness, as if in becoming a wife she had not lost any of the ingenuousness of girlhood, and as if all her ideas of happiness were now centred in her husband and her infant boy. And well might she be proud as well as fond of him who had just returned to strain her to his breast: for not only was he exceedingly handsome, but he possessed fascinating manners, a distinguished appearance, and a well-cultivated intellect.

“I should have been with you, dearest Ethel,” he said, “some hours earlier to-day, only that I waited at Maidstone to perform a promise which

I made you some little time ago. Do you not recollect, my Ethel——”

“Oh, I can have no thought for anything now,” she cried, “except the enthusiastic joy which I experience at your return!”

Alfred threw his arm round the beautiful form of his wife; and as he thus strolled with her through the garden, he went on to say, “You remember, dearest, I promised that we should enjoy equestrian exercise the moment the fine weather set in. Oh, it will be so pleasant to ride together amidst the shady lanes and through the wheat-fields in the cool summer evenings!”

“Oh, delightful!” exclaimed Ethel, clapping her fair white hands with joy. “I now know what you mean, dear Alfred! You have been buying some horses at Maidstone?”

“Yes—and I am convinced that you will be pleased with the one I have procured for you. It is the most beautiful creature that ever carried a lady; and you, dear Ethel, will look charming upon its back!”

Alfred Trevor contemplated his lovely companion with the tenderest admiration as he thus spoke; and his eyes beamed with delight as he thought how elegant and graceful would be her appearance in a riding-habit setting off the contours of her symmetrical shape, and with a plumed hat decorating the beautiful head. But all of a sudden some other thought of a very different nature appeared to intrude itself upon that delicious reverie, as if some demon had suddenly flitted athwart the heaven of his imagination; for an expression of indescribable anguish shot over his countenance, and he had only just time to avert it to prevent the gentle Ethel from being shocked and horrified by the view thereof.

“Ah,” he ejaculated, finding himself compelled to snatch up some excuse for thus abruptly turning away from her; “how beautifully some of these flowers have come out during my absence!”

“And I have watched them with care and interest,” replied Ethel, whose voice was of silvery clearness, and pure as the roves of pearly teeth between which came the fragrant breath that wafted those dulcet sounds,—“I have watched them with care and interest, because I knew that you would admire them when you returned home. Ah! and now, my dear Alfred, I hope that you are going to make a long stay with me before you go away again—though of course I know that your business must be attended to—and all the more so,” she added, with a sweet smile and a fond look, “if you indulge me in such extravagant whims as that which you have this day gratified.”

“Nay, dear Ethel,” responded Alfred, “it was no whim of yours—it was an offer which I spontaneously made, and which resolved itself into a promise that has now been kept. Ah! by the bye! reverting to these new purchases, I should inform you that I heard of them quite by accident. I travelled a short distance in a coach with a person who turned out to be a horse-dealer—a Mr. Manning of Maidstone,—and he had to sell some horses for a military gentleman who it appears has been a little extravagant of late: but Manning would not mention his name. However, I bought the best two animals of the stud; and I gave them in charge to a person to bring them over. They ought to be here by this time.”

Scarcely had Alfred Trevor spoken these words,

when the sounds of horses' hoofs might be heard approaching; and again winding his arm about the waist of the beautiful Ethel, he hurried her towards the gate. In a very few moments the horses made their appearance, in the charge of the Maidstone groom to whom they had been entrusted. Ethel was delighted by the appearance of the beautiful creature purchased for herself; and she also admired the one which Alfred was to ride in company with her.

“And now, my man,” said Alfred, putting a guinea into the groom's hand, “this is in addition to what I have already given you for the care with which you have brought the horses over. Take them up to the Red Lion for me, and let them be put into the stables there until I can make other arrangements.”

The man took the guinea and touched his hat. But he did not immediately ride off: he fidgetted with his whip, and looked as if he had something to say.

“Well, what is it, my man?” demanded Alfred. “Are you not contented with what I have given you?”

“Oh, perfectly so, sir,” was the response. “Only——”

“Only what?” ejaculated Trevor, impatiently. “Perhaps you want to ask me whether I am suited with a groom?”

“No, sir—'twas not exactly that—indeed nothing near like it. But I want to say summut to you, sir: only——” and he glanced at Ethel.

“This lady is my wife,” cried Alfred; “you may speak before her. If there is anything wrong about the horses—and if I have been at all deceived——”

“No, no, sir—it's not that!” interjected the groom. “I'll just take up the horses to the Red Lion; and if so be, sir, you'll be disengaged for a few minutes when I come back——”

“Yes, yes! Away with you!”—and then, as the groom rode off, Alfred said to Ethel, “These fellows are never satisfied; for although he says he is, you may depend upon it he has yet something in his mind by which he hopes to extort another guinea or two out of me.”

A neatly-attired and pretty-looking parlour-maid now appeared from the cottage porch, to announce that dinner was served up; and Alfred conducted his wife into the dwelling. They sat down to table together; and half-an-hour passed, during which the groom was forgotten. At length the man was seen entering the gate; and Alfred exclaimed, “By heaven, my tormentor! But I will soon go and get rid of him.”

He hastened out into the garden; and stopping the groom, said, “Come now, my good fellow, what is it that you want with me?”

“Beg pardon, sir,” was the response, accompanied by a touch of the hat, “but you've behaved so like a genelman to me that I should be sorry to see you get into any trouble——”

“Trouble?” echoed Alfred. “What do you mean?”

“Why, sir, about that cheque——”

“The cheque? Ah!”—and for a moment Alfred changed colour. “Come now, explain yourself—and tell me exactly what you do mean.”

“Why, sir, just as I was coming out of Maidstone with them horses,” continued the groom,

"who should I meet but Mr. Manning the dealer. He didn't know anything of me before; but seeing the horses, he cries out, 'Well, so you're taking them home, and you must be careful with them, for it's a long distance——'"

"Ah! he said that—did he?" interjected Alfred, whose countenance now wore an uneasy expression. "But go on. What followed?"

"No, sir," says I to Mr. Manning, 'it's by no means a long distance, a matter of some dozen miles from Maidstone to Addington.'—Then you should have seen, sir, how queer Manning looked: but I didn't know that I had done any harm——"

"Well, well!" interrupted Alfred, with increasing nervousness. "Proceed, proceed! What followed? I suppose Manning asked you where you were going to take the horses?"

"Well, he did, sir; and I told him to a Mr. Trevor's. I believe that was right, sir—and you gave me that name?"

"I did. And what then?"

"Manning looked astonished; and clapping his hands on his breeches' pocket, he cried out—But saving your presence, Mr. Trevor——"

"Go on!—go on!" exclaimed Alfred, with an increasing excitement. "What was it that Manning cried out?"

"That the cheque you had given him," responded the groom, diffidently and hesitatingly,—"I don't like to say it, sir—but if I must—well then—Mr. Manning cries out, 'By God, I'm done! and the cheque's a forgery!'"

"My heavens!" ejaculated Alfred, smitten with consternation: "what if he should come here?"

"No—he will not come here, sir," said the groom; "because he's gone up to London to present the cheque at the banker's."

"Ah!" and it was with a sigh of ineffable relief that the exclamation came forth from the breast of Alfred Trevor.

"Why, you see, sir," continued the groom, "I represented to Mr. Manning that you didn't look like a swindler, but that you must be a gentleman every inch of you; cos why, says I——"

"Did he say anything more about the cheque?" demanded Alfred quickly.

"He only said, sir, that 'twas signed in quite another name from the one I'd mentioned to him; for he didn't seem to know that you was Mr. Trevor at all."

"Well—and did he mention *that other name*?" asked Alfred, still with nervous quickness.

"No, sir—he didn't mention it; and so in course I didn't ask him. But as I was saying," continued the groom, "I represented to Mr. Manning that you must be a thorough gentleman out and out, for that you comes to me and you says, says you, 'If you'll take them horses over to Dahlia Cottage at Addington for Mr. Trevor, here's a five pun' note for your trouble.' And so Mr. Manning says, says he, 'Well, at all events we know where the horses are going; and if everything should be right after all, I should be sorry to have kicked up a bobby about the business; and so I'll risk it this far, that I'll go up to London at once and present the cheque for a hundred and eighty guineas; and if it's all right, well and good; and if not, why then there'll be plenty of time to take out a warrant.'—So then away cuts Manning in one direction, and away comes I in t'other with the horses."

"And that was all that passed?" inquired Alfred.

"Why, not exactly, sir," responded the groom; "for Mr. Manning tips me half a guinea, telling me not to say a word to you that he had questioned me on the point. But you see, sir, I thought you was a gentleman——"

"Enough, my man!" exclaimed Trevor. "There is another guinea for your trouble; and now, mind you don't say a word to a soul about all these things. I shall be over in Maidstone again in a few days; and if I find that you have not said anything, depend upon it I shall not forget to reward you."

"You may rely upon me, sir:"—and again pulling his forelock—for the groom had stood hat in hand the whole time he was talking to Trevor, with the respect due to one who scattered his money about with no niggard hand—he took his departure.

As Trevor turned hurriedly away, the bitter anguished expression again swept across his handsome countenance, completely distorting for a moment those features of perfect masculine beauty; and he almost wrung his hands in despair as he mentally ejaculated, "Oh, my poor Ethel! Oh, my poor innocent babe Alfred!"

He however quickly composed his looks, and retraced his way into the elegantly-furnished little dining-room. Good heaven! what a spectacle met his view! Upon the carpet lay Ethel, white as marble. Was she dead? or was she only in a swoon? Half frantic, he flew towards her, and raised that inanimate form in his arms.

"Thank God, she breathes!" he exclaimed: and he hastened to sprinkle water upon her face.

He comprehended it all. The window was open; but it was concealed by evergreens from his view on the spot where he had conversed with the Maidstone groom, so that he had failed to observe at the time how it was possible for their colloquy to meet the ears of Ethel whom he had left at the table. Oh, what agony of mind did that young man then experience!—and how far more anguished even than before was the expression of mingled horror and despair which swept across his countenance!

Ethel opened her large hazel eyes. For a moment she smiled in fondness as her regards met his looks; and then, as if smitten with a sudden hideous recollection, she became dismayed and affrighted—and in a suffocating gasping voice, she said, "Oh, Alfred! Alfred! what was it that I heard?"

"Nothing, nothing, dearest!—a mistake! It was nothing but a mistake!"

"O God! *forgery!*" and the unhappy creature shivered and shuddered, and literally writhed convulsively in his arms: then with that sudden inspiration of fondness which ever impels a loving woman under such circumstances, she flung her arms about his neck, crying, "Oh, my dearest husband! do not deceive me! If there be any reason—Ah, I will not speak what I mean—but you will understand me when I say that no matter what you may be or what you may have done, I will ever cling to you—Oh, yes! all the more closely!"

"Ethel, Ethel! you are driving me mad!" exclaimed Trevor. "I have done nothing wrong! No, no!—fear nothing, my angel!"



"Alas, dearest Alfred!" she said, shaking her head mournfully; "it seems as if a veil had suddenly fallen from my eyes!—a thousand circumstances now surge up in my memory to make me apprehend a thousand evils!"

"This is foolish, Ethel! Oh, this is foolish!" ejaculated Trevor vehemently.

"Oh, do not be angry, dearest husband!" she resumed, now lavishing upon him the tenderest caresses: "but you know my fondness—and hence you may appreciate my fears! Relieve me therefore of my doubts! Why those constant absences from home? why the mystery that envelopes our union? Why have I never been presented to your family? And, Oh! why, why should you who are evidently so well off, bury me—aye, and bury yourself too when you are with me—in this comparatively humble cottage?"

"I thought, Ethel," answered Trevor reproachfully, "that you were contented to live with me

anywhere, no matter how secluded the spot—how humble the home!"

"Heaven knows that I am thus contented!" replied the young lady, smiling and weeping beneath the joint conflicting influences of her fondness and of her affliction. "It is not that I wish to change! But this occurrence has put such strange wild fears into my head—it has all in a moment made things which were apparently natural and consistent before, seem so strange and inconsistent—"

"You ask me, Ethel, relative to my frequent absences," responded Trevor: "you ask me concerning my family—you ask me why having money at my command, I bury myself with you in a retirement like this. Have you never before received from me explanations on these points? Have I not told you that I am connected with a mercantile firm on behalf of which I am compelled to travel frequently throughout all the

English counties—to Scotland and to Ireland—and sometimes even to Paris! Moreover, have I not assured you that I possess no near relatives who care for me, nor whose friendship you would value; but only distant kinsmen, of cold and proud dispositions—worldly-minded and selfish—whose only ideas of happiness are associated with money, and who could not be made to understand or believe that I am in the enjoyment of an almost perfect felicity with a wife whose beauty and virtue constitute her only dower. Do you desire to be presented to such relatives as these? Then, in respect to the retirement in which we live, is it not the happiest mode of existence? Suppose that I took you to the metropolis—that I there hired a fine house and gave entertainments,—would you be happier if we were thus lost as it were to each other in the midst of crowded rooms, than we are when alone together in the retirement of this cottage? And think you, Ethel, that it would be pleasing to my feelings to behold you whirling round in the dance with your waist clasped by some mawkish dandy, intolerable fop, or notorious profligate? or would you be altogether satisfied if you beheld me bestowing my attentions on one of those modern belles who drag out a sort of artificial existence in the sickly atmosphere of fashionable society,—one of those women whose faces are enamelled with hardihood, and the freshness of whose youth, though they themselves be yet young, is for ever gone!”

“Enough, enough, Alfred!” ejaculated Ethel, as she clung far more fondly than ever to her husband. “I do not wish to go into that society which you thus depict in such forcible colours! And, Oh! forgive me, my dear Alfred, for having expressed doubts, or hinted at misgivings, or seeming to have required explanations! But Ah! the words that I overheard—”

“Ethel,” interrupted Alfred, solemnly, “listen to me for a moment! Have I ever deceived you? Look back over the two years which have elapsed since first we met amidst the wild and grand scenery of Dorsetshire; and tell me whether you have ever known me to give utterance to a falsehood? Will you not therefore *now* believe me when I declare that everything connected with the communication made by that groom was an error and a mistake?”

“I am sure that you have never deceived me, dearest husband,” answered Ethel: “every promise you ever made you have fulfilled! But, Ah! I know how much you love me; and I fear—Oh! I fear that if there were anything disagreeable, you would do all that you could to conceal it, and you would say the most consoling things to me—and—and—out of actual kindness you might deceive me!”

For an instant Alfred made an impatient gesture; and then, with a quick revulsion of feeling straining his beautiful wife to his breast, he exclaimed, “Well, well—it is natural, Ethel, that you should have been annoyed and rendered uneasy by the untoward incident which has arisen. Not for worlds would I leave a restless suspicion floating in your mind. It is the dearest wish of my heart that you should continue to enjoy the calm serene happiness which you have hitherto experienced. To-morrow, therefore, you shall accompany me to London; and I will afford you

the most convincing proof, not merely that the mention of the word *forgery* in connexion with my name is as ridiculous as it is outrageous, but that the sources of my income are most honourable and legitimate!”

“A thousand thanks, dearest husband, for this proposition, so kind—so considerate!” exclaimed Ethel. “But I will not accept it!—for it would imply suspicion and mistrust; and Oh! to suspect or mistrust you—no, never! never!”

Alfred reflected for a few instants; and he said to himself, “Yes—it were better that I should take this step; or else on every future occasion the slightest incident will be rendering her uneasy and mistrustful!—Yes, dearest Ethel,” he continued, addressing himself to her, “it shall be as I have said! And now no more upon the subject.”

He embraced her affectionately; and for the remainder of that evening she was as gay and happy as her disposition was naturally wont to be; for she entertained not the slightest doubt that it was indeed an error and a mistake of some sort or another which had produced so much uneasiness.

On the following day Alfred and Ethel Trevor took their seats in a postchaise procured from the Red Lion; and they proceeded to London. Ethel had been in the metropolis before; and therefore the spectacle of the crowded Babylon was not new to her, though it was interesting, as it must ever be to those habitually dwellers in the country, who visit it but rarely. They alighted from the vehicle at an hotel at Charing Cross; but without tarrying there longer than was necessary to obtain some refreshment, Alfred Trevor gave his arm to Ethel and conducted her to a celebrated banking-house in the Strand. The moment they crossed the threshold, Trevor whispered to Ethel, “Remain here an instant:”—and he passed into a parlour at the back part of the premises.

In less than a minute he returned; and again giving his arm to Ethel, he conducted her into that parlour. There a short, elderly, bald-headed gentleman was seated at a table strown with letters and other documents; and at once rising from his chair, he bowed politely to Ethel.

“I know that your time is valuable,” said Alfred; “and therefore I am not going to occupy it for more than two minutes. In the first place just satisfy me—will you?—that the cheque for one hundred and eighty guineas which I gave to Manning, the Maidstone horse-dealer, has been paid.”

“No doubt of it,” answered the elderly gentleman—and he quitted the parlour: then almost immediately returning with a huge account-book, he opened it at a particular page, and said, “The cheque was presented and paid this morning. Will you have the cheque itself?”

“Oh, by no means!” answered Alfred. “Let me see? How long have I banked at your establishment? I mean I myself—individually. I am not alluding to my family—”

“The account was first opened in your name about three years ago,” replied the elderly gentleman.

“Have the kindness to give me a blank cheque,” said Alfred.

This request was immediately complied with; and he proceeded to fill it up at a desk which

was so situated that while he was writing his back was turned towards Ethel.

"Now," he said, "I must trouble you to procure me the amount for this. It is for five thousand pounds."

Ethel started; and she could scarcely keep back a cry of astonishment. Indeed, at the moment she was half inclined to fancy that the elderly gentleman would be taken quite aback by such a demand. But this individual continued perfectly calm and unruffled; and receiving the cheque, he again issued from the parlour. Ethel cast a look of bewildered inquiry upon Alfred, who smiled confidently, but said nothing. The bald-headed gentleman very speedily returned, and handed Trevor five bank-notes, each for a thousand pounds. Ethel felt as if she were in the midst of a dream; and the parlour, with the table and desk, and the little bald-headed gentleman, appeared to be whirling round and round. It was the same with the public part of the bank, as Alfred led her through it; and the sounds of chinking gold mingled with the buzz of voices in a manner that only seemed to increase the confusion of her brain. It was not until she again found herself in the street that the dreamy feeling of hallucination quitted her, and that she became conscious of the reality of the whole proceeding.

"Ah, dearest Alfred," she murmured, "it must indeed have been most painful to you to have been mistrusted and suspected yesterday, not only by others, but by your own wife! Now that I am so perfectly convinced of the prosperity of your position, I am happy—Oh, so happy! I feel as if my form were as light as the elastic air itself—and that I could spring up into it!"

Alfred flung upon her a smile of mingled tenderness and pride; and then stopping an unoccupied hackney-cab that was passing, he handed her into it. His instructions were given to the driver, and the vehicle proceeded into the City. In due time it stopped at an office in the immediate neighbourhood of the Bank of England; and Alfred, leaping out, left Ethel alone in the vehicle for a minute or two while he entered the office. On re-appearing, he said to her, "Come, dearest—alight. Mr. Warren is disengaged."

"And who is Mr. Warren?" inquired Ethel.

"A stockbroker," was the reply,—*"a gentleman who transacts all kinds of business in respect to money."*

The office was entered; and Mr. Warren—a tall, good-looking, elegantly-dressed man, whose age was under thirty—bowed most courteously to Ethel as Alfred presented him to her.

"Pray be seated, Mrs. Trevor," he said: "the business will not occupy a long time."

"Here is the money," said Alfred; and he handed the five bank-notes to Mr. Warren, who immediately quitted the office.

"These stockbrokers," said Alfred to Ethel, when they were alone together, "make a great deal of money. Here is Mr. Warren—a single man, with a splendid house at Highbury, his hunters and his yacht, his shooting-box down in the country—and yet scarcely able to spend all the money he makes!"

"And what has he gone to do with *your* money?" inquired Ethel.

"With mine?" ejaculated Alfred. "With

yours, you mean! Yes, dearest—he has gone to place that sum of five thousand pounds in the Bank of England in your name; so that if anything should prematurely happen to me—for of course we are all mortal—you and our dear little Alfred will be provided for. Not but that I hope to leave you a large fortune," added Alfred, with the sudden quickness of an afterthought.

The tears were streaming down Ethel's cheeks; and with mingled smiles and sobs she flung her arms about his neck. She had scarcely composed her feelings when Mr. Warren re-entered the office.

"The money is duly invested," he said, "in your name, madam; and here is the Bank receipt."

"Put it in an envelope," ejaculated Trevor, "and seal it. It will be safer so."

Mr. Warren did as he was requested; and when the envelope was duly sealed with a ring which he took from his finger, he presented the packet to Ethel, saying, "This is your's, madam."

She took it; and in a few moments she was again seated with her husband in the vehicle, which retraced its way towards the West End. The hotel where the postchaise had been left, was reached—the equipage was soon in readiness—and by five o'clock in the evening Alfred Trevor and the beautiful Ethel were again at Dahlia Cottage in the picturesque village of Addington.

"Now, my dearest wife," whispered Alfred, when they had embraced their infant, "go and secure that packet in some safe place. And remember—remember, dearest Ethel, the solemn injunction which I now give you—that you never open that packet until I shall be no more!"

Having thus spoken, he hastily turned away and walked forth into the garden; while Ethel, ascending to her chamber, consigned the sealed packet to a place of security.

Meanwhile her husband sought an arbour at the extremity of the garden; and rushing into that shaded retreat, he threw himself upon the bench, murmuring in accents of despair, "My God! what stratagems! what subterfuges! Oh, that I dared fling myself at her feet and tell her everything!"

CHAPTER III.

THORNBURY PARK.

THE scene now changes to a noble country-seat called Thornbury Park, and situated in one of the most beautiful parts of Buckinghamshire.

It was evening; and a flood of lustre streamed from the array of windows belonging to the spacious drawing-room; for there were many guests on this occasion at Thornbury. The moon was shining brightly in company with legions of brilliant stars, so that the argentine beams descending from heaven's canopy, mingled with the roseate effulgence flowing forth from the gilded saloon.

It was the last day of April; and therefore scarcely a week had elapsed since the occurrences which we have related in the preceding chapters. The weather was more than usually warm for that season of the year: there was not the slightest

chill in the evening air—but just a sufficient freshness to prevent the atmosphere from being sluggish or oppressive. Some of the guests began to stroll forth from the mansion into the spacious gardens; and they soon scattered themselves in the different avenues.

And presently the mistress of that palatial dwelling imitated the example set by the majority of her guests, and came forth likewise. The reader already knows her:—she was the handsome Duchess who had paid so mysterious a visit to the abode of Imogen, Hartland. She now appeared in evening toilet, which displayed her fine shape to the fullest advantage. Her carriage was not stately nor her mien imposing: but better still, the former was elegant and the latter engaging. She had evidently no more pride about her than that which properly belonged to her sex, apart from the social rank which she occupied. But exceedingly beautiful was she; and hence in fashionable society she was usually known as “The Brilliant Duchess.” If a newspaper paragraph, while recording any circumstances connected with high life, simply mentioned “The Duchess,” without giving her the rest of her title, everybody knew who was meant. People spoke of “The Duchess” as if there were only one lady of that exalted dignity in the land—while in reality it was because this particular Duchess was held paramount over the rest. Often too she was spoken of as “The Young Duchess;” for whereas her age was only five-and-twenty, she was actually the youngest lady who bore a ducal rank.

Yes—exceedingly beautiful, was she, with her light-brown hair rendered lustrous by the moonbeams, and with her pure complexion seeming all the fairer and more brilliant in the chaste halo which the heavens shed around her. As a flower sits gracefully on its stalk, so was the well-shaped head poised upon an arching neck, which rose up from a bust of grand development. The waist was slender: the arms, bare to the shoulders with the evening toilet, were modelled to a statuesque perfection. Her eyes were of a clear liquid blue,—not nearly so deep as the violet: indeed they were only a shade darker than the azure of that heaven from which the flood of silver light was pouring down upon her. The expression of those eyes can only be defined by blending the ideas of softness and animation—of clear brilliancy and of limpid calmness. The mouth was beautifully formed: the teeth were like rows of ivory; and the softly rounded chin completed the oval of that countenance of transcendent loveliness.

She came not forth alone from the mansion, to ramble through the gardens. She was accompanied by a gentleman of elegant appearance; and who was dressed in the most fashionable style, yet with the best possible taste. He was very handsome; and his slender form was well proportioned. He had light hair that curled naturally; and a moustache somewhat concealed the strength of passion which would otherwise have displayed itself in the curving voluptuousness of the mouth. His age was about six or seven and twenty: he was a Baronet—and he held a commission as a Captain in the Guards, with the rank therefore of Lieutenant-Colonel. He was unmarried, and had the general repnte of being very gay and of loving pleasure; while amongst those

who knew him most intimately, he bore the character of a successful libertine. He belonged to an old family; but from various circumstances it had been getting poorer and poorer for the last two centuries—so that it was but a very moderate fortune which descended to Sir Abel Kingston, the personage of whom we are writing.

Such was the individual who escorted the young Duchess forth from the mansion. She did not lean upon his arm: he had offered it—but she had declined to accept it; and silence reigned between them for several minutes as they descended a flight of marble steps leading down from a noble terrace to the walks and avenues of the garden, where splendid statues constituted no mean features of attraction. Everything was magnificent in reference to the old mansion of Thornbury—the gardens, the park, and the other pleasure-grounds attached to it; and as the mistress of such a charming country-seat—possessing a habitation of corresponding splendour in London—and married to a man only a little older than herself, and as handsome as she was beautiful,—one would have fancied that there was every reason why the young Duchess should have enjoyed as much happiness as this world could possibly give. But whether it were so, will appear from the developing incidents of our story.

“You seem offended with me?” said the Baronet, at length breaking silence. “How is it that I have been unfortunate enough to give you offence?”

There was a certain deprecation as well as a remonstrance, in his tone which showed that it was not as a mere guest he was speaking to his noble hostess—nor as a friend to a friend—no, nor as a relation—to a relation, because there was not the slightest kinship between them. Then, in what capacity was it that he thus spoke? The beautiful blue eyes of the young Duchess glanced half in tenderness and half in affright at him; and her bosom heaved like tumultuous billows as a long deep sigh came up from her very heart, forcing for itself a vent by the portals of ivory and coral which formed the mouth.

“Do you deem me too bold,” asked the Baronet,—“do you think that I have been too audacious in whispering to you ere now as I have done? Oh! if you would but give me credit for the immensity of the love which I have dared harbour for you! *Dared?* It is not the word! *To dare* means something that one does spontaneously and deliberately with a heroism of one’s own accord. But I—my God! I am as powerless in the vortex of this love of mine as the frailest vessel that ever was tossed amidst the foaming billows of the Maelstrom! Do not therefore blame me for loving you:—but pity me!”

The Duchess trembled violently; and as the moonbeams played slantingly upon her entire form, they revealed the agitation of her countenance—the flush that went and came rapidly upon her cheeks—and the swelling and heaving of the bosom which the low corsage of the evening toilet left half revealed. Sir Abel Kingston looked at her:—never to his eyes did she appear so wondrously beautiful; and he devoured her with his regards. She glanced at him—he quickly averted his looks, with the consciousness that they were so full of impassioned ardour they might cause her to doubt the pure sincerity of his

love, and make her think that it was nothing more than a sensuous flame. She caught the half-vanishing profile so perfect in its masculine beauty: the Baronet's white teeth alone beneath the moustache which bowed the upper lip; and at the very same instant when he thought within himself that he had never seen her look so wondrously lovely, did she feel herself smitten with the conviction that he was handsomer than ever she had thought him to be, well as his countenance was known to her!

"I am not offended with you, Sir Abel," she murmured: "I have no right to be. Alas! I feel and I know that my conduct has not been altogether consistent with prudence; and there have perhaps been looks which I have thrown upon you, and words which I have unguardedly suffered to drop from my lips, that may have seemed like an encouragement—"

"Oh! if you regret anything of all this," interrupted Abel, "tell me that you would wish to go back to that period when we were as mere formal acquaintances!—when I dared not suffer my looks to mingle with your own—or my hand to linger in the clasp which it gave your's—or my tone to catch the infection of my heart's melting tenderness! Tell me that such is your wish—and I will at once assume that demeanour which shall be in accordance therewith! Yes!—for I value your happiness above all other earthly things; and sooner, sooner would I feel my own heart breaking, than that a single hair of your head should be injured!"

The wily Baronet threw an ineffable pathos into his accents; and now with anxious looks he watched to mark the effect that his words were to produce. Again was there the agitation throughout the entire form—that beautiful form in its evening toilet!—again was there the deepening flush upon the damask cheeks!—again the swelling of the bosom as if it must burst its prisonage of corset! A faintness came for a moment over the young Duchess; and then, obedient to a sudden impulse, she ejaculated almost with vehemence: "No! no! I am neither offended with you—nor do I wish to go back to the cold formalities of our first acquaintance some months ago."

"Then why—why did you refuse ere now to take my arm?" asked Kingston: "why did you even seem as if my presence was unwelcome to you when I offered to become your escort into the garden?"

The Duchess did not immediately answer these questions: she reflected deeply for some moments; and then at length she said, "I will tell you the truth, Sir Abel—I will be candid with you! I feared to find myself alone with you; but perceiving that it was impossible to avoid it, I sought to arm myself with as much coldness and reserve as possible—But Ah! what am I doing? It is a veritable confession that I am making! Leave me, Sir Abel!—leave me I entreat you!"

"Oh, no! no!" he ejaculated, in a joyous tone: "not after these delightful encouraging words which have issued from your lips! Oh, it is an avowal of love—it is an admission that the strong sentiment I experience towards you is reciprocated! Oh, Mary! beautiful Mary! I thank thee for that avowal!"

Sir Abel Kingston sank upon one knee as he

took the hand of the charming Duchess, and pressed it to his lips. It was the first time that he had ever ventured to call her by her Christian name; and the sound of that name, when thus spoken by a voice that was so full of masculine harmony, sent a thrill throughout her entire form. She abandoned her hand to him for some moments; and he rapturously covered it with kisses. At the same time he flung a keen searching glance in the direction of a thicket of evergreens, in the immediate neighbourhood of which this scene took place: and he exclaimed, "Oh, Mary! Mary! how happy am I in the consciousness which I at length possess, that this love of mine is reciprocated!"

"Rise, rise, Abel!" she said, deeply agitated: and it was now also for the first time that she addressed him by his Christian name. "Oh, what if any one were to observe us! And this reminds me," she continued, as the Baronet rose and continued to walk by her side, "of the immense impropriety of my conduct! Oh, I beseech you to forget everything—that has just passed between us—I recall what I said—I will admit nothing! No, no! I will not permit you to put any interpretation you think fit upon those words which fell from my lips I know not how!"

"Recall nothing, I beseech you!" exclaimed Kingston. "And why should you? You have suffered me to understand that you love me; and you have put me in possession of a degree of happiness from which I cannot part. And if it be happiness to you also to love one who will sincerely love you in return, wherefore should you not abandon yourself to that bliss? Your husband appreciates not your great beauty—he neglects you—nay, more than neglects you—"

"Sir Abel Kingston," interrupted the Duchess, with a certain degree of seriousness, if not of absolute severity in her tone, "do not seek to undermine my sense of duty to my husband by misrepresenting that conduct on his part which may perhaps be fully explained! You know the reason which compels me to remain chiefly at Thornbury. It is so absolutely necessary that my unfortunate mother-in-law should have the benefit of this beautiful fresh air. The comparatively close atmosphere of our town-residence seems to kill her! But the Duke has his parliamentary duties to attend to during the Session—then, in the autumn there is the excursion to the moors in Scotland—and he has his shooting-box—"

"But what if I were to tell you, Mary," interrupted the Baronet, "that while you remain chiefly at Thornbury in order to devote yourself to the care of the unfortunate Dowager-Duchess,—what should you think if I were to tell you that his Grace, your ducal husband, occupies his time during his frequent and prolonged absences in a manner very different from what you seem to imagine? What, in short, if I could prove to you that not merely have you become an object of indifference to him, but that a successful rival has usurped the place which you were wont to occupy in his heart?"

"Say no more! say no more, Sir Abel Kingston!" cried the young Duchess; "for I should not believe you! No, no! I cannot think—"

"I swear to you," exclaimed the Baronet, "that what I tell you is the exact truth. Your husband keeps a mistress to whom he is devotedly

attached, and on whom he is inclined to lavish large sums. All this I can prove."

The beautiful Duchess became pale as death—yes, pale as the marble statues which embellished the spacious garden; and then in another moment a crimson glow suffused her cheeks, her neck, and her bosom. But again that vivid evidence of indignation vanished; and she said with white quivering lips, and in a low deep tone, "Prove to me the truth of the assertions you have just made—and—and—I will refuse you nothing—I will be wholly thine."

It was an ejaculation of joy which burst from the Baronet's lips, and at the same time an expression of sardonic triumph flitted over his countenance. Then, as he continued to walk slowly by the side of the Duchess, he gave her certain explanations in proof of the statements which he had put forth. She listened in profound silence—with colourless cheeks, and with a fixed resolute gaze of the beautiful blue eyes; so that as Sir Abel glanced at her, he had no difficulty in discerning that whatsoever design she was revolving in her thoughts, she was certain to carry out, for that a new spirit had been conjured up within her.

When he had ceased speaking, a deep silence prevailed for some three or four minutes; and then the Duchess said, "I have listened to all that you have told me—and not a syllable has escaped my attention. I shall find some means to test the truth of the story. If I find that it is precisely as you have represented, and that my husband has thus so entirely bestowed his heart upon another, the pledge which I have given you shall be kept. But on taking leave of me this evening you must not return to Thornbury until you receive a note from me. We must not meet again until it be decided on what terms we are henceforth to regard each other. For I swear, Sir Abel Kingston, if I find you have deceived me in reference to my husband, everything shall be at an end betwixt you and me. But if, on the other hand, I discover that the facts are precisely as you represent them, then the first vengeance that I will wreak upon my husband will be to fulfil the pledge which I ere now gave you. Meanwhile let us separate."

Having thus spoken, the young Duchess turned abruptly away from the spot where she had halted to address this last speech to Sir Abel Kingston; and she began to retrace her way rapidly towards the mansion. The Baronet remained for nearly a minute where she had left him; and the intensity of his inward chuckling was expressed by the glow of triumph which overspread his countenance. He at length moved away from the place—that is to say, he sauntered a little farther along the avenue; and then he returned to retrace his steps. He watched until the beautiful Duchess was out of sight: and then he proceeded quickly towards that knot of evergreens to which he had glanced so keenly when kneeling at the feet of the brilliant patrician lady. In another moment there was a rustling amongst those shrubs; and then a man came forth from the place which evidently had served him as a lurking-hole. He was about fifty years of age; his complexion was sallow—and upon his face there were many hard lines which gave it a most sinister expression. He wore a

long surtout coat, which fitted him loosely, as if his form, which was naturally thin, had shrunken since it was made for him—or else as if (which was much more likely) the garment had been bought ready-made and had therefore never fitted him properly at all. He wore shoes, the strings of which were tied in a slovenly fashion; and his trousers hung in wrinkles or plaits about the lower part of the leg, as if they were not braced up sufficiently, or as if they had been always too long. A portion of a red cotton pocket-handkerchief hung out of his pocket; his hat was almost napless, and the front part of the brim was greasy and also put out of shape with much handling. He walked with a stick; and though only of the middle age, he seemed to be prematurely infirm in his limbs.

Such was the individual who emerged from the hiding-place of evergreens on perceiving that the Baronet halted near the spot in a significant manner as if to imply that the coast was clear.

"Well, Casey," said Sir Abel, in a half-patronising, half-entreating voice, "you have heard what has taken place. Are you satisfied?"

"I have heard that the young Duchess has confessed her love for you, Sir Abel," replied Casey; "but I cannot say I am satisfied that you will be enabled to turn the circumstance to the advantage you expect: for how do I know to what extent her Grace is allowed to put her hand into her husband's purse?"

"Come, come, my dear Casey, be reasonable!" exclaimed the Baronet. "You promised me that if I afforded you a proof of the probability of this love-intrigue of mine turning out successfully, you would agree to wait awhile. I have done what you required—I elicited from her Grace's lips the avowal on the very spot where it could best reach your ears—"

"But how do I know what followed?" demanded Casey, whose voice was hard and cold and monotonous, and the expression of whose eyes was implacable as well as full of mistrust. "You walked away together:—she may have recanted by the time she was fifty paces off, and when beyond earshot in respect to me—"

"No, no, she did not recant," exclaimed the Baronet. "On the contrary, in a very short time she will be so far compromised with me as to be entirely in my power; and you, Mr. Casey, with your knowledge of the world, cannot fail to be aware of how much a man can do with a woman who is infatuated with him! And when once I secure this hold on her, it will be as easy as possible to obtain a few thousands—"

"Well, I hope for your sake, that it will prove so," said Casey. "I shall wait to see the issue of this adventure of your's; and then I shall wait no longer. You know what I mean. So let there be no unnecessary loss of time."

Casey bent a look of reptile-like significancy upon the Baronet, who failed not to perceive it; and for an instant he actually ground his teeth with rage at finding himself in the power of such a man. But instantaneously recovering himself, he said, in that half-patronising, half-entreating tone to which we have before alluded, "Come, come, Casey, do not be too hard upon me, nor yet too impatient—and all will yet be well. And now you had better take yourself off. That avenue is the one by which you entered the grounds—"

"Yes, by climbing over the palings at the end," interrupted Casey, the monotony of his voice now breaking into irascibility. "A pretty thing for a man like me to do with the chance of being seized upon by some gardener as a thief—besides the chance of tearing my pantaloons."

"I would offer to come and assist you over the palings," said the Baronet,—"only, if any of the guests straying in that direction should happen to meet us together, they would think it strange—"

"No doubt!" interrupted Casey, glancing down at his toilet: "for any one can tell that I am not a fitting guest for Thornbury Park!"

Having thus spoken, with a species of cynical bitterness mingled with scorn and irony, Mr. Casey passed as rapidly along the avenue as his infirm limbs could convey him.

The Baronet returned into the mansion—but it was only to order his carriage to be gotten in readiness, so that he might immediately take his departure; for he knew the disposition of the young Duchess well, and he was aware that he should only be injuring his cause by venturing to seek her again after the positive injunction she had given that he was to appear no more in her presence until she should have put to the test the tale which he had told her in reference to her husband.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TWO FRIENDS.

Two or three days after the incidents which we have been relating, a handsome showily-dressed young female, whose age was probably about twenty, knocked at the door of Mademoiselle Imogene's house in the vicinity of Astley's Amphitheatre. The summons was soon answered by the servant-woman, who evidently knew the visitress—for she at once said, "You can walk in, Miss, if you please."

The young female, availing herself of this permission, entered the little parlour which we have before described, and where Imogen was now lounging in a large arm-chair, in a mood that was half listless and half pensive, just as when we first introduced her to our readers. She was dressed in a morning wrapper: she was completely *en negligée*—but though her toilet was as yet unmade, there was nothing slovenly in her appearance, and the freshness of her skin denoted that her ablutions had been fully attended to. The little girl was playing about the room, and she presented as perfect a picture of neatness and cleanliness as when we first described her.

"Ah, my dear Alice," said Miss Hartland, in a tone alike familiar and languid, "is it you? But I need scarcely ask such a question—for you are almost my only visitor—and you are assuredly always a welcome one."

"To-day is Saturday, you know," exclaimed Miss Alice Denton—for we may as well at once acquaint the reader with the young female's entire name; "and consequently to-morrow is Sunday," she added, in a gay tone. "So I came to propose that we should take a run down to Gravesend—or even as far as Margate if you like; for

I see that an excursion steamboat is advertised—"

"No, I thank you, Alice," interrupted Miss Hartland: "no more excursion-trips for me."

"Why, what has come over you, Imogen?" demanded her friend in surprise. "For the last three or four weeks you have refused to take any holiday, although the fine weather has set in, and you and I always used to make it a rule to enjoy ourselves once a week!"

"I know it, Alice—I know it, my dear friend," answered Imogen; "but my humour is changed. Do not seek me as a companion for your hours of recreation and gaiety—you would find me a very dull one."

"But why is this, Imogen?" inquired Alice, with a tone and look of concern—for she evidently was a good-natured, kind-hearted young woman. "I have noticed that you have not been the same as you were wont; and it is not that you have heard any ill-tidings concerning your brother—for if so, you would have told me—because that at least could be no secret. Ah! I begin to think, Imogen, that you must be in love!"

Miss Hartland made no immediate answer; and nothing on her part indicated that her friend was right in the conjecture she had just thrown out. Indeed, Imogen seemed as if she had not caught the words at all: but at the expiration of a couple of minutes, she said in a strange wild, vacant manner, "Yes, Alice—I am in love."

"Oh, then, if your love be unrequited," cried Miss Denton, "you must endeavour to divert your thoughts into other channels. But if your love be reciprocated, then it is a very strong reason why you should enjoy yourself with an occasional holiday, in order to celebrate as it were the happiness you thus experience. Therefore, in reference to the excursion of to-morrow—"

"Do not talk to me of excursions, Alice!" interrupted Imogen, somewhat petulantly. "It was on one of those occasions—you will remember it well, Alice—it was the final one we took last autumn—"

"What!" ejaculated Miss Denton, starting as if a sudden light flashed in unto her comprehension: "you do not mean that the tall handsome young gentleman, who picked up your book when you dropped it, and who handed us so politely ashore at Margate—"

"Why have you fixed upon him?" inquired Miss Hartland, as a slight flush now crossed her cheeks.

"Oh, a thousand reasons struck me,—a thousand recollections swept into my head," cried Alice, "when you spoke of that excursion! I remember it was there I first saw that young gentleman: but I have seen him fifty times at the theatre since—and I have met him walking in the Westminster Road and upon the bridge; but I never gave the matter much thought—for one often and often sees the same faces at the theatre—and then as to one person meeting another very frequently in the same neighbourhood, that is also likely enough if they both live there—"

"But are you sure that the young gentleman to whom you allude, lives in this neighbourhood?" inquired Imogen, somewhat quickly.

"I have no certainty on the point," answered

Alice. "I was merely saying that I used to think he might live in this district, and that therefore it never struck me as being at all peculiar that I should so often meet him. But now a new light has flamed upon me, and I understand it all! It was to see you that he frequented the theatre!—and he is the one whom you love! Is it not so?"

"Why do you think it?" asked Imogen.

"Because he evidently admired you so much when first we saw him on board the steam-boat; and you remarked to me what a nice-looking young gentleman he was—and for all the rest of that day you were abstracted. Do you not remember that I jested you on the subject? Well, it all went out of my mind until this moment; and now it comes back to me with the force of a revelation. Again I ask you, Imogen, am I not right?"

Miss Hartland remained silent for nearly a minute; and then she replied, "Yes, Alice, you are right."

"And who is the young gentleman?" inquired Miss Denton, with the quickness of an excited curiosity.

"I do not know," was the answer.

"Well, but his name, then?" ejaculated Alice.

"I do not know it," was the response.

"Not know it! But where does he live? Tell me *that*—and we will very soon know his name! The nearest butcher or baker in his neighbourhood will give us the information."

"I do not know where he lives," rejoined Imogen.

"Ah, this is strange!" cried Alice. "Yet you love him? Is he aware of it?"

"Perhaps—I do not know—I cannot tell," said Imogen, in a slow thoughtful manner. "I have never spoken to him. And yet——"

"Oh, this is the most extraordinary adventure I ever heard of!" exclaimed Alice Denton. "Here is a young gentleman with whom you are desperately in love, and who I feel convinced is equally enamoured of you; and yet you know nothing of him!—not so much as his name! You have never exchanged a word with him—and you do not even appear to be sure that he knows he is loved in return! But surely, my dear Imogen, there is a language in the eyes—an eloquence in the looks——"

"Yes," said Miss Hartland, in a still lower and more deliberate tone than before; "he *must* know that I love him! When we have met in the streets, or have passed each other in the Park on a Sunday, he must have seen the tall-tale blush which has swept across my cheeks! And then too, in the circus, he must have observed the emotion which I have not possibly been enabled to conceal——"

"Of course he has seen all this!" cried Alice. "But what a singular sentimental affair it is! Why, when Sylvester took it into his head to fall in love with me, he soon found an opportunity of speaking out; and then I at once asked him his name. Ah, I remember the occasion well!"—and Alice laughed merrily. "First of all he said his name was Sylvester; and I assured him it was a very pretty one. But I told him that was not enough—that he surely had another name—and that he must deal candidly with me if he wished me ever to speak to him again. So then he gave

me his card. *Mr. Sylvester Casey!* Oh, how I laughed at that name of Casey! Indeed I could scarcely restrain myself when he went on to tell me that his father was the rich Mr. Casey of Hatton Garden——"

"You have told me all this before, my dear Alice, over and over again!" ejaculated Imogen, somewhat impatiently.

"True! so I have," said the good-natured Miss Denton. "So now let us return to your own affairs, my dear friend. This young gentleman—how stands the matter now?"

"How stands it now?" echoed Imogen. "Look!"—and for a moment her beautiful blue eyes flashed with a sinister glare, and she extended her faultlessly shaped hand towards the child, muttering ominously between her white teeth, "There is the cause of all I now suffer!"

Little Annie was playing with a new doll, and she did not hear what was thus said—nor did she observe the strong emotion that was at the instant agitating Imogen: she was unconscious of the fierce gust of passion whereof she was the cause on the part of that female. Nevertheless this strange impulsive creature was evidently smitten all in a moment with a remorse at her conduct towards the child; and bounding across the room, she snatched up the little girl and pressed her to her bosom, exclaiming, "Dear Annie! darling, darling Annie! Oh, you pretty creature, you! how I love you! how I love you!"

The child threw her arms about Imogen's neck, smiling with a sweet infantile joy, while Alice Denton looked on with an air that showed she was by no means surprised at the scene, and that therefore it was not the first time it had occurred in her presence.

"Yes, she is a sweet dear little creature," said Alice, now in her turn bestowing a caress upon Annie when Imogen set her down again upon the carpet. "But tell me, my dear friend," she continued, "how it has happened——"

"Listen!" interjected Imogen: "I will tell you in a few words. Six months have passed since that excursion to Margate, when first I beheld the handsome young stranger. You noticed the incident of his picking up the book which I dropped. It had on the fly-leaf the name of *Mademoiselle Imogene*; for it was a present from our young French friend Rose. Well, I saw that the handsome young stranger glanced at the name on the fly-leaf as he picked up the volume; and then he flung upon me a look full of surprise and delight. The very next evening he was at the theatre. I am not going to make a long story of it, my dear Alice: suffice it therefore to repeat what you yourself ere now said, that during the last six months he has been often and often at the theatre and often and often wandering about the neighbourhood. I have no vanity—but I could not help understanding what all this meant. Ah! and I comprehended likewise that his love must be a pure and honourable sentiment; for if he had entertained a different passion—if he had hoped, in a word, that he could make me his mistress, he would speedily have accosted me with his overtures. Well then, Alice, it was because I felt convinced he loved me as I could wish to be loved, that I came to love him so fondly in return. And often and often, when we met, his eyes told me the tale of his honour-



MISS ALICE DENTON.

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able sentiments—yes, with a single look they conveyed volumes of the silent language of the heart—”

“I would much sooner have had a single page of an audible language from the lips,” interjected Alice, “than all those volumes of the heart’s hieroglyphics. Why, it has been the most stupidly sentimental affair—”

But here Alice Denton stopped short, for she beheld a sudden flush of indignation upon Imogen’s beauteous countenance. It however immediately passed away; and it was with a good-tempered melancholy smile that Miss Hartland observed, “You cannot enter into my feelings, Alice. Let me therefore make a speedy end of my-story. It was about three weeks ago that I took little Annie to a shop in the Westminster Road to purchase her a new frock,—when behold! I found myself face to face with *him*. It was the first time he had ever seen little Annie with me. I saw that he became deadly pale as if he experienced a sudden shock; and I felt the burning blush sweep over my countenance. Then a dimness appeared to come upon my vision: by an effort I recovered myself—and he was already hurrying away in another direction. Two or three hours later I saw him in this street—yes, in this street! The dusk was then setting in—and he was muffled in a cloak; but I beheld him glide out of one shop and then into another, where he stayed for several minutes—”

“Do you think he was asking questions?” inquired Alice.

“There can be no doubt about it,” rejoined Imogen: “he was seeking information concerning me. From that day I have seen him no more. And now, Alice, not another syllable upon the subject!—but do not, my dear friend, ask me to accompany you on any more excursions, for I am not in the humour for them. Leave me to myself. You have your Sylvester to escort you—”

“Oh, Sylvester indeed!” ejaculated Alice, putting her pretty lips with an expression of mingled scorn and contempt. “A miserable puppy—as mean as he is boastful—”

“What is that roll of papers you have brought with you, Alice?” abruptly inquired Imogen, as if she did not like the turn which the discourse had just then taken.

“Ah, I quite forgot!” exclaimed Alice. “I came on purpose to show you the portrait; but we almost immediately got talking upon other subjects—”

“Ah! it is the portrait—eh?” said Imogen; and she proceeded to unfold the roll of thick paper.

It was a lithograph picture of Alice Denton, in the same style and by the same artist as the portrait of Mademoiselle Imogene which was suspended to the wall in the parlour. The reader has doubtless understood that Imogen’s friend followed the same profession as herself, and was engaged at Astley’s Amphitheatre; but she had not been honoured with a French nomenclature. At the bottom of her portrait figured the veritable English name—MISS ALICE DENTON. She was therein represented in a fantastic dress, and in the act of taking off a mask from her countenance. The costume and mask bore reference to some favourite character which she was wont to personate; but we need not trouble our reader with

many details on this point. In respect to Miss Alice herself, we have already said she was very good-looking; but she was entirely deficient in that intellectuality which characterized the face of Imogen Hartland. The features of Alice Denton breathed a soft sensuousness; and her figure, instead of being striking and brilliant, was soft and voluptuous, though modelled to an admirable symmetry. Good-nature, an easy indifference to the cares of the world, and a very moderate amount of mental culture, were indicated by the expression of Miss Denton’s face. Like her friend Imogen, she had blue eyes: but they were only languishing, and not vivacious: they were indicative of an indolent, luxurious temperament—a disposition that was frank and easy, gay and thoughtless, callous and fond of pleasure. The formation of the mouth and the voluptuously rounded chin combined to tell the same tale. Though she was not more than nineteen or twenty years of age, yet her figure already gave indications of an expansion to *embonpoint*; yet it was far from deficient in grace—and the limbs, though robust, were perfect in their modelling. Neither she nor Imogen had aught of that jaded or fading appearance which so frequently characterizes actresses when seen in the day-time: there was not the slightest shade of a bluish tint under the eyes; and thus these beings, when viewed together, though in many respects so different, nevertheless formed a group of a most interesting character.

The merits of the portrait were discussed for some little while by the two young females; and then Alice took her departure, having vainly endeavoured to persuade her friend Imogen to accompany her in the water-excursion on the morrow.

When Alice had left, Miss Hartland ascended to her chamber to perform her toilet. She dressed herself in a plain neat attire, so that she now looked a very different being from what she was in the fantastic semi-Greek, semi-ideal costume which she wore when we first introduced her to our readers. She had a thick veil attached to her bonnet; for there were times when she found it convenient to conceal her countenance, because if recognised in any public place as Mademoiselle Imogene, the “star” of Astley’s, she was liable to become the focus of half-a-dozen quizzing glasses stuck into the eyes of snobs, gents, and fast young men about town.

Leaving little Annie in the care of her servant-woman, and affectionately assuring the child that she would not fail to bring her home some sweetmeats, Miss Hartland quitted the house. Passing into the Westminster Road, she crossed the bridge and proceeded to a large linendraper’s in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross, where she had some purchases to make. On leaving the establishment, Imogen said to herself, “I am half inclined to call upon the brilliant Duchess; for more than a week has elapsed since she promised to communicate with me—”

But here Imogen’s reflections were suddenly cut short and all her ideas were turned into another channel, by the appearance of an individual who was issuing from the narrow passage leading by way of Spring Gardens into St. James’s Park. He was a young man of about two-and-twenty—a little above the middle height—of handsome

countenance—and good figure. He had brown hair, curling naturally—and fine blue eyes. The expression of his face conveyed the idea of blended intelligence and amiability. He looked like a good young man rather than a high-spirited one; and if any one on pointing him out to another, had said that he cultivated poetry, that he was fond of music and the fine arts—that he was an affectionate son, a kind brother, and a good-natured friend—the description would precisely correspond with the first impression made by the young man's appearance. He was neatly yet plainly dressed: his toilet indicated a perfect gentility of taste, and his manner was altogether that of the well-bred gentleman without pride or pretension.

Such was the young gentleman whose appearance produced a sudden effect upon Imogen Hartland. He was proceeding slowly on his way, and with an air of pensiveness, so far as she could judge at that distance. He was looking neither to the right nor to the left: she felt convinced that he did not notice her; and she could not help following him. Her veil was drawn down over her countenance: she had on a different apparel from any that she had ever worn before:—it was plainer and more simple; for whereas she had once been wont to dress showily, like her friend Alice Denton, she had become more and more simple in her taste ever since the love she had conceived for the handsome young stranger had spread its influence over all the phases of her mind.

He pursued his way without glancing to the right or to the left, much less stopping to look behind him, until he reached Berkeley Square. There he halted suddenly and looked at his watch: and then he swept his eyes rapidly around. Imogen had abruptly stopped short also; for she was all in a moment struck with the impropriety of her conduct in thus following the young stranger, and she affected to be looking in quite another direction. When she again glanced around, she saw him standing on the upper step of a house about fifty yards off: he had a white kerchief in his hand—and a thrill shot through her heart as she fancied that he waved it significantly. Then he disappeared from her view.

With a brain intoxicated as it were under the influence of wine—full of mingled rapture and suspense—hope and fear wildly conflicting,—and obeying an irresistible impulse,—Imogen sped towards that house. The front door stood open; and a fat hall-porter, with a powdered wig and a very red face, was standing on the threshold. As Imogen reached the bottom step, the porter stood back from the door-way as if in a respectful manner to make way for her. She paused for a single instant: then she ascended the steps; and at the further end of the hall she beheld the handsome young gentleman just beginning the ascent of a wide marble staircase. He glanced back on observing her: he stopped short for a moment: it seemed as if he were about to descend to speak to her: and then, as if a second thought struck him, he contented himself with bowing in a manner sufficiently courteous—and he continued his way up the staircase.

“Be so kind as to step into this room, ma'am,” said the hall-porter, who had already thrown open a side-door communicating from the hall.

Imogen, who was under the influence of irresistible feelings, crossed the threshold; and the door closed behind her. Then she felt convinced that the course thus pursued by the hall-porter was in obedience to some rapidly uttered mandate which the young gentleman had given as he entered the house; and she said to herself, “He *did* wave his kerchief significantly after all! He evidently resides here; and he has resolved that the accident which has thrown me in his way and led me to follow him, should furnish likewise the opportunity for explanations!—But who can he be?”

CHAPTER IV.

THE HOUSE IN BERKELEY SQUARE.

It was a handsome dining-room into which Imogen had thus been shown: the furniture was massive and rich; and the walls were hung with portraits of imposing-looking gentlemen and ladies of stately appearance. Some of the pictures were evidently old, not merely from the dingy aspect of the canvass, which was also cracked in some places, but likewise from the quaintness of the costumes. But in the recesses on either side of the fire-place, there were two portraits which had a fresh appearance as if they had been recently executed. One represented a thin, pale-faced man, with an aristocratic countenance, and who was of the middle age. The other portrait was that of a lady, also pale, with very handsome features, and whose age might be some ten years under that of the one we have just been noticing. In both the artist had, with an evident fidelity, even to the view of one to whom the originals were unknown, preserved a certain air of cold severe pride which blended with the general expression of their countenance.

Imogen had just finished contemplating these pictures through her veil—which she still kept over her countenance, not for any studied motive, but simply from the fact that in the agitation of her thoughts it did not occur to her that she ought to raise it—when the door opened, and two personages entered the room. They were a gentleman and a lady; and a glance thrown at each, showed that they were the originals of the two portraits which had just been engaging her attention. She was now seized with confusion: she wondered who they could be, and to what this adventure was to lead. She was smitten with disappointment and surprise that the opening of the door had not given admission to the handsome young gentleman whose image was uppermost in her thoughts. She nevertheless had presence of mind sufficient to incline in a graceful and respectful manner towards these two personages.

We should observe that they both looked a few years older than they seemed in their portraits, so that the age of the gentleman might be about fifty-five and that of the lady proportionately younger. Both countenances wore an expression alike sad and severe, blended with an air of aristocratic pride; and the resemblances to the two portraits were unmistakable.

“Be seated,” said the gentleman, indicating a chair; and at the same time he and the lady

placed themselves on a sofa close by, so that as Imogen sank upon the chair indicated she was immediately opposite to them.

"Have the goodness to raise your veil," said the lady, in a tone where an unconquerable restraint seemed to be blended with an endeavour to appear patronising, condescending, and conciliatory.

Imogen mechanically obeyed that half-mandate, half-request; and she lifted the thick veil which had previously shaded her countenance from the view. The gentleman and the lady both gave a visible start of surprise: then they contemplated her earnestly; and she fancied that the rigidity of their features relaxed somewhat, as if through a feeling of interest with which she inspired them. Miss Hartland met their gaze steadily for a few moments: then she blushed and became confused; and she felt that never before in her life was she so completely deficient in self-possession and fortitude.

The gentleman and lady slowly, and as if by a simultaneous impulse, withdrew their looks from her face, and regarded each other.

"She is indeed very beautiful," said the lady in an under-tone: but Imogen's ear caught the words that she spoke.

"Yes—very beautiful," responded her male companion—"more beautiful even than Launcelot represented her to us!"

These words were likewise caught by Imogen's ear; and a thrill shot through her heart. Launcelot!—the name struck her like a revelation. She felt convinced it was that of her hitherto unknown lover; and that brief low-whispered exchange of sentences seemed to indicate that she was finding favour in the sight of these two personages who appeared in her view as the arbiters of her destiny.

"On the present occasion," resumed the gentleman, "we purpose to say but little, because the circumstances of this meeting are necessarily so peculiar—"

"And likewise to a certain degree painful," interjected the lady. "At the same time it is my duty to confess—and I experience pleasure in making the admission—that your appearance and your manners are altogether so superior to what we could have conceived—"

"Stop!" exclaimed the gentleman: "stop, my dear!" he added, with a tone and look of mild rebuke. "Since the matter has come to this point, we will not perform our own part ungraciously. Do you love our son? or at least do you feel as if you could love him, and that you are prepared to study to your utmost to ensure his happiness?"

Imogen literally trembled all over with an ecstatic joy—wild, rapturous, incredible: she was almost suffocated by her emotions—and it was with difficulty she could falter forth, "Yes,—I love him—and until death it shall be my study to ensure his happiness!"

"Then without another word," said the gentleman, "we give our consent to this union."

Imogen's brain reeled: it appeared to her as if she were being whirled round and round in the midst of a wild fantastic dream; and falling at the feet of him who had just addressed her, she took his hand and pressed it to her lips. Then the lady bent towards her and imprinted a kiss

upon her forehead. It was assuredly no fervid caress: it was cold and distant as if it were the mere formal ratification of a compact; but Imogen cared not for this; and it was with grateful ardour that she pressed that lady's hand in its turn to her lips. The lady made her rise from the suppliant posture she had assumed; and she said, "Be seated—compose yourself! Everything is now arranged; and never from my lips shall you hear any allusion to antecedent circumstances. Be seated, I repeat—compose yourself—and Launcelot shall join you presently."

The gentleman and lady now rose from the sofa and slowly quitted the room. The instant the door closed behind them, Imogen's feelings burst forth in a fit of weeping; for the extremes of joy and grief often display themselves in the same manner. By some mechanical movement or unstudied action she drew down the veil over her countenance; and it soon became moist with the tears that trickled through it. Was it possible that on the very day when she had been complaining to her friend Alice Denton of the unhappiness which her love had brought, so much happiness should have been in store for her! She thought not to ask herself why Launcelot's parents could be: she reflected not that she was even utterly ignorant of their name. It was sufficient for her that they had given their assent to her marriage with their son! But this son—she had never even exchanged a word with him; and all had been managed as if it were a scene in a fairy-tale!

Presently the door opened, and Launcelot made his appearance. Imogen's first impulse was to bound towards him, either to throw herself upon his breast and sob forth the expression of her thanks, or else to fall down at his feet and assure him of her grateful love. But there was something in his look and manner which suddenly chilled her ardour and gave her a cruel shock. He was deadly pale: he stopped near the threshold of the door—then he seemed to stagger forward for an instant—he pressed his hand to his brow, as if with a sense of uncontrollable anguish—and finally, with the air of one who made a mighty effort to abduct powerfully agitating emotions, he said in a gentle voice, "Forgive me—pardon me—it is over!—and from this moment forth will I be unto you everything that I ought!"

He took her hand and lightly touched it with his lips. He then sat down, or rather threw himself upon the sofa; and resting his elbow on the back thereof, he leant his head upon his hand, so that his eyes were half-averted from Imogen, and she beheld only the side face, with the profile of perfect masculine beauty. She was bewildered what to think: she was shocked—she was cruelly pained: she knew not whether to display all the pride of woman and put an end to everything in a moment—or whether she should abandon herself to the tenderness of her emotions, sink at his feet, and implore him not to make on her account any sacrifice which was repugnant to his feelings. Then it suddenly struck her that it was well if she at once entered upon certain explanations; and falling upon her knees, she endeavoured to give utterance to the thoughts that were now uppermost. But her bosom was convulsed with a variety of emotions; and taking his disengaged hand, she raised it beneath her veil to her lips. He aban-

done that hand to her. Again and again she pressed it to her lips: and she covered it with her tears. There was a footstool close by the sofa: she sat down upon it—and still she retained his hand in her own,—no longer pressing it to her lips—no longer weeping—but remaining perfectly still, in a sort of confused luxury of thought. For at length she was with him!—at length she had heard his voice—and it was full of masculine harmony!—and despite all the mystery which enveloped the entire proceeding, she had been informed by his parents that he was to be her husband, and assured by himself that he would be everything that he ought towards her!

And Launcelot was also silent;—and it might seem as if he were unconscious of her presence, although his hand was still clasped between both her own. At length, as Imogen's mind was slowly recovering from its luxurious confusion and blissful ebriety, she began to ask herself a few questions. Why was the conduct of Launcelot so singular? was it not he himself who had brought about the events which were now progressing?—and must he not have besought his parents to consent to his union with Imogen? Was it that he had taken this step in a moment of ungovernable infatuation, and that the instant the very point was gained, he had been stricken with remorse and regret? Again did the necessity of entering upon certain explanations recur to Imogen; and already were the prefatory words wavering upon her lips, when Launcelot himself broke the silence of many minutes which had been prevailing.

“On the eve of that solemn union in which our hands are to be joined—on such an occasion as the present—and considering all circumstances, I feel that it is incumbent upon me to tell you the whole truth which regards myself. I am now your affianced—and in a few days I shall become your husband! You have a right to fathom the secrets of my soul to a certain extent: but I will of my own accord annihilate the limit altogether and lay bare to you as it were the mysteries of my heart. You will then comprehend wherefore I was so overcome by emotion ere now; and you will have no ground hereafter to reproach me with hypocrisy or duplicity towards you. No: for I would have you read down to the very profundities of my soul, as if you were plunging your regards into the depths of a stream pellucid to the very bottom!”

Launcelot paused; and such a profound silence then prevailed through the room that a pin might have been heard to drop. Imogen had drunk in, in a species of half-raptured, half-bewildered suspense, the language which flowed upon that soft harmonious voice:—she had hung upon the words as it were upon an isolated and beautiful voice rising from the midst of a choir and beneath the vast arched roof of a cathedral. What was to follow?—what secrets were now to be revealed to her?—what mysteries could be treasured up in the sanctuary of that young man's heart?

“It was not until some few months ago,” he resumed, “that I knew what love was. Having read much, I had necessarily encountered an infinite variety of descriptions of that sentiment. I saw how one depicted it as a fierce consuming passion—a fire devouring the heart that cherished it. I saw how another painted it as a soft æsthetic feeling, bathing the soul in a continuous fount of

bliss, and making a paradise of the earth. Then I read how another spoke of love as a frenzy—a passion that was akin to madness—painful like hunger or thirst—tortured by jealousies, suspicious, and misgivings,—ever fancying that its own love was not reciprocated enough, and experiencing periods of anguish in which it verged to the extreme bordering upon hatred. I read of the love which would lay down its life for the loved one; and I read likewise of a love which could kill the object of its flame rather than suffer that object to be beloved by any other! On the one side I beheld some who could find no language comprehensive enough to depict the happiness of love: while on the other hand there were bards who could not aggregate a sufficiency of bitter words to depict its misery. Here were those who recorded their rapturous eulogies on rose-tinted paper, with ink of gold, and with a pen plucked from the gay plumage of some bright tropical bird: while on the other hand there were those who chronicled love's miseries with an iron pen dipped in gall. Thus was I bewildered what to think of the sentiment of love, and my imagination possessed not a creative magic sufficiently powerful to enable me to solve the mystery.”

Again did Launcelot pause; and again did a deep silence prevail throughout the apartment; for Imogen, after listening with a deep rapturous absorbing interest to the words that flowed from his lips, was now lost in wonder at the nature as well as the object of such a preface.

“At length,” pursued Launcelot, “all my doubts were cleared up, and I comprehended what love was. Chance threw in my way a being on whom I had no sooner settled my looks when a secret voice appeared to whisper in my soul that she would exercise the greatest influence over my destinies! I knew not whether it was a sweet presentiment or a solemn warning. I longed to speak to her; but I was afraid. Oh, that beautiful face! it was instantaneously imprinted on my heart! By an accident—a book which was dropped and which I picked up—I learnt her name. Surprise seized upon me. I had heard of her before—and this was the first time I had ever seen her. She was an equestrian actress at a theatre!”

Imogen had still retained Launcelot's hand in her own; and as he went on speaking she pressed that hand closer and closer to her lips, and then to her bosom. There was rapture in her soul: yet why should Launcelot tell her this tale the particulars of which she already knew so well?

“From the moment of that meeting,” he proceeded, “my life became as it were a dream. It appeared to be as if I lived only for that bright and beautiful creature who had stolen my heart away in a moment. I beheld her at the theatre—I saw her with her fantastic garb in the circus—and I loved her all the more, for methought that she was one who could embellish and adorn every apparel, no matter of what species! I encountered her in the streets and in the parks: she was then dressed in the ordinary costume of her sex; and again was she all elegance and grace. Yet I never once spoke to her; for singular as it may seem, every time that we met that secret voice whispered in my soul, and still was I ignorant whether it was a sweet presentiment or a solemn warning!”

Again was his hand pressed to Imogen's lips, and then to her heart; and if she wondered that he bestowed no caress in exchange, but merely continued to abandon that hand to her, she the next moment thought to herself, "He will finish his narrative—he will bring it down to the present point, so that I may thoroughly understand his entire conduct;—and then he will be all love and affection towards me!"

"You may judge," continued Launcelot, "from what I have been telling you, that I lived as it were in a dream, and that my imagination had created for itself an existence more visionary than ever the wildest flight of poetic fancy attained! You may even consider me a madman or a maudlin sentimentalist—a drivelling idiot—"

"No, no!" murmured Imogen, in a low faint voice: and again was the hand pressed still more fervidly to her lips and to her heart.

"Well then, you are kind to make allowances for me," continued Launcelot, "for I confess that notwithstanding the turn which circumstances have taken, I do not feel despicable in my own estimation. I was not the master of my own feelings: I yielded to the influence of a love as holy as it was mysterious. It was not a passion: it was a sentiment. There was nothing fierce nor frenetic in it:—its flow was soft and agreeable: it was dreamy and visionary, yet cherishing all the hopes of a vital reality. For you understand me, I pictured to myself that being to be pure and virtuous: I thought that her goodness must bear the closest relation to her beauty, and that the loveliness of her person was the external sign of the loveliness of her soul. Good God, how I was mistaken! All in a moment the bandage fell from my eyes—it was as if I had been walking in darkness and a light suddenly blazed upon me, lurid and sinister, showing me that she was a lost, fallen, dishonoured creature!"

A wild cry burst from the lips of Imogen as she sprang up from the footstool, and in an instant regained her feet. Launcelot started up from the sofa; and quick as lightning did his eyes glance over the form of the veiled one before him. Then a tremendous agitation seized upon him—he became white as a sheet—he quivered visibly from head to foot—and he ejaculated, "You are not—you are not *she* whom I took you for!"

"No—I am Imogen herself!" and in a moment the veil was thrown back, revealing a countenance which was even more pale and ghastly, more agitated and scared, than that of the young man himself.

"Oh, my God!" he murmured, pressing his hand to his brow; "how did this happen?—and what have I done?"

"Launcelot, hear me! hear me!" exclaimed Imogen; "hear me, I beseech you!"—and she flung herself at his feet. "You have taken me for another—some tremendous mistake has been committed—evidently by your parents likewise—you are about to wed that *other*—and therefore all hope is dead for me! But still—but still I would not have you think—"

"Oh, Imogen! no more!—tis vain! We must part for ever!"—and with these wildly ejaculated words, Launcelot burst from the apartment.

For upwards of a minute did Imogen remain upon her knees—there, where she had knelt to him—there, on that spot whence he had just fled

away—there she still knelt, bowed down, crushed—the fine-spirited young woman levelled as it were to the very dust beneath the overwhelming weight of a stupendous calamity! At length she slowly rose up: she caught sight of her countenance in a mirror opposite—and she started as if some other face had been looking forth upon her from the polished surface, so altered and woe-begone had her own countenance become! She sat down in a chair close by a table; she hurried her face in her hands, and she reflected profoundly.

Several minutes passed; and she wondered whether any one would come to her. She was inclined to ring the bell and ask to see Launcelot again, if only for a few moments: then she thought of penning a few lines and summoning a servant to bear the billet to him: but abruptly discarding both these projects, she ejaculated with bitterness, "Of what avail? He is affianced to another! All is at an end for me!"

She drew the thick veil again over her countenance, and she issued from the apartment. The hall-porter was at his post: he had the same quiet, good-humoured, respectful look as before; and Imogen was almost surprised as she mentally ejaculated, "He suspects not that anything extraordinary has been taking place!"—for a moment before it seemed to her as if every one whom she might encounter would stare at her with a meaning and a significancy.

The hall-porter opened the door and bowed as Imogen went forth.

"He doubtless takes me for another," she inwardly thought,—"*that other* who was evidently expected here at the same time!—*that other* to whom Launcelot is now affianced!"

Imogen descended the steps; and when she reached the bottom, the door was closed behind her. She continued her way through the Square with a species of dismay in her brain and a horrible tightening at the heart. At length she suddenly recollected something. A respectable-looking female-servant was advancing; and Imogen accosted her, saying, "Would you be kind enough to tell me whose is that large house with the green verandahs?"

"Oh, that is Lord Trentham's, ma'am," was the reply.

"Ah! and their family——"

"They have but one son," rejoined the servant-maid,—"*a very handsome young man—the Hon. Mr. Osborne.*"

"Thank you," murmured Imogen; and she pursued her way homeward.

CHAPTER V.

ALICE DENTON AND HER FRIEND.

AT about the same time that the preceding scene was occurring at Trentham House in Berkeley Square, a dashing phaeton and pair, having crossed Waterloo Bridge, turned into the York Road,—which, for the benefit of our country readers, we may as well observe, is a street in the immediate neighbourhood of Astley's Theatre. Though of no very high pretensions, it was nevertheless a superior street to that in which Imogen Hartland

lived; and if we make this comparison, it is simply to show that Miss Alice Denton was better lodged than her friend.

Yes—Alice lived in the York Road. She occupied apartments on the first floor: they were ready furnished, but the appointments were of no very elegant character, and the entire aspect of the place bespoke the lodging-house. Nevertheless, for this suite of apartments on the first floor Alice Denton paid thirty shillings a week—in addition to which there were fees for attendance; so that, including the expense of coals and other little *et ceteras*, Miss Denton lodged at a rental of about two guineas a week. She was fond of good living; and her repasts were of a succulent nature accordingly. On the sideboard there were decanters containing wine. Miss Denton also dressed showily, and frequently appeared with some new article of raiment. But being only in the receipt of a salary of two guineas and a half a week at Astley's Theatre, it is an evident impossibility that Alice Denton could maintain such a style of living on those comparatively slender resources. Truth therefore compels us to state that she was the mistress of a certain Mr. Sylvester Casey, to whom allusion has been previously made.

The dashing phaeton and pair which we represented as turning into the York Road, contained that gentleman and his livery-servant. Mr. Sylvester Casey was about five-and-twenty years of age, short in stature and mean-looking in appearance—red-haired and freckled—of immense pretensions and of a still more stupendous vulgarity. There was nothing of the gentleman about him, but everything bespeaking the "gentish" upstart—the *parvenu* who wanted to be considered a very fast young man. Thus he was dressed in an extravagant fashion—that is to say, in all the most recent abominations of cut-away coat, peculiar waistcoat, marvellous shirt, and astounding pantaloons. He was bedizened with jewellery: he wore a quizzing-glass continually at his right eye, that side of the face being all screwed up to retain it; and he had a cigar in his mouth, though in reality his stomach heaved painfully against tobacco-smoke. His servant was one of those cunning, leary-looking, short, bow-legged men who may invariably be seen hanging about the mews and stables at the West End of the town, who infest betting-houses, and swarm upon race-courses. Indeed, Mr. Sylvester Casey considered that a groom of sporting appearance was indispensable to a gentleman who had just started a fine turn-out. The domestic's livery was therefore outrageous flaring in colour and flaunting in lace; and as if the fellow thought that in some sense he must ape his master, he held a flower between his lips, while the other had the cigar. Everything was new in the entire equipage: and as Mr. Sylvester Casey held the ribbons and gave an artistic flourish with his whip as he dashed round the corner into the York Road, the whole appearance of the thing proclaimed as eloquently as possible, "We are all bran new! do look at us!"

In this style did Sylvester Casey drive up to the door of the house where dwelt the handsome Alice Denton. A crowd of half-a-dozen small boys, two beggars, and a baker's man, instantaneously collected; and Sylvester, while endea-

vouring to do the thing very fine by tossing the reins in a *nonchalant* manner to his groom, and then leaping out just as if he were perfectly well accustomed to the use of his own private equipage, stumbled and knocked his shin against the sharp edge of the projecting iron step with a violence that brought all the blood into his face and tears into his eyes. Then, though suffering excruciations, he endeavoured to look as if it were nothing of any consequence: while the small boys were tittering around, and he caught a sly impudent smile just vanishing away from the features of his groom.

"You can walk the prads about for about half-an-hour, Tom," said Mr. Sylvester Casey. "And I tell you what you can do—You can just drive down to What's-his-name yonder, and tell him he needn't keep the black mare any longer for me, as I've made up my mind I shan't take her. And, I say, Tom, just look in at t'other place—you know where I mean—down there, you know—and see whether the brown cob is still to be had—and if so, let Jenkins get the saddle on in about half-an-hour or so, and I'll just give him a trial."

All these directions were simply given because the groom interjected a "Yes, sir," at every third word that his master spoke; and every "Yes, sir," was accompanied by a touch of the hat, which Mr. Sylvester had no doubt produced a very grand effect upon the little crowd collected around, and upon all beholders who were staring from their windows. Besides, it was even still more for the behoof of the fair Alice Denton herself that the process of order-giving and hat-touching was sustained; for this was the first day that Sylvester had sported his new turn-out—the first occasion therefore on which Alice had seen it.

He entered the house, and ascended the stairs to Miss Denton's sitting-room. Throwing himself upon the sofa, taking off his hat with one hand, and running the fingers of the other through his villainous straight coarse red hair, he said in an affected tone, "Well, Alice, what do you think of it? It'll do, eh? It's the thing, isn't it? Rather slap-up, I fancy? A neat trap—ain't it? And the prads—stunners—eh?"

"Well, it is a very pretty turn-out, Sylvester," responded Alice. "And I suppose you mean to come to-morrow and take me for a drive with you? You have often promised that we should go to Richmond and have dinner at the Star and Garter—"

"That's like eating gold, Alice!" answered Mr. Sylvester Casey. "Not that I mind, you know—only I was thinking that if we went to Greenwich—there you can get such a nice tea—for—"

"Ninepence a piece!" cried Alice, with mingled gaiety and contempt. "Fie, Sylvester! If you can afford to keep that dashing equipage, you surely can manage to treat me with a little more liberality than you have done."

"Well, by Jove, Alice!" ejaculated Sylvester, "if this ain't too bad! You have all you want. Look at these lodgings—fit for a princess!"

"I ought to have my own furniture," interjected Alice poutingly. "Every young lady in my situation—"

"Oh, nonsense! your own furniture!" exclaimed

Sylvester. "Only conceive what an expense it is when you move! And then too, you would be wanting me to insure it!"

"Well, come, we will not have any words," interrupted Alice: and then she added coaxingly, "I suppose you have brought me the gold watch you promised?"

"No, by Jove, I haven't though!" cried Sylvester. "The truth is, I couldn't find a second-hand—I mean to say a neat little lady's watch—though, 'pon honour, I went strolling about last evening, looking in at all the pawnbrokers'—I mean to say jewellers' windows—"

"Oh, I daresay," interrupted Miss Alice, "what you first said you meant! For shame of you, Sylvester! You set up your carriage: but you treat me—"

"Treat you?" he ejaculated: "how the deuce do I treat you? Why admirably! Here you are living at the rate of at least five guineas a week—"

"Half of which I earn by my own profession," interjected Alice.

"And a very good job, too, that you can do it!" said Sylvester.

"But you promised me when—when—you know what I mean—when our connexion began," continued Alice, half pointing, half good-humouredly coaxing, "that you would take me altogether away from the horsemanship—"

"It would be a sin," observed Sylvester. "You look admirably in the circus!"

"But I don't like it!" exclaimed Alice.

"You ought to like it, my dear girl," rejoined Sylvester. "It keeps down your fat. You are the least thing inclined to *embonpoint*—"

"Then why not buy me a horse?" exclaimed Alice. "Ah, that would be something liberal on your part!"

"Well, well, my dear girl, we shall see. You mustn't talk to me of gold watches and horses for the present: I am as hard up as the deuce! It is with difficulty I can spare you your two guineas to-day—"

"Two guineas and a half, if you please, sir!" cried Alice, now speaking vehemently, and indeed with ill-concealed scorn and disgust.

"Oh, two guineas and a half, is it? Well, be it so. But as I was saying, if you only knew the bother and trouble I have had to screw enough out of the governor to get that little drag and those prads—"

"And yet your father is very rich, Sylvester?" interjected Alice.

"Rich? Well, no doubt of it—but precious close! And therefore, Alice, if sometimes I don't seem to be quite as liberal to you as I ought—But Ah, by the bye!" he abruptly ejaculated, "the very thing I ought to have told you first I am coming to last! It's all settled."

"What is all settled?" inquired Miss Denton, with an air of more indifference than interest.

"Why, the little business that I was hinting to you about t'other day," rejoined Sylvester. "The fact is, Alice, it shan't make any difference betwixt you and me as far as my coming to see you on the sly and giving you your money is concerned: but I don't think it will be proper for us to be seen too publicly together—"

"What on earth does he mean?" ejaculated Alice.

"Oh, you know very well! That business is coming off. Not that I shall be proud, you know, Alice—because it's all very well to have an *Honourable* prefixed to your name; but in my humble opinion Sylvester Casey Esquire is just as good as the Honourable Launcelot Osborne."

"Oh," said Alice; "now I do recollect you said something the other day about marriage between your sister and the gentleman you have just named. But Lord bless you, Sylvester! those kind of things go in at one ear and out at another—particularly as you are now and then given to shooting with the long bow."

"Don't say that again, Alice," interjected the young man angrily, while his countenance was as red as a peony; "or else I shan't like it."

"Well, but about this marriage?" said Miss Denton; "when is it to take place?"

"In a few days," responded Sylvester. "T was only settled this morning. My father and Launcelot had a final interview—"

"Mr. Osborne, I presume, having duly proposed to your sister and being referred by her to your father?"

"Well, that was not exactly the way in which the business was managed," resumed Sylvester.

"You see, my dear Alice, the Trentham family are entirely in my father's power. The governor can sell up everything at any moment—landed estates and all—because Launcelot has executed a deed cutting off the entail; so that in plain terms it only depends on the governor to make beggars of the Trentham family at any moment. But this is not his game; he has got plenty of money; it isn't *cash* that he wants, Alice—it's *connexion*. There! deuce take it! I've spoke it out plain enough—and now you understand me. But don't go telling anybody what I'm saying to you."

"Not I," said Miss Denton carelessly. "I am not acquainted with a soul to whom your family affairs or those of Lord Trentham are at all likely to prove of any interest. But does Launcelot Osborne love your sister?"

"Oh, love! bother take love in a match of this sort! But the truth is, Lsuncelot and Selina have seen each other so seldom—Ah, by the bye!" and here he again interrupted himself with suddenness: then taking out his watch, he cried, "Yes—this is just about the time!"

"What is the time?" asked Alice: "I mean, to what do you allude?"

"Why, Selina is to be at Trentham House between three and four o'clock, to be introduced to my lord and her ladyship."

"What?" ejaculated Alice, in astonishment: "have things gone so far without your sister even so much as knowing the parents of her intended husband? Well, this is the most extraordinary thing I ever heard of in all my born days?"

"Oh, but in fashionable life," said Sylvester flippantly, "love never enters into the question. Launcelot Osborne is a good-looking young fellow enough—though perhaps he hasn't quite so much of the *dash* about him as I have, and therefore is not likely to get on quite so well with the fair sex—"

"Oh, you are indeed irresistible!" said Alice: and then she burst forth into the merriest peal of uncontrollable laughter.

"I don't know what you mean," cried young



Casey, "whether this is joke or not; but all I can say is——"

"Why, of course I meant it as serious," said Miss Denton; "only that you looked so singular at the moment I could not help laughing. But pray go on. You were telling me that at this very hour your sister was going to be introduced to Lord and Lady Trentham——"

"Yes—the thing is so arranged. Of course the governor——"

"That means your father I suppose?" remarked Alice.

"Why, you know it does! Don't I always call him the governor? That's the fashionable term now-a-days. And so, as I was saying, the governor of course knows Lord Trentham well enough, because they have had all their money connexions together: but his lordship has never been to our house, and he doesn't as yet know me or my mother—though I daresay by this time he

has formed the acquaintance of my sister. She is to call at Trentham House all alone, so as to avoid any display or ceremony——"

"And does your sister like this proceeding?" asked Alice.

"Like it?" said Sylvester. "Well, to tell you the truth, Selina is a very great fool, and she doesn't seem to know her own interests quite so well as she ought. Of course I can speak plain to you, Alice—and therefore I don't mind saying it's a deuced fine thing for Selina to make such a match. The Hon. Mrs. Osborne at once, and Lady Trentham hereafter!"

"But if your sister does not love this Mr. Osborne," interjected Alice, "she may well have scruples——"

"Oh, don't bother me again about love!" cried the young man: "it's all very well to read of in plays and romances! Launcelot Osborne is good-looking enough—and Selina is a deuced

pretty girl—though I say it which perhaps should'nt say it, being her brother;—and so I have no doubt they will like each other well enough when they are spliced."

"And so your sister is a very pretty young lady?" said Alice: and then, after a pause, she inquired with a sly look towards her protector, "Is she anything like you?"

"Well," said Sylvester, rising from the sofa, and advancing towards the mirror, in front of which he stood running his freckled hand through his horrible red hair, "I can't say that she is precisely in my style, though of course there is a certain family resemblance: but her hair is not—hem—auburn like mine; and—and—her complexion has not of course got these—what-d'ye call them?—sunburns, which are all very well in a man—Indeed they rather become him—though in a woman they may be thought slightly objectionable. Then, as for eyes, mine are——"

"Green," Alice ventured to interject, but in a low tone.

"Eh! what?" ejaculated Sylvester, as he gave a sudden start. "You said——"

"Nothing," rejoined Alice, looking up quite innocently. "Pray go on. You were describing your sister."

"Oh, well," cried the young man, still smarting under the idea that his mistress had intended to joke insultingly with him, "I have told you enough about my sister to-day. But by the bye, Alice," he went on to observe, recovering his good temper, "you were speaking just now about my taking you out somewhere for an excursion to-morrow; and you named the Star and Garter at Richmond. Now, what should you say if I were to tell you to invite your friend Mademoiselle Imogene?"

"She would not come," answered Alice.

"She wouldn't come?" ejaculated Sylvester. "Well, that would be a fine game! You don't mean to say she plays the prude when everybody knows she has got a child of three or four years old."

"Ah, that child indeed!" exclaimed Alice, as if she were about to make some revelation concerning it: and then checking herself, she said, "But it is of no use—you would not believe me if I were to tell you."

"Not believe what? That your friend Imogen is privately married—or is a widow—or anything else to prove that she is quite a respectable character?"—and Sylvester laughed mockingly.

"No matter, sir!" interjected Alice, somewhat sharply: "let us change the subject. And now," she asked, good-humouredly, "will you come and take me for an excursion to-morrow? or will you not? I do not particularly care—only I wish to know for certain; because if you could not possibly make it convenient, there is Mr. Blundell——"

"What! the acrobat?" ejaculated Sylvester.

"Well, yes—the acrobat," rejoined Alice. "There is no harm in being an acrobat—is there? I am sure he is a very handsome man—and all the ladies seem to admire him, particularly when he climbs to the top of the ladder, or balances himself upon the great globe up the sloping plank."

"Well, well—what of your Mr. Blundell?" demanded Sylvester, with an air of jealous vexation.

"Only that he was telling me yesterday," re-

plied Alice, "that whitebait dinners have begun at Greenwich and Blackwall—and he offered to take me to one of those places to-morrow."

"Oh, but I haven't said yet that I won't take you to the Star and Garter at Richmond. And now that I think of it, I should rather like the trip. It is not at all probable we shall meet any of the Trentham family down there on a Sunday; and so I will take you, Alice. But don't go and flatter yourself, now, that I am jealous of this Mr. Blundell the acrobat; for such an idea would be ridiculous. And now good bye till to-morrow."

My Sylvester Casey took his departure; and as he endeavoured to make his equipage cut sharp round the nearest corner, so as to give a proof of his skill in driving to all persons who might be beholding him at the moment, he dashed one of the fore-wheels with such violence against the lamp-post that it was a marvel the phaeton was not upset. The bystanders laughed; and Mr. Sylvester Casey's dignity experienced the utmost humiliation for some little time, until by the aid of his consummate conceit it was enabled to recover itself.

Soon after Sylvester's departure, Alice Denton put on her bonnet and scarf and proceeded to pay another visit to her friend Imogen Hartland. She found the Star of the Circus seated in her little parlour in a very thoughtful mood; and the child, as usual, was playing with her toys. Imogen made a slight gesture of impatience as Alice entered the room—for she wished to be alone with her own reflections.

"Am I intruding?" inquired Miss Denton, who was too good-humoured to take offence for so slight a cause. "If so, I will retire. I shall see you to-night at the theatre. I dare say you are surprised to find me dropping in upon you twice in the same day——"

"Do not go away, Alice," said Imogen, now speaking kindly and even affectionately to her friend, whose hand she took. "I have something to tell you. Yes—I will tell you what has occurred. There need be no secrets between you and me!"—Then, after a pause, she added very seriously and in a low voice, "I have seen him—I have spoken to him—I have been alone with him—his hand has been pressed to my lips and to my heart——"

"Good heavens, Imogen! And yet you are unhappy?" ejaculated Alice. "You are pale—careworn——"

"How can I be otherwise than unhappy?" asked Imogen, shaking her head with an air of the deepest despondency. "Lancelot Osborne——"

"Lancelot Osborne?" cried Alice, at once struck by the name.

"Yes," responded Imogen; "he whom I loved—aye, and still love—is Lancelot Osborne, the son of Lord Trentham."

"And his is engaged to be married," exclaimed Alice, "to the sister of Sylvester Casey!"

"What!" cried Imogen, starting with mingled indignation and astonishment: "that handsome and amiable young man to throw himself away upon the daughter of a gripping money-lender—a notorious usurer?"

"It is as I tell you," rejoined Alice. "Ah! little did I think when just now listening to Sylvester's nonsensical chattering, I should learn any-

thing that would be so vitally important for you to hear. But so it is; and Selina Casey was to call this afternoon at Treatham House to be introduced for the first time to the parents of her intended husband."

"Ah!" ejaculated Imogen, as everything in respect to her own adventure was now entirely cleared up. "How strange the coincidence! how wondrous! It almost seems preternatural that I should have been led to keep, as it were, the very appointment which was made for my rival!"

The two young women remained in discourse together for some while longer,—Imogen Hartland narrating to her friend all that had happened at Treatham House, and Alice on the other hand detailing all the facts she had learnt from the lips of Sylvester Casey.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PARISH CLERK.

THE scene again shifts to the picturesque little village of Addington, at no great distance from Tunbridge Wells. It was evening—the evening of the Monday following next upon the incidents of the two or three preceding chapters; and the old clerk of the village church was seated on the stile leading into the church-yard, enjoying the freshness of the breeze, and basking as it were in the slanting rays of the declining sun. Presently he beheld approaching towards him a young gentleman whose appearance riveted the old man's attention more and more as its object drew nearer to him. He seemed to be one of those exquisites whose existence is as peculiar to the metropolias as that of a bee is to a hive, and who, if they ever make their appearances in the provinces at all, seem only to have gone thither for the express purpose of astonishing the rustic natives.

The young gentleman to whom we are now alluding, was most elegantly dressed. Never was a white hat more admirable in its shape or more jauntily worn. It imparted an air of rakishness to a countenance whose features were somewhat feminine and delicate, despite the manly appurtenances of the whiskers and moustache. And what whiskers!—how glossy! how artistically curled! Then, as for the moustache—it needs particular description. It was not a great coarse moustache such as might be worn by a cavalry soldier: but it was a slender line bowing the upper lip: it was glossy like the whiskers; and its pointed extremities were curled and twisted as if the last finishing touch of a twirl had been given by the most fashionable of hair-dressers or the most accomplished of valets. But though this moustache was exceedingly becoming, truth nevertheless compels us to state that it looked uncommonly like one of those which decorate the upper lips of the waxen heads of gentlemen in hair-dressers' windows. In all other respects the young gentleman to whom we are alluding, was equally well got up. His surtout-coat fitted without a wrinkle to the symmetry of his shape: but it seemed as if it were rather too much padded at the breast. The trowsers were full and plaited after the French fashion,—not being cut straight, but bulging very much all round the hips, and

getting narrower and narrower towards the points where they terminated above the most elegant patent-leather boots that ever were worn. The shirt, with its three chased gold studs—the waist-coat, fitting as faultlessly as the coat—and the light brown kid gloves, completely defining the shape of the small well-modelled hands—were all in keeping with the rest of his most elegant, fashionable, and attractive toilet.

The young gentleman carried a beautiful little riding-whip in his hand; and he had a slight swagger in his walk, as if he were on uncommonly good terms with himself, and as if the cruellest thing that could happen to him would be for any one to pass by without looking at him. By his gait one would fancy that he considered himself the very pink of dandyism. You would not call him a "swell:" he would strike you as being only a most fastidious gentleman. As he came along the path leading to the church-yard stile, he flourished his riding-whip in a *nonchalant* fashion, cutting off the tops of the long stalks of grass that were growing for hay, or the points of the young twigs sprouting from the hedge. Then, as if very short-sighted, he thrust a quizzing-glass into the socket of his eye,—though from this circumstance it must not be supposed that we are giving another description of Sylvester Casey; for the subject of our present remarks was a very different being indeed from the vulgar *parvenu* who was introduced in the preceding chapter.

The old parish clerk stared through his great spectacles at this phenomenon who was approaching him; for a phenomenon such an individual really was in the quiet little village of Addington. If at first bewildered and astonished, the old clerk at length felt himself to be overawed; and he was at first about to get off the stile in order to make room for the young gentleman to pass, when the exquisite stranger said in a voice that was of velvety softness, "Don't move, my good man. Don't move! I am going to stop here and converse with you for a few minutes."

The old clerk took off his hat out of respect to one who addressed him in such a friendly patronising style. The young gentleman told him to put on his hat again; and then drawing out his purse, which was very tiny and very elegant, with a quantity of sovereigns in one end and a very few pieces of silver in the other, he extracted some two or three of the latter coins, saying, "I observed a very excellent ale-house in the village, and you will permit me to offer you the means of presently refreshing yourself there."

The old clerk was more and more enchanted with his new acquaintance; and he thought that he could not do otherwise than at once enter upon certain personal explanations to one who suddenly displayed so deep an interest in him. So he proceeded to inform the young gentleman that "his name was Hogben—John Hogben at his service—that he would be sixty-three years old come next January—that he had been parish clerk thirty-nine years, ever since the death of his father (God rest his soul!) which lay under the yew tree on t'other side of the church—that he once used to be sexton as well as clerk, but that ever since he got the roomatiz in his limbs, he was obliged to give up the digging of other peoples' graves, or else he would have been soon brought down into his own." Then, having been thus

communicative towards the young gentleman, Mr. Hogben's heart was moved, alike by his feelings and by the shillings he had consigned to his pocket, to be confidential. So he went on to say that "he liked his late wicar very much, but he didn't like the present one; nor more did a many other people that he could name; and he thought it a very great pity the old one should ever have died—but it was the law of natur', and so he supposed there was no help for it."

Having arrived at this lucid conclusion, the old man took off his spectacles—wiped them—put them on again—and then regaled himself with another good look at the stranger.

"And where is your vicar's house?" inquired this young gentleman.

"Just round behind the church here, sir," was the reply. "You see that stack of chimbleys above them trees? That's it."

"And that picturesque little cottage which I see yonder, in the other direction?" continued the young gentleman.

"That's Dahlia Cottage," replied the parish clerk. "Mr. and Mrs. Trevor lives there."

"Ah! that's where Mr. and Mrs. Trevor live?" ejaculated the exquisite stranger: and then, with his left hand upon his hip, the riding-whip to his mouth, and the quizzing-glass stuck in his right eye, he stood contemplating the cottage for upwards of a minute.

And all this while the old clerk was surveying the young gentleman; and he could not help thinking that there was a something strange—but he could not exactly define what it was—in the mien, or the costume, or the general appearance (he knew not which) of the exquisite stranger.

"How long have those Trevors lived there?" inquired the young gentleman, at length breaking silence.

"How long?" repeated Mr. Hogben. "Well, let me see. Tim Gaffney was took up for sheep-stealing just close upon twenty months ago—"

The young gentleman could not help bursting out into a merry laugh, which was however so exceedingly musical that it seemed quite to charm the ears of the old man instead of making him angry; for he gazed with a half-smiling expression of countenance upon the exquisite stranger.

"What on earth," cried the latter, "has Mr. Gaffney's being taken up for sheep-stealing to do with the time that the Trevors have dwelt at that cottage?"

"Why, sir," responded the parish clerk, "I remember it was on the very same day that Tim Gaffney was took to Maidstone, Mr. Trevor comes to the village and takes Dahlia Cottage—'cause why, I recollect the two things was talked of together in the parlour up at the Red Lion that same evening."

"And which event seemed to be looked upon as the more important?" inquired the stranger, with a smile which the old clerk thought was very pleasing, and which revealed two such pure and perfect rows of ivory that Mr. Hogben mentally ejaculated, "Them teeth has never chawed bakker!"

"Why, you see, sir," he continued, speaking audibly, "the cottage had been shut up for some time; and Mr. Fairbrass—that's the owner of it, sir—began to despair of ever getting another tenant; when, lo and behold! one evening the Harlequin comes in—"

"The Harlequin?" said the young gentleman, dubiously.

"Yes, sir—that's the coach which runs atwixt Maidstone and the Wells. So, when it come in, Mr. Trevor comes along with it. He steps into the Red Lion; and he says, says he, 'Where does Mr. Fairbrass live?'—'That red brick house over the way, with the great brass knocker,' says the landlord, says he. Then away goes Mr. Trevor to Mr. Fairbrass. 'You have advertised in yesterday's *Times*,' says he, 'a sweet little willa containing eight rooms with every convenience.'—'Besides kitchen and washus,' says Fairbrass.—'And a garding,' says Mr. Trevor, says he,—'Yes, and a garding,' says Fairbrass, says he. So then they go off together and look at it; and Mr. Trevor soon makes up his mind. 'I'll take it,' says he.—'Werry good,' says Fairbrass. 'Rent forty pounds a-year.'—'It's a bargin,' says Mr. Trevor.—'I shall want references, or a quarter in advance,' says Fairbrass.—Thereupon Mr. Trevor pulls out his purse and pays a whole twelvemonth in advance, doesn't even wait for the receipt, but bids Fairbrass good day, and mounts the Harlequin again when it passes through on its way to Maidstone."

"Then the bargain was soon settled?" said the young stranger; "and this Mr. Trevor seems a very off-handed person. Well, what next?"

"In two or three days the waggins comes with the furnitur," pursued Hogben; "and everything was soon in apple-pis order. Then a poshay drives up to Dahlia Cottage, and Mr. Trevor hands out the beautifullest cretur' that ever was seen in Addington—barring *your* presence, sir—for you are certainly the prettiest man that I ever see come into the place:" and there appeared to be something peculiar or significant in the glance and tone of the old clerk.

"Don't mind me," said the exquisite, somewhat impatiently; "but go on. "Your discourse interests me. The lady, I suppose, was Mrs. Trevor?"

"Yes—Mr. Trevor's wife," rejoined the clerk. "She's quite the belle of the place."

"But she's not visited, I presume?" said the young gentleman. "I mean that—of course—living in this secluded manner—"

"They don't want to be visited, and won't receive no company," said the clerk. "They might have been called upon by the gentlefolks in the neighbourhood; but they declined all society. They gave it out by some means or another—ah! I remember! it was through the wicar when he had that explanation with them: for of course it wasn't till *then* that people thought of visiting them: but when once that explanation was given—"

"What explanation?" inquired the exquisite.

"Why, you see, sir," continued the parish clerk, "when the Trevors first came to live in the willage, there was many curious things said about 'em; and amongst others it was whispered that the lady wasn't the genelman's wife. Well, time wore on—and about ten months ago Mrs. Trevor has a baby. Now, a baby, sir, must be christened; and Mr. Trevor speaks to our wicar about it: but the wicar having heard the report that was afoat, wouldn't register the child in the name of Trevor unless he fust of all saw the parents' certificate of marriage."

"Ah!" ejaculated the stranger. "And what

then? I suppose it was rather inconvenient to produce the certificate—eh?”

“Inconvenient?” exclaimed Mr. Hogben. “Not a hatom of it! The certificate was forth-comin’ in no time.”

“You mean to say *that*?” cried the young exquisite, suddenly turning right round upon the old clerk.

“To be sure, I mean it, sir. But your manner is so singular—you gave a sort of start—”

“It was nothing, my good man—only a twinge which seized upon me.”

“Ah! it is the roomatiz, sir. Pray take care of it! I was laid up for three year—”

“Never mind how long you were laid up!” interjected the young exquisite petulantly. “You were telling me that the certificate was produced?”

“Of course it were,” rejoined the old man; “and then, as soon as our wicar saw that they was raly married, he became all politeness—he offered to introduce Mrs. Pickstock—that’s his wife—to Mrs. Trevor, and to mention to all the other families in the neighbourhood—”

“Well,” interjected the young exquisite; “and then it was, I suppose, that Mr. Trevor signified his desire to live in seclusion?”

“Just so, sir,” answered the clerk.

“Well, hut that certificate,” proceeded the young stranger, on whose mind the discourse appeared to be making an impression which was something more than the mere casual interest that attends upon a passing gossip: “are you sure it was a genuine one?”

“Geniwine, sir?” cried the old man, in astonishment at the implied doubt. “Do you think that Dr. Pickstock, with a red hood at his back, doesn’t know what a geniwine certificate be? In course he do!—and I rayther think—but mind! I’m not sure—leastways I rayther think he know’d the incumbent which signed it, and in consequence his handwriting.”

The young dandy reflected profoundly; and then he said, “Did you happen to see the certificate?”

“In course I did, sir. Why, I was in the westy at the time when Mr. Trevor produced it.”

“Good God! how strange!”

“What did you say, sir?”

“Oh, nothing! I was only asking if you happen to recollect where Mr. and Mrs. Trevor were married?”

“Well, I don’t know that I can exactly remember the place,” replied the clerk; “for of course I didn’t seize hold of the certificate and examine it just for all the world as if I thought it was a forgery—”

“A forgery? Ah! by the bye,” said the young stranger, “such things *are* sometimes forged—are they not? We have heard of certificates of every kind being forged—matrimonial, baptismal, burial—”

“You seem to be getting excited, young sir,” interrupted the parish clerk: and then, as he again scrutinizingly surveyed his querist, he went on to remark, “I hope that I haven’t been aying too much—the fact is, you have led me on—your manners is so insinuating—and then too there’s a summut about you—a hair of distinction—and raly it has two or three times struck me that if

them whiskers and mustashes was took away from your face, you’d be much more like—”

“My good friend,” interrupted the young exquisite, with crimson upon his cheeks, “never mind what I, should he like or what I should be not like:” then drawing out his purse, he thence extracted a sovereign; and placing it in the old man’s hand, he said, “I feel that I ought to recompense you well for all this tedious process of questionings to which I have subjected you. Keep on your hat, my worthy friend—it is not for advanced years such as your’s are, to show so much deference to comparative youthfulness such as I can boast of. You have atill something more to tell me. That certificate whereof we were speaking,—do you happen to remember the place where it was signed, and where consequently it is supposed Mr. and Mrs. Trevor were married?”

“Supposed?” ejaculated Mr. Hogben, catching at the word which seemed to throw a doubt upon that marriage altogether: but then, as he dropped the sovereign into his waistcoat-pocket, he said, “Well, it is not for an old man like me to look too deep into motives. You seem to be a young genelman with coat, veskit, and breeches—and that’s enough! Well, sir, I’ll take you as sich. Now about that there certificate, I rayther think—but mind I’m not quite sure—it come from Southdale.”

“Southdale? To be sure!” ejaculated the young exquisite. “It is a village in Dorsetshire.”

“Dorsetshire, to be sure!” cried the old man. “I’ll take a davy that was the county! But Ah!”—and he now glanced towards Dahlia Cottage at a little distance.

The young gentleman turned his regards in the same direction; and he beheld a lady approaching.

“That, I presume,” he said, “is Mrs. Trevor?”

“The same, sir,” ejaculated Mr. Hogben.

“Ah! by the bye,” pursued the exquisite, suddenly recovering all his off-hand self-possession and easy air of indifference, “you forgot to tell me what sort of a looking person Mr. Trevor is?”

“He is a tall young man, sir, with dark hair and eyes—very handsome—I should think his age may be something between five-and-twenty and thirty—”

“Seven-and-twenty!” interjected the fashionable querist.

“Why, one would think that you knew as much of these people as I do!” exclaimed the parish clerk. “But I forgot! It’s no business of mine,” he immediately added, as the young gentleman again drew forth his purse. “You are paying me for my information,” continued the old man, with a humiliated air; “and I must not say that my soul is my own. Well, sir, I dare say Mr. Trevor is about seven-and-twenty. I do not think he is in the village at this moment—I’m almost sure that I saw him atop of the Harlequin yesterday morning—”

“Enough, old man!” ejaculated the young exquisite. “I thank you for your information. The money I have already given you was to purchase it. This additional sum is to ensure your silence in respect to the questions that I have been putting to you.”

Thus speaking, the delicate-gloved hands drew forth a couple of sovereigns from the tiny head-

purs with the silver slides:—and with a friendly nod the donor passed loungingly away from the spot.

"Well," said the old man to himself, as he very comfortably consigned the extra donation to his waistcoat-pocket, which could have stowed away a couple of hundred of them; "if ever I saw a man that looked like a woman, you are the one!"

He continued to weigh this reflection as the young exquisite strolled along the path towards Mrs. Trevor, who was advancing from the opposite direction.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DISCOURSE AT THE GATE.

Mrs. TREVOR, who was dressed with that simple elegance which invariably characterized her toilet, was taking an evening walk, having seen her beloved infant consigned to its cradle of repose. Her eyes were bent downward—for she was thinking of her Alfred, who had departed from Addington on the preceding day, precisely as Mr. Hogben had informed the young stranger. Not that Ethel was unhappily pensive or gloomily thoughtful; because, after the visit to London upwards of ten days back, she had every reason to be happy and contented at the proofs which Alfred had afforded her of his pecuniary prosperity. But he had again gone away for one of those periods of indefinite absence which were longer than the intervals that she devoted to her at Dahlia Cottage; and she was thinking to herself how long the time might be ere his return.

All of a sudden she heard footsteps approaching; and raising her eyes, she beheld a fashionably-dressed young gentleman contemplating her with his quizzing-glass in a style which at once struck her to be most superciliously impertinent. Ethel was virtue itself—she was propriety personified: therefore, innocent and artless though she were, she was the very first to feel any insult that might appear to be directed against her womanly modesty. Her immediate impulse now was to turn abruptly round and retreat to the cottage: but a second thought induced her to continue her way. It struck her in a moment that it was a species of conduct which she ought not to seem to recognise, and that it would be time enough to resent it if it assumed a more overt shape. Besides, it was still daylight—the sun had not as yet set—she caught a glimpse of the old parish clerk seated upon the church-yard stile at a little distance—and in the adjacent field there were two or three labourers returning from their work. She therefore flattered herself that the exceeding insolence of the fashionably-dressed stranger's regards would be limited to its present bounds.

But she was mistaken. The young exquisite, still retaining his glass up to his eye, said in a taunting, jeering voice, "Oh! oh! Mrs. Trevor—eh? Do let me have a look at you! They say you are the *belle* of the place."

Ethel's countenance became crimson, and the fires of indignation flashed from those beautiful hazel eyes which were usually so calm and soft in their expression.

A laugh which was strangely musical in its mockery, rang from the lips of the young stranger, and he continued his way, apparently satisfied with the amount of insult which he had thus thrown upon the amiable and inoffensive young lady. Nay, more—he almost instantaneously repented of it: for scarcely had he hastened onward fifty yards, when he ejaculated with an expression of countenance which showed how angry he was with himself, "Fool that I have been to interfere with the creature!"

Meanwhile poor Ethel's sudden paroxysm of indignation had yielded to one of deep mental distress; and she felt afflicted, as every modest woman does under such circumstances, at the thought that her own appearance and her natural good intentions should not have been sufficient to defend her from insult. She could not continue her walk: she wished to be at home that she might at least be shielded by its walls from the possibility of further aggression from the same quarter. She glanced around: the impertinent young coxcomb, as she naturally took him to be, was striking into another path leading to the village; and thus in a few instants the open road was left clear to her to seek Dahlia Cottage.

What was her surprise, and how great was her joy, when on reaching her habitation she beheld Alfred himself coming forth to greet her! She flew towards him:—another moment and she was clasped in his arms!

"Oh, what a happy surprise, dearest husband!" she fervidly exclaimed.

"And equally happy for me, beloved Ethel, that I am enabled thus to return to you for a few days!"

"Then you were not wanted in London so soon as you fancied?" she cried.

"No," he rejoined. "But good heavens, Ethel! how pale and agitated you are! Something has happened! Good God! what is it? Do tell me!"

"Nothing, nothing, Alfred" she exclaimed: and she nestled all the more closely to his bosom, as if to that of a beloved protector who had most unexpectedly returned at the very instant when his presence was invoked.

"Do not say that it is nothing, my dear girl!" interposed her husband. "You are all trembling and quivering! Ethel, I must know what this is!—and he himself now appeared to be seized with much trepidation and emotion.

"I cannot disobey you, Alfred!—I must tell you the truth when you thus adjure me! I have been insulted."

"Insulted, Ethel?" echoed Trevor, his handsome countenance flushing with indignation, "who would dare insult you? Tell me, dearest! tell me! This is a point that I *must* know and *must* have cleared up!"

"Oh, do not for an instant believe, Alfred," said the young lady, greatly distressed, "that by any look on my part—"

"Good heavens!—no!" he exclaimed. "Sooner would I believe that the sun itself would cease to shine, than that *you* would fling a glance of encouragement upon the libertine! Who has insulted you, Ethel?"

A few words of explanation were quickly given; and then the young lady added in an imploring tone, as she saw the angry start which

her husband gave, "Oh, do not take any notice of it! It is past—and you are here! If you go—my God! there will be a duel! I shudder when I think of it!"

"Ethel dearest!" cried Trevor, "be calm! be firm! There are insults which cannot be passed over—and this is one! I must investigate it! The person whom you have depicted, must be some wretched fop across whose back I will lay a horsewhip, but who is by no means likely to have the courage to meet me as a man of honour! Ethel! do not detain me! If I were a coward in such a case, you would have a right to say that I do not love you!"

With these words, Trevor imprinted a fervid though hasty kiss upon Ethel's lips; and then he darted forth from the apartment. At the same time he caught down his hat from a peg in the hall, he snatched up a riding-whip—and in a few moments he was outside the garden-gate.

The dusk was now closing in: the sun had set—the twilight of the early part of May was redeeming the landscape from a deeper obscurity. Trevor bent his hurried steps towards the village; for the cottage, be it remembered, was a little apart on the outskirts; and he soon caught sight of a person leaning against a gate and gazing in the direction of that cottage. A glance at the appearance of the individual satisfied him that it was the very one of whom he was in search and of whom Ethel had spoken. And now that young stranger himself, on catching a glimpse of Trevor, quickly averted his regards; and bending forward over the gate, instead of leaning with his back against it, seemed suddenly to become very intent on surveying the field with which the gate itself communicated.

"Ah! ha!" thought the indignant Trevor to himself: "he suspects that I am one who has an account to settle with him! He pretends not to see me! he hopes I shall pass him by unrecognised. He is evidently a coward."

Another moment, and Alfred was by the side of the young stranger at the gate. But now the exquisite appeared to be very far from being inspired by terror; and turning slowly round, he again leant loungingly with his back to the gate, twirling his moustache with an air of supercilious defiance. There was something full well calculated on the part of that feminine, foppish, yet inimitable representative of dandyism to enhance to the very utmost the indignation of the high-spirited Trevor; and holding his whip in a menacing manner, he said, "May I ask, sir, whether it was you who just now wantonly insulted a young lady whom you met at no great distance from the church?"

The young exquisite made no answer; but it struck Alfred that a low derisive laugh sounded from his lips.

"By heaven, sir!" exclaimed Trevor, "the more you provoke me, the severer shall be the chastisement which I will inflict! The amplest apology—"

"Very well, then," said the young stranger; "let me make the apology to the lady herself, and in your presence."

Trevor was struck by the sound of the voice; he even gave a quick galvanic start: but instantaneously regaining his self-possession, he mentally ejaculated, "The idea is ridiculous!"

"No, sir," he continued, speaking audibly; "you shall not be admitted into the presence of the young lady whom you so grossly insulted. You will apologize to me here—upon this spot!"

"And if I refuse?" said the young exquisite coolly.

Again Trevor started at the sound of that voice: but again feeling convinced that the sort of suspicion it engendered was ridiculous, he answered sternly, "If you refuse, I will lay this whip across your back."

"Oh, indeed!" said the young fashionable, still with a most provoking coolness; and sticking the quizzing-glass in his eye, he added, "But, you see, I also carry a whip; and perhaps I may know how to use it as well as yourself."

While he was thus speaking, he lounged against the gate in such a posture that whatsoever remained of the twilight defined his profile completely to the view of Alfred Trevor. This gentleman contemplated that profile with a growing interest that rapidly increased into consternation and dismay: but all in a moment the exquisite averted his face again—and Trevor with an infinite sense of relief, ejaculated to himself, "Pshaw! it is preposterous!"

"Now, sir," continued the young stranger, "you have not answered my last remark. I said that I also carried a whip—and I warn you that if you touch me with your's, I will thrash you soundly with mine."

This time the voice sounded differently from before; and Trevor, still smothered under the sense of the insult offered to Ethel, exclaimed, "The matter must be settled in another way. If you refuse as a gentleman to apologize, remember that there are such things as pistols!"

The fashionable stranger burst out into the merriest laugh,—a laugh as musical and as silvery as that which had ere now so completely ravished the ears of the old parish clerk,—a laugh that was clear as a metallic sound—as pure and as gushing as the rippling flow of a streamlet. Again did Trevor give a quick galvanic start: again did his eyes scrutinisingly survey the features of the young stranger,—whom, however, he began to look upon as very far from being a stranger to him; and then, as suspicion became conviction, he said in a hollow tone and with dismayed looks, "My God! is it really you?"

"Yes—'tis I," answered the disguised lady—for such she indeed was, as the reader has no doubt already full well surmised: and now she spoke altogether in her natural voice, which she had previously disguised as much as possible. "Yes—'tis I, Herbert!"

A groan came from the lips of Trevor—and he staggered against the gate for support. At length suddenly recovering his self-possession, he assumed an air of haughty defiance; and he said, "Well, I confess that I keep a mistress here. I know not by what accident you may have discovered it: but at all events you can now judge for yourself whether I have not studied to envelop the fact in so much mystery as to avoid creating a scandal in the world. I am not the only man who is thus criminal, if actual fault there be in it: and perhaps you would do well to let the affair continue shrouded in this obscurity?"

"Oh, Ethel is your mistress—eh?" said the

lady, in an ironical tone. "Judging by her appearance, Dorsetshire may boast of very beautiful women—and Southdale perhaps may produce the loveliest of all."

Trevor became ghastly pale, all his hardihood and assurance forsook him in a moment; and again staggering against the gate, it was also again in a hollow voice that he said, "Why those allusions? what is it that you know? Speak out, I entreat you! At all events let there be a thorough understanding between us!"

"You ask me what I know," said the lady; "and I reply that I know *all*! It was not for nothing that I was just now engaged in an hour's chat with the garrulous old parish clerk——"

"Ah!"—and Trevor at once understood to what extent the revelations of Mr. Hogben might have gone, and how far he himself was compromised thereby. "Now, permit me to offer a few words of explanation," he went on to observe. "Doubtless the clerk spoke to you of a marriage certificate——"

"Precisely so. He was in the vestry when you displayed that certificate to the vicar."

"Oh! and you can doubtless comprehend," ejaculated Trevor, "how to satisfy the scruples of that clergyman, who refused to christen the infant in a particular name until he received a certain proof—you can comprehend, I say, how I manufactured a certificate——"

"Ah! was it so?" ejaculated the lady, who did not seem prepared for this explanation: and then she murmured to herself, "Well, it may be so!"

"It was comparatively easy," continued Trevor, "to cheat the vicar with a fabricated certificate—the offence was a very venial one—it injured nobody—whereas, on the other hand, it saved certain feelings from being too deeply wounded——"

"Enough, Herbert! enough!" interjected the lady. "You need not tell me how considerate you have been on account of the feelings of that woman!"

Trevor started, and an angry flush passed over his countenance; for he keenly and poignantly felt the terrible insult which was thus suddenly levelled against his Ethel. But he knew himself to be powerless to avenge it: he even felt that it would be imprudent to notice it more than he had involuntarily done; and he said in as quiet a tone as he could command, "I will see you to-morrow; and whatsoever you may wish to be done under existing circumstances—whatsoever stipulations you have to make——"

"Not to-morrow," said the lady. "I shall not be in London."

"Where then shall you be? Are you going to——"

"I am going on a little journey," she interrupted him, "which will perhaps occupy me for two or three days."

"Ah! a journey?" said Trevor. "And might I venture to inquire whither you are thus going? Not that I assert the remotest right to control your actions;—no, nor even to question them——"

"Oh, there is no secret," interjected the lady, "in respect to the journey which I am about to undertake. I am going into a county where you passed a few months some two years ago; and it was no wonder," she added, throwing a tincture of irony into the silver melody of her voice, "that you should have written up at the time to tell me

what a delightful neighbourhood it was—how much you were enjoying yourself, and how happy you were——"

"Ah! I understand the allusion," said Trevor "In plain terms, you mean that you are going into Dorsetshire?"

"I am. It will be a nice little trip."

"And— and— which part of Dorsetshire?" faltered forth Trevor.

"Oh, Southdale of course," rejoined the lady.

Trevor reflected for a few moments; and then, in a voice which again sounded hollow even to his own ears, and with pale careworn looks, he said, "You are determined to follow this up to the very uttermost. Well, I confess that I am in your power. And now deal with me as you will."

"Ah, then, you propose to save me the journey into Dorsetshire?" cried the lady. "Well, this is very kind of you, and shall be duly taken into account. We may therefore meet to-morrow, as you just now proposed—and you will then have the kindness to sign a certain paper which I shall in the meanwhile have drawn up."

"Yes— anything! everything!" ejaculated Trevor, with a tone and look of grateful eagerness. "Name anything else that you will!— anything that I can do——"

"I do not know that there will be anything else," answered the lady coolly and carelessly. "And now farewell!"

With these words she sauntered away from the spot; and Trevor remained leaning against the gate, giving way to his painful reflections. The dusk was deepening around him; but, Oh! if any one could have beheld his features at that moment, they would have revealed an expression of almost mortal anguish—betraying the intensity of the affliction which had seized upon his soul! At length he began slowly to retrace his way to the cottage, exerting efforts that were well-nigh preterhuman to master his feelings and compose his looks.

Meanwhile the disguised lady, instead of entering the village, struck off into a path which diverged from the commencement of the little street; and at a distance of about a hundred and fifty yards up that narrow shady lane a horse and gig were standing; while a man, who was in charge of the equipage, lay upon the grassy bank, smoking his pipe. On hearing approaching footsteps, he rose up; and as he beheld the seeming young gentleman emerge from the surrounding obscurity, he exclaimed, "Why, sir, I thought you was never coming!"

"I have been detained much longer than I anticipated," replied the lady. "But I told you at the outset that you were to wait, no matter how long—and that you should be liberally rewarded."

"Oh, I wasn't afeard of that, sir," said the man, who had the air of an hostler in a somewhat decayed and seedy state.

The lady took her seat in the gig, observing, "We shall soon accomplish the dozen miles between this and Maidstone."

"Werry soon, sir," said the man, as he took the driver's seat; and then flicking his horse with the whip, he added, "The mare is a good 'un, and gets over the ground in denced good style."

The equipage sped along; and about half-an-



hour passed, during which the disguised lady was almost completely absorbed in her reflections, and she occasionally acknowledged with a monosyllable the remarks which the man went on making in a garrulous strain upon the weather, the crops, the horse that he was driving, and all the other horses that he had ever had anything to do with in the course of his life—and they were not a few.

The idea presently began to creep into the mind of the disguised lady that the road was narrower and more lonely than when she had pursued it on coming from Maidstone two or three hours previous. She therefore began to look about her; and as the moon was now coming out with all its argentine brilliancy, the landscape was sufficiently lighted to enable her to contemplate all objects within a certain distance. The longer she surveyed the features of the scene, the more was she convinced that it was a different route which was

being taken, from that by which she had been brought to Addington. But then, might it not be a nearer one? She was determined to put the question.

"I suppose," she said, with an assumed air of confidence, "that this bye-lane affords a shorter cut than the regular road?"

"Eh?" said the man, eyeing the lady askance. "Ain't this the main road?"

She felt as if her heart were leaping up into her mouth as the conviction smote her that the man had some nefarious purpose in view; and she now for the first time remarked the sinister expression of his countenance. She swept her eyes around: she beheld some building in the distance ahead—and her resolve was in a moment taken. She would wait till she got opposite that building, and then she would suddenly throw herself out of the gig—or else desire the man to stop on some pretext—anything, in short, so as

to place herself in the way of invoking protection or assistance. But in order to conceal her design, she said in a careless tone, "Oh, I thought this might be a bye-road; but as I have never travelled it before to-day, 'tis no wonder that I should be mistaken."

Again the man eyed her askance; but he said nothing.

The road now went down a gradual descent into a valley, through the bottom of which meandered a stream, which looked like an enormous serpent shining like quicksilver beneath the rays of the bright moon. The disguised lady now perceived that the river passed close by the very building which she was keeping in view; and as the gig approached it still nearer, she conjectured from the shape and position of the edifice that it must be a water-mill.

"It was down there," said the man, pointing with his whip, "that the young o'man which was murdered by her sweetheart three years ago."

"Murdered?" ejaculated the lady, with a cold shudder.

"Yes—and ever since the old mill has been shut up——"

"Shut up?" echoed the lady, her cherished hope suddenly vanishing, and dismay seizing upon her.

"Yes—didn't I say *shut up*?" demanded the man, whose tone and demeanour seemed to become every instant more threatening and sinister. "Well, sir, as I was saying, ever since the mill has been shut up the folks say it has been haunted by the ghost of the young o'man which was so cruelly murdered by the miller's man. But ghost or no ghost, it wouldn't prevent me from going into the mill if I wanted to do so; and whether in the middle of the day or the middle of the night it would be all one to Tim Gaffney."

An ejaculation of mingled astonishment and affright burst from the lips of the disguised lady; for she instantaneously recollected that this was the very name which the old parish clerk had mentioned in a manner that had elicited from her lips a peal of such musical laughter. A wild terror now seized upon her: her brain appeared to reel: she knew not what course to adopt,—when all in a moment the man pulled in the horse, just as the gig reached the middle of a bridge which spanned the stream.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MILL.

"What are you going to do?" asked the lady, in an almost dying voice.

"Why, there's no use in mincing the matter for another moment," replied Gaffney. "You've shown so much curiosity about this mill here, that I'm going to treat you to a look at the inside of it."

A cry of terror pealed forth from the lady's lips—and she made an effort to spring out of the gig; but it failed, for her arm was instantaneously seized upon by the strong vigorous grasp of Tim Gaffney, who at the same time exclaimed, in a threatening voice and with a terrible oath, "If you try to run away, I'll do for you as sure as the

miller's man did for the poor girl in the mill close by!"

The unfortunate lady was now paralyzed with horror; and though the ruffian released her arm from the vice-like grasp in which for a few moments he had clutched it, yet she dared not renew the attempt to save herself by flight; for she saw that she was indeed completely in his power. He coolly drew forth and displayed a brace of pistols, at the same time remarking, "Your best plan is to be quiet and do as you're bid."

"My God! would you murder me?" faltered out the unhappy lady.

"If I wanted to do it, I shouldn't have taken the trouble to give you any sort of warning to be quiet," responded Tim Gaffney: "but I should have done the business at once."

He now whistled in a peculiar manner; and the sound, which was very loud and shrill, penetrated through the lady's brain. In a few moments she distinctly heard the sound of a door opening somewhere about the premises; for the gig had halted close by the old mill, which consisting of a mass of woodwork all tarred over, had a gloomy and ominous appearance. The lady now felt convinced that Gaffney was summoning other ruffians to his assistance; and the dread idea struck her that they might not prove so merciful in respect to her life as he had proclaimed himself to be.

"For heaven's sake, drive on, or else let me go!" she said in an imploring voice. "Tell me what you require. My purse—my jewellery——"

"Hold your tongue, young lady!" exclaimed Gaffney, now for the first time showing by his speech that he was aware of her real sex.

At this moment a man was seen crossing a plank which lay above a stream branching off from the river; for that plank formed a means of communication betwixt the road and the mill. As this individual emerged from the obscurity, the lady, whose terrified looks were rapidly thrown upon him, perceived that he was a middle-sized, stoutly built fellow, dressed in a velvet shooting jacket and dark trousers; and he carried a thick stick in his hand.

"Now then, Bill, look alive!" said Gaffney. "There's one of the fair sex dressed up as a man! Now then, young lady, you get out and follow my friend Bill Bax; and he'll introduce you into the mill, where I shall have the pleasure of joining you as soon as I've put the trap into the outhouse——"

"What!—go with him? Into the mill?" shrieked the lady. "No, no! you may kill me first!"

Another terrible oath came from Tim Gaffney's lips as he exclaimed, "You *shall* go, young lady! or else"—and he again produced his pistols. "Take my advice, and don't have none of your nonsense. I tell you again we don't want your life: but we want your money—and that we mean to have."

"Then take it! take it!" cried the lady, presenting her purse, which she tore forth from her pocket with all the vehemence of nervous haste.

"No one ever ought to refuse a good offer," said Bill Bax, as he took the purse from the hand of the disguised lady, whom he had been attentively contemplating for the last few minutes

"But you must come along with me all the same—'cause why, there's a little paper you must just sign inside the mill. Is'n't that the dodge, Tim?"

"It is," answered Gaffney; "and if the lady stands talking and bothering any longer in the middle of the road, I'm hanged if I don't put an end to the whole business at once by blowin' her brains out!"

"You swear that my life is safe?" demanded the lady, regaining some portion of her lost self-possession as she perceived the absolute necessity of yielding obedience to the ruffians who had her in their power.

"I've told you so more than once," replied Tim Gaffney.

"Lead on," said the disguised lady to Bill Bax; "and I will follow."

"Well, I rather think you had better go in front, ma'am," said that individual; and he just examined for a moment the knob at the end of his bludgeon, as if significantly to let the captive know that it might be dangerous for her to make the slightest attempt at escape.

Without another word the lady began to cross the plank; and she reached a little low door opening into the mill. It stood ajar; and Bill Bax, who had followed her closely, told her to push it. She did so; and he then bade her walk in. But she stopped short. Within the place a deep darkness prevailed: and the lady's heart was smitten with terror at the idea of crossing that threshold.

"Move on!" said Bax gruffly, at the same time pushing her from behind, so that she was perforce compelled to enter the building.

He was close at her heels; she heard the door shut; and now she was entombed in the most stupendous darkness, in the midst of which she was alone with that ruffian! So dire a terror seized upon her that her quivering limbs were about to give way and fall completely, when the sharp crack of a lucifer-match sounded upon her ears and a light flamed upon her view. It appeared that the man Bax had a candle close at hand; and the lady felt as if a great weight were all in a moment lifted from her mind. She glanced upon the fellow's face: he was a middle-aged man, with a sallow complexion, large overhanging eyebrows, and a very wide mouth. Ugly almost to repulsiveness, his appearance was even more sinister than that of his friend and accomplice Tim Gaffney. Nevertheless, as he was now lighting a candle, instead of preparing to murder her in the dark, the lady felt considerably reassured; and the hope arose within her that her life was indeed safe and that her liberty could only be compromised for a short time.

She looked around; she was in a little passage, whence a steep narrow staircase led upward, a rope serving as a substitute for a handrail.

"Go on, ma'am, if you please," said Bax, whose voice was naturally surly in its tone, and whose mode of speaking was coarse and peremptory. "I've lighted this here candle for your accommodation; and you'll therefore have the goodness to make use of it without any more delay."

She ascended the staircase, and then found herself in a room where there were portions of the huge massive machinery of the mill; and still Mr. Bax, who kept close at her heels, bade her move on. She traversed the room, at the opposite extremity of which there was a door; and this

led into another compartment where there was another ascent of steps. These the disguised lady mounted: another room was reached—and then a complete labyrinth of places formed by different portions of the machinery, was threaded, until a light was seen emanating from a door that stood half open.

"Now," said Bax, with a grim smile, "let me do the honours of my own house. Walk in: though it isn't everybody that would introduce such a dashing young spark as you are to one's wife!"

Thus speaking, Bax led the way into a room, where there were some few little articles of furniture—such as a bed, a table, three or four chairs, some crockery, and culinary articles. A woman of an aspect even more repulsive than that of Mr. Bax himself, rose up from her seat as soon as the door opened; and as her husband whispered something in her ear, she immediately began to contemplate the disguised lady with wonder and curiosity.

"Well, it wouldn't have struck me at first," she said, "unless you had given me the hint"—and she turned towards her husband. "But what does it mean?"

"You'll see all about it presently," answered Bax. "Tim's here."

"Oh, then that was *his* whistle?" said the woman.

Bax nodded an affirmative; and the disguised lady thought to herself, "Then it must be a complete gang of ruffians into the midst of whom I have fallen. God help me!"

Still however she hugged the belief that her life was safe; for there was something reassuring in the presence of a female, even though it was as repulsive a specimen of the sex as Mrs. Bax.

"Sit down and make yourself at home, ma'am," said the man, as he extinguished the candle which he had brought in his hand, for there was another burning on the table. "You see," he continued, "it don't do to have much light. The people in the neighbourhood have already seen it more than once—"

"Well, Bill, and so much the better!" ejaculated his wife; "for they spread the report that the mill's haunted, and so no one comes to interfere with us."

"Ah! but if a light was seen burning regularly," rejoined Bax, "there might be some of the farmers in the neighbourhood that wouldn't exactly believe it was the doing of ghosts, and would come with a dozen or so of their men to root out whoever they might find here. For they would soon get it into their heads that there was tramps, or gipsies, or thieves secreted in the old mill."

"Well, well," said the woman, "you've taken precaution enow, with them shutters all covered over with brown paper pasted over every cranny and crevice.—But I say," she added, suddenly lowering her tone and drawing her husband a little aside; "are we right to talk in this way in the presence of the stranger?"

"Oh, I daresay there is no harm in it," replied Bax. "You know that Tim Gaffney is a shrewd wide-awake fellow; and he wouldn't have brought the lady here unless he had some strong hold over her and could bind her to silence. However, we shall see in a few minutes. He has just gone to put the horse and gig up in the shed."

While the man and woman were whispering, the disguised lady watched them with the intensest anxiety, though she did not appear to be doing so; for every movement and every look—aye, and every word that she might by any possibility catch, was of importance to one in her situation. At length footsteps were heard approaching—Bax hastened to open the door—and Tim Gaffney made his appearance.

"What a confounded break-neck place it is to grope one's way about in the dark!" he grumbled forth. "Howsomever, it's dangerous to have a light. Now, Bill, put out the bingo and let's get to business."

The disguised lady gave a sudden start; for she thought that the word "bingo" might possibly be a synonym for "candle," and that therefore the extinction of the one remaining light was contemplated. On this score, therefore, her mind was relieved when she saw Mr. Bax open a small cupboard and take out a bottle of brandy and some glasses.

"Do you do anything in this way, ma'am?" asked Tim Gaffney, as he filled one of the glasses.

Notwithstanding the circumstances in which she was placed, the disguised lady averted her looks in disgust from the ruffian who thus addressed her; and then, in a tone of sudden excitement, she exclaimed, "Keep me not in suspense! tell me why you have brought me hither! What is it that you demand? what paper is it that I am to sign? or was that only a pretext?"

"We didn't want no pretext," replied Gaffney, "when we had got you so completely in our power. But now, ma'am, we will get to business. We are no more inclined for any unnecessary delay than you are. So in order to make a beginning, just tell us your name."

"My name? No, you cannot want to know it."

"Very well, keep it to yourself," responded Tim Gaffney: "but if you don't choose to let us see your name at the bottom of a cheque, you must put it inside a note that you will have to write to some friend, ordering that five hundred guineas are to be given to the bearer and no questions asked."

"Yes—I will do this," answered the lady; and it was almost with a tone of cheerful gaiety that she spoke. "I will write a letter to my bankers—But they live in London, remember!"

"So much the worse for you," remarked Gaffney. "Have you no friend in the neighbourhood to whom you could apply?"

"None," answered the disguised lady. "I am a perfect stranger in this part of the country."

"Well then," pursued Gaffney, "it must be a letter upon your London bankers. I will lose no time in running up to London—I'll undertake to be at the bank the moment it opens to-morrow morning at nine o'clock; and then—let me see?—by one o'clock in the afternoon I'll be back here again. I can use the rail all the way from London to Chatham—"

"Good heavens," exclaimed the lady, "you surely do not mean me to stay here until you return?"

"In course we do," answered Gaffney. "Why, seeing you togged out in this style, I took you for

a shrewd, cunning, wide-awake kind of a young lady; and therefore I am surprised to find that you think us such precious flats as to part with you before we get hold of the ransom-money. Nothing of the sort! Here you stay till it's paid!"

"But you shall see the letter, all except my signature!" cried the lady; "and I will pledge myself in the most solemn manner not to give any counter-instructions!"

"It won't do, ma'am," said Tim Gaffney: and Bill Bax shook his head in a knowing manner at the same time. "We daresay you are a young lady of honour: but we'd rather not trust to mere promises. Mrs. Bax will do her best to make you comfortable; and after all, it's only a little temporary inconvenience to which you are going to be put."

The lady was perfectly dismayed at the idea of having to pass a night in that gloomy place and with such dreadful people: she almost wrung her hands in despair; and after a few moments' bewildering reflection, she exclaimed, "Take all my jewellery! Here is my watch!—it cost fifty guineas!—here is my chain—here are my rings! See! these are diamonds!—and I swear most solemnly that their value is not less than two hundred pounds!"

"Oh, but we meant to have them into the bargain," said Tim Gaffney. "The ransom-money is quite another thing. And now please to observe, ma'am, that the more you delay the business the longer you'll have to remain in this place."

"You shall not keep me here!" she cried, starting up in feverish excitement from the seat which she had taken. "I insist upon being restored to liberty! There are all my jewels! Now let me depart! Do not drive me to desperation! I will rend the entire place with my screams! I will shriek on and on until success comes! Do you hear me?"

"I hear, ma'am," said Tim coolly; "but you're only wasting precious time in mere idle talk. Look here!"

He went to a corner of the room, stooped down, and catching hold of an iron ring, raised a trap-door.

"There!" he said; "that goes right down to the ground-floor: there is no break between! It's where the sacks used to be hoisted up and down. Here's the rope still. So you see, ma'am, that if you made any inconvenient noise you could be very quickly disposed of."

The unhappy lady recoiled in horror from the dark mouth of the abyss; and Tim Gaffney, closing the trap-door, returned to his seat, re-filled his glass, and inquired coolly, "Well, how is it to be?"

"They would not dare take my life!" thought the lady to herself: "it would be such a needless crime!"—then speaking in an audible manner, she said, "I will not submit to your terms! I have given you my purse and my jewels: but I will give you no more! Let me depart."

"Nay, young lady—this nonsense won't do with us," replied Gaffney, producing a pistol from his pocket.

"Are you not afraid that punishment will overtake you," she exclaimed: "do you not think that you would do well to conciliate me somewhat?"

Let me depart—and I swear most solemnly that I will not merely send you five hundred guineas to any address that you may name, but I will also keep the seal of silence on my lips in reference to the whole proceedings! But if on the other hand you drive me to extremes, does it not occur to you that I may prove vindictive—?”

“That’s enough, young lady!” interrupted Tim Gaffney: “you don’t seem to comprehend how the matter stands—and therefore I must tell you. If we were afraid of your peaching against us—giving a description of our persons—and having us advertised, or what not,—why, we would very soon put you out of the way. But *that* is not our game!—for you *won’t* say a word about this adventure, for your own sake! We know we’re quite safe on that score. A young and handsome lady, going gallivanting about the country in man’s clothes, isn’t after any good; and such being the case, you’ll keep the whole matter to yourself. Perhaps you have a husband, or a father, or a brother, or some one that you would not dare have the thing known to. As soon as I discovered that you was a lady in disguise, I thought to myself that you must be rich, and perhaps of distinction. At all events I knew it was a perfect safe game that I meant to play; and that’s all about it. But ‘pon my soul, you are so well got up, ma’am, in that dandified dress—that I really did not at first suspect you was anything but what you seemed—a very pretty young gentleman—until just as we were getting close in to Addington—and then, if you remember, I happened to touch you on the bosom with my elbow as you was sitting by my side in the gig; and then you drew back so suddenly, that what with one thing and another I suspected the truth. But come! all this is mere idle talk, and time is passing.”

“You refuse to suffer me to leave this place?” demanded the lady.

“We have already told you as much,” responded Gaffney.

“I will send you a thousand guineas instead of five hundred, if you will let me go!”

“If you hold out much longer, we shall make the ransom-money a thousand guineas instead of five hundred.”

The lady again literally wrung her hands in despair; and it was with the greatest difficulty she could prevent herself bursting into tears and giving vent to a flood of passionate weeping.

“Good God!” she cried, “do put faith in me! do trust in me, I conjure you! You, who are of my own sex,” she continued, turning towards Mrs. Bax, “will surely take compassion upon me?”

The woman shook her head; and Tim Gaffney said, “Now, ma’am, be kind enough to finish the business at once. From this place you shall not stir until our conditions are fulfilled. Have you got any writing-paper, Bill?”

“Well, it’s as much as I have,” responded the man. “Howsoever—”

“There is a sheet of paper, a new pen, and a piece of sealing-wax in the cupboard!” exclaimed the woman.

She produced the articles; and the disguised lady, seeing that there was no help for it, prepared to write the letter. With a deep sigh she took up the pen; and she wrote these lines, addressing them to a certain eminent banking esta-

blishment in the Strand:—“Pay the bearer five hundred guineas, without asking any questions, and without a moment’s delay. To convince you that the signature is genuine, I will mention the fact that the last cheque which I drew was on the 2nd of the present month.”

“There!” she said, passing the letter to Tim Gaffney: “you may now read what I have written before I append my signature.”

“It is all right,” said Tim. “And now, although I don’t want to see what name it is, yet you will please to write it in such a way that I may tell from this distance that you put nothing else in the letter except your name. There! that’s right!” he added, as the disguised lady, taking back the paper, affixed her autograph.

She then folded up the letter carefully; and she sealed it with one of the rings which she had just taken from her fingers, and which bore a crest.

“Now,” said Tim, “I hope you’ve made sure, ma’am, that this money will be paid and that I shan’t get into any trouble by presenting the letter notwithstanding the orders you have given inside. Because, look you, ma’am—I’m going to take certain precautions; and therefore if you are playing me any trick—or if you hope that this letter will lead to my arrest, you had better think well of it before it is too late. Bill,” he continued, turning to his accomplice Bax, “I shall take Jack Peppercorn up to London with me. If all’s well, you’ll see me here again to-morrow at about one o’clock in the afternoon. But if there’s anything wrong with me, you’ll see Jack instead; and then you’ll be guided by circumstances. For don’t you see, ma’am,” he added, again addressing himself to the lady, “if I am nabbed, you shall never come forward as a witness against me.”

“I thought you just now said,” interjected the lady, “that you felt strong enough in your own position, because you were certain that from motives of fear and of prudence I should not dare speak of adventures wherein I have figured in male apparel.”

“Very true, ma’am,” rejoined Gaffney: “but it’s a habit with us to make sure doubly sure. And now I’m off.”

The fellow took up his hat; and making a bow to the lady, he just nodded his head to Bax and the woman, and took his departure.

“What can we do for you, ma’am?” asked Mrs. Bax, as soon as Tim Gaffney was gone. “Will you take some supper? You can only have things in the rough here; and it’s easy to tell by your looks that you are accustomed to a better style.”

The lady had fallen into a profound meditation the instant the door had closed behind Tim Gaffney; and she did not immediately answer the questions that were thus put to her. She nevertheless heard them; for all in a moment she gave a start, saying, “Yes, I will take some refreshment.”

The woman produced some bread, cold meat, cheese, and butter from the cupboard; and she spread a cloth upon the table. The disguised lady watched these preparations; and when they were completed, she said, “Could you give me some water?”

The man and woman looked at each other; and the lady saw that Mrs. Bax shook her head.

“Come, this is all nonsense!” growled her husband in a surly tone. “Go and get a pitcher of

water. Besides, somebody must go down to make this door fast—and you may as well do it.”

“I won’t, Bill,” she replied emphatically. “You go. Just leave me *that*,”—and she glanced at the club-stick—“and I’ll take care that—”

She said no more, but looked significantly towards the prisoner.

“Now I say you *shall* go!” exclaimed Bax. “It’s all nonsense,” he added, with an oath. “I never saw nothing and never heard nothing—”

“Then I won’t go, Bill. I tell you that I wouldn’t move about in the old mill after dark for ten times the money that Tim has gone up to London to get. I know she walks!”

“Take a candle for once, you fool!” growled Bax; and in a menacing manner he clenched a fist that would have felled an ox.

“It’s of no use, Bill,” she doggedly replied. “I almost think I should be more afraid of a candle than without it. They say she walks with her throat cut from ear to ear—”

“Bother take the woman!”—and Bill Bax gave vent to a terrific oath. “Well then, keep tight hold of this stick, and lean with your back against the door.”

“Trust to me,” answered his wife; and again she looked significantly towards the lady, as much as to imply that there was no chance of her escaping.

At the same time she took up the club; and her husband, furnishing himself with a couple of large pitchers, issued from the room. He took no light with him; and as soon as he was gone, his wife placed herself with her back against the door, holding the stick in her hand.

The disguised lady had affected to be perfectly indifferent to the preceding colloquy; and while it was in progress she had seemed to be again giving way to her reflections. She suffered about a minute to elapse after Bax had left the room: then she rose up, as if suddenly starting from a reverie; and she said in a sort of careless manner, “This must be a wretched dull kind of a life that you lead in this place.”

“Well, it’s not very lively,” answered the woman, whose eyes followed her as if she was a cat watching a mouse.

The lady was lounging near the table: she took up the loaf of bread, and all in a moment she let it drop straight down on the top of the candle. Instantaneous darkness ensued. Mrs. Bax gave vent to a cry of mingled rage and terror; and almost at the same time there was a tremendous crashing noise—for the lady upset the table, with all the preparations of supper that were upon it. Mrs. Bax was astounded and bewildered: but she kept her place and furiously brandished the club in the dark, so as to ward off the attack which every moment she expected to be made upon her.

But the lady’s policy was altogether of another character. In the twinkling of an eye after she had upset the table, she hounded to the trapdoor and raised it. The rope and pulley that had been used for raising the sacks, were suspended over the trap. To let down the coil was the work of an instant; and in another twinkling of an eye down that rope the lady was gliding!

She reached the bottom in safety,—a distance of about forty feet. She had now all her presence of mind about her; and she so regulated her pro-

ceedings that she did not alight with too much violence on the boards of the ground-floor. But she was in utter darkness; and she knew not which way to turn in order to find the means of egress. Neither had she a moment to lose; for she knew that Bax would be immediately returning—and heaven only could tell to what extremities his rage might drive him when he should discover what had happened. She groped her way; and as good luck would have it, her hand encountered the large wooden latch of a door. It yielded to her touch; and as the door opened, she beheld the glimmering of moonlight upon the water, and the fresh breeze fanned her cheeks. There was the bridge within view, so that she was suddenly struck by the conviction that she was now in the little passage by which she had in the first instance been conducted into the mill.

On she glided; she reached the outer door—and there she beheld Bax stooping down on the bank of the stream, from which he was filling the pitchers. Another instant; and the lady, now rendered desperately intrepid, rushed upon him and hurled him into the water. Down he plunged; and as he came up to the surface again, the very first object he beheld was a figure gliding across the plank. He was for a moment too much blinded by the water to recognise the person: but as he quickly scrambled up on the bank, he drew his hands rapidly across his eyes, and then perceived the disguised lady hastening across the bridge. A tremendous imprecation burst from his lips; and the next moment he was in full pursuit.

Hastening! no, it was rather flying on the part of the disguised lady! for she had the wings of desperation and terror attached to her feet. Away she flew,—Bax rushing after her. He called out loudly for her to stop: but the sound of his voice only tended to enhance her speed. She glanced over her shoulder—she saw that he was gaining upon her—on she sped! Another look thrown behind—and now she was distancing him. She knew that she was safe!

A few minutes more; and he was no longer to be seen. Completely out of breath—panting and exhausted—the lady threw herself upon a grassy bank; and there she rested—but still keeping her eyes riveted on the direction whence the ruffian might emerge if he were maintaining the pursuit. However, he appeared not—he had doubtless abandoned the chase as hopeless. When she had recovered her breath, the lady continued her way, her heart leaping with joy at this successful result of her daring exploit.

“Now, at least,” she thought to herself, “I am on the safe side! The bankers might to-morrow suspect something wrong, and might detain Gaffney until he should give proper explanations, or until they had communicated with me. In that case my doom would have been sealed!—for nothing could have been more horribly significant than the threat that I should not live to appear as a witness against him!”

The reader will now comprehend that it was from the moment this threat was made, the lady had resolved to run every risk in an endeavour to effect her escape. The thought of the trap-door had flashed to her mind; and she had asked for water to drink as an expedient for getting rid of one of her custodians, in the hope that by some means she would be enabled to outwit the other.

Fortune had favoured her, as we have seen—and she was now free.

But she was penniless: her purse and all her jewels had been left behind at the mill. A milestone presently informed her that she was still nine miles from Maidstone. This was a long walk for her to take; but there scarcely seemed to be any help for it. It however appeared as if fortune was determined not to do things by halves on her account on this particular night. She had not advanced half a mile from the spot where she had rested on the bank, when she heard the rumbling of wheels behind her; and in a few minutes she was overtaken by a postchaise returning empty to Maidstone. The postilion, who was somewhat inebriated, did not notice anything peculiar in the well-dressed individual so as to lead him to suspect that she was one of the gentler sex disguised in male apparel: and he immediately gave her a seat inside the chaise. When the outskirts of Maidstone was reached, the lady desired the postilion to put her down at a little public-house which she named; and there the chaise stopped accordingly. The lady's confidential maid was waiting there; and she had a supply of money in her purse. All difficulties were therefore at once overcome: the postilion was remunerated—the male disguise was soon exchanged for the raiment properly becoming the lady's sex—a postchaise was soon in readiness—and away started the heroine of the evening's adventures, attended by her confidential maid.

Precisely at ten o'clock on the ensuing morning, Mr. Timothy Gaffney entered the celebrated banking house in the Strand. His friend Mr. John Peppercorn, who was dressed in a sort of sporting style, and had the air of a horse chaunter, lounged on the opposite side of the street, pretending to be looking in a picture-shop window, but in reality awaiting with no inconsiderable degree of interest the issue of his companion's call at the bank. Tim advanced with an air of confidence up to the counter, and presented the letter. Indeed, that confidence was not assumed; for he considered the chances to be a hundred to one in his favour.

"You must take this letter into the parlour," said the clerk, to whom he presented it. "It is private, and addressed to the Firm."

To the parlour did Tim Gaffney accordingly proceed; and he found himself in the presence of a short, elderly, bald-headed gentleman, who was seated at a table strown with letters and other documents.

"What have you there?" inquired this gentleman.

Tim gave the letter: the old gentleman took it—carefully examined the seal—and having assured himself that it had not been broken nor tampered with, he muttered, "Then her secret is safe!"

Without opening the letter he proceeded very deliberately to lock it up in an iron safe, the key of which he consigned to his pocket.

"That will do, my good man," he calmly said as he resumed his seat.

"Do?" ejaculated Gaffney. "But you have not read the letter, sir!"

"I know its contents well enough," was the reply, delivered in the same quiet tone as before.

For a moment Tim Gaffney knew not whether

he stood upon his head or his heels: but quickly recovering himself, he said, "I suppose, sir, you are not the gentleman who reads private letters of that sort, and I must call again?"

"Oh, yes! I am the gentleman—as you might judge when I told you that I already knew the contents of the letter. Or else of course I should have opened and read it."

"But there must be a mistake, sir!" continued Tim.

"There is no mistake, my good man—unless it be made by yourself."

"Beg your pardon, sir," persisted Tim; "but it is impossible that you can know the contents of that letter!"

"To prove to you the contrary," rejoined the elderly gentleman, who was very serious, but very mild in his voice and look, "I need only mention that the letter enjoins me not to ask you any questions."

Tim Gaffney was thunderstruck: he literally staggered against the door-post: but quickly recovering himself, he said, "I wish you a very good morning, sir:"—and he took his departure.

"Well?" said Jack Peppercorn, as he rejoined his friend in the street. "I see there's something wrong, old feller, by your looks?"

"Wrong?" echoed Tim savagely. "I'm done as brown as ever I was in all my life! But how the deuce it could have happened, I can't for the life of me conceive!"

CHAPTER IX.

A DISCOVERY.

WE must now return to Alfred Trevor, whom we left when he parted from the disguised lady, and whom we represented as endeavouring to compose his looks prior to rejoining his beloved Ethel at the cottage. But in spite of all his attempts to assume a mien which should have the effect of alarming Ethel as little as possible, it was more than human nature could achieve to avoid the betrayal of some portion of the agitation which shook him.

The young lady herself was waiting in the garden for his return: she was a prey to the utmost suspense; for visious of a duel—wounds—and perhaps death—were flitting through her mind. The minutes seemed to be ages dragging themselves past! At length Trevor emerged from the surrounding obscurity; and Ethel flew towards him.

"It is all settled, dearest!" he said. "You have nothing more to apprehend on my account!"

Though the dusk was closing in, yet there was sufficient light to show Ethel her husband's countenance; and she saw that it was deadly pale. She noticed moreover that he was all trembling; and the immensity of the love she bore for him, had taught her so minutely to study his disposition and character, that the slightest evidence of any unusual feeling on his part was sure to be comprehended by her.

"Oh, Alfred!" she exclaimed, "I am afraid that there has been a scene of violence—or else

that the worst is yet to happen, and you in your kindness are concealing it from me?"

"Believe me, Ethel—believe me, dearest! when I give you the solemn assurance that there will be no duel! No! I swear to you that there will not!"

Again were the beautiful arms wound about Trevor's neck; and Ethel exclaimed in a tone that was gushing with joy, "Oh, I believe you, Alfred!—and heaven be thanked that there is to be no serious issue to the case!" But then as she again saw how agitated he was, a sudden revulsion in her feelings took place; and she said in a lower and more deliberate tone, "Tell me why you still seem unhappy—troubled—distressed—"

"Oh, Ethel dearest!" he cried, "is it possible that I could know how you have been insulted without experiencing a mingled indignation and grief? Would that I could be always with you to protect you, my Ethel!"

"Think no more of it, Alfred!" she exclaimed imploringly. "It is the first time such a thing has ever happened; and let us hope it will be the last. Besides, you are with me now; and while you are present, I am always happy and think of naught beside!"

"But I must leave you again to-morrow, Ethel—I must leave you to-morrow!"

"To-morrow, Alfred? Oh, I thought you told me you had come back for several days?"

"I had forgotten—or else you must have misunderstood me. But I will be with you again the day after to-morrow; and then I promise you I will make a long stay at the cottage?"

"With this assurance I must content myself," answered the loving creature. "But do tell me once more—just once more, as a last assurance—that you are not going away to-morrow on account of anything connected with the unpleasant occurrence of this evening?"

"I repeat, dearest Ethel," emphatically responded Trevor,—“I repeat the solemn assurance that there is to be no duel!—nothing hostile of any kind! By the love I bear you, I swear that this is the truth! I will just walk up as far as the Red Lion, to order my horse to come and fetch me at nine o'clock to-morrow morning, as I cannot wait for the coach, because I wish to be in London early; and in that case I shall be all the more certain to be enabled to return to you the day after to-morrow.”

Trevor imprinted a kiss upon Ethel's cheek, and then again quitted the garden. She remained walking there alone; but in a few moments she beheld some one stop at the gate, without however entering the premises. A second glance showed Ethel that it was the parish clerk, Mr. Hogben. She at once accosted the old man, and wished him "Good evening."

"Good evening, ma'am," he said. "The flowers in your garding smells so nice that I couldn't help stopping to scent 'em!"

"You are quite welcome to walk in," exclaimed the amiable Ethel, "and pick as many flowers as you like. It is early for them as yet: but still there are some very pretty ones."

"Thank'ee kindly, ma'am," rejoined the clerk: "but my eyes is getting old, and I can't see the flowers well by this light. Ah! by the bye, ma'am, did you observe that very nicely-dressed

young genelman, with the mustashes? You met him, you know, as you was taking your walk this evening—"

"I saw the person you allude to," answered Ethel, in a tone which immediately grew constrained.

"Well now, I dessay you didn't like the look of him," ejaculated the old man, "cause why he wore a quizzing-glass and looked like a fop. But I could tell you summat, which would make you laugh rayther than think so serions of it. Howsomever, I mustn't do *that* I suppose!"—and yet Mr. Hogben was burning with a desire to throw off the statement from the tip of his tongue. "Ah! what a many questions he did ask me about Mr. Trevor and you!"

"About us?" ejaculated Ethel, in astonishment. "Surely you must be making a mistake; for his conduct towards me was of a rudeness—"

"Questions!" ejaculated the old man. "I should rayther think he did put a power of questions! He seemed to take a great interest in you—"

"Enough upon this point," interrupted Ethel, with a certain degree of severity in her tone. "Did you not hear me say that he treated me with rudeness?"

The old man laughed outright; but it was in a very good-humoured way, so that Ethel was more bewildered than offended. She could not possibly conceive what was passing in Mr. Hogben's mind to make him thus merry on such a subject.

"Well, I must tell you the secret," he said, "although I oughtn't to do it. But then, I des-say she will never come into these parts again—"

"She?" ejaculated Ethel. "What mean you?"

"I mean just what I say, ma'am," replied the old clerk, with another outburst of merriment; "it was no young spark at all! It was a lady dressed up!"

"A lady?" echoed Ethel; and her astonishment was immense.

"Yes, ma'am—there's no mistake about it," pursued Mr. Hogben. "But did you ever see any one so neatly got up? Suppose it was a play-actress dressing for the stage, the thing couldn't have been better done! But she was no play-actress, I'll be bound! She was as reg'lar a lady as you yourself are, ma'am. And pretty too! Why, she must be beautiful without them whiskers and mustashes! But what on earth she could have come into this neighbourhood for unless it was to make inquiries about Mr. Trevor and yourself, I raly can't tell!"

At this moment a voice exclaimed, "Well, if that isn't Uncle Hogben speaking, I never was more mistaken in my life!"

"Why, Sam?" cried the old man; "is it raly you? My nevvny, ma'am," he added for the behoof of Mrs. Trevor.

The new-arrival was a young man of about one-and-twenty, and dressed in a plain genteel suit of black, so that he had the air of a gentleman's valet. He was good-looking and well made; and on perceiving a lady standing at the gate, he made her a most respectful bow.

"I've got a week's holiday, uncle," he said, "and I came down to father's at the Wells this morning; so I thought that this evening I would



ETHEL.

walk across and see you ; for I knew you'd give me a bed——”

“Aye—and a hearty welcome, Sam,” exclaimed the old man ; “for you are a good lad, and don't spend your wages in fooleries and gallivantings about London. He's been upwards of two year, ma'am,” continued Mr. Hogben, again addressing himself to Ethel, “in the service of a great rich nobleman in London——”

No. 5.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

“The Earl of Carshalton,” interjected Samuel. “He married the celebrated tragic actress Miss Percy. Perhaps you may have heard of her, ma'am? He has only lately come into the title of Carshalton. He is a good kind master—and as for the Countess, God bless her! everybody speaks well of her!”

“I am glad,” said Ethel, “that you are in so good a situation.”

She then moved away from the gate: but old Mr. Hogben still lingered there—for he seemed very proud of his nephew Samuel, and it was with infinite delight he heard the young man talk of the great people in whose service he was.

"By the bye, uncle, has Dr. Pickstock got any person of rank staying with him? for I don't know where else he could be stopping—unless he may have walked or rode in from some nobleman's or gentleman's country-seat—"

"Who are you talking about, Sam?" inquired the old man. "The wicar hasn't got no one staying with him."

"All I can tell you, uncle, is that at this present moment there is a Duke in the village."

"A Dook?" ejaculated Mr. Hogben, in a species of awful astonishment.

"Yes—a Duke," responded the nephew. "Lord bless you, uncle! to one who has lived in London Dukes don't seem to be such very rare things—"

"And you mean to tell me, Sam," interrupted the parish clerk, "that there is a rale living Dook in our village at this moment?—a Dook of flesh and blood—and he walking about on his two legs like any other person? Or has the wax-yorks come, and it's a Dook which travels in a caravan?"

"No, uncle," pursued the nephew: "it is a real living Duke—and you may see him with your own eyes if you like."

"Well, I never did yet see a Dook to my knowledge," said the parish clerk. "I once saw a whale at Ramsgate, and a boa constructor in a travelling wan: but among other curiosities I never did see a Dook. So come along, Sam!—But are you quite certain?" and Mr. Hogben stopped short, after having got three or four paces away from the gate.

"Certain, uncle? Of course I am," exclaimed the nephew. "The Duke is an intimate friend of my master's; he and the Duchess are often at Carshalton House. Ah! you should see the Duchess, uncle! They call her the Brilliant Duchess. She is a splendid creature—with such a profile!—a clear complexion—light brown hair—large blue eyes—"

Ethel heard no more; for the parish clerk and his nephew had now passed beyond earshot. She could not help listening to the preceding colloquy as far as it went, for there was something amusing in the observations made by the old parish clerk; and a smile lingered on Ethel's lips as she resumed her walk to and fro in the garden, until Trevor made his appearance. They entered the elegantly-furnished little parlour; and Trevor, who was now more composed than when he had set out on his walk to the Red Lion, began to converse in a cheerful tone, as he and Ethel sat at the window, which was wide open, with an array of beautiful flowers upon the sill.

"I just now heard such an extraordinary statement from the old parish clerk!" said Ethel, from whose mind the laughable discourse about the Duke had hitherto banished the intelligence respecting the disguised lady.

"Ah!" ejaculated Trevor, with a sudden start. "What—what—"

"Ah, now I am completely reassured with respect to the young fashionable!" continued Ethel. "But perhaps you made the discovery—perhaps you knew—"

"What? what?" inquired Trevor. "Do tell me, dear Ethel!"

"It was a lady dressed up," she responded; "and Mr. Hogben has been telling me that the disguised female made so many different inquiries relative to you and me!—But hush!" and Ethel laid her fair hand upon Trevor's arm; for at that instant they caught the sounds of voices speaking in the road outside the palings which fenced the front part of the garden. "Hush, dear Alfred!" whispered Ethel; "it is old Mr. Hogben again—and he has got his nephew with him—and I have been so amused by their discourse!"

"Let us shut the window, Ethel!" ejaculated Trevor, somewhat impatiently.

"What! this beautiful evening?" she gently whispered. "I thought you liked the fresh air—and the brilliant moonlight—and the fragrance of the flowers—"

"So I do, Ethel:"—and Trevor who had started up to close the casement, resumed his seat by Ethel's side, so that the window still remained open.

"I tell you, uncle, I could take my oath of it!" one of the voices in the road was now heard to say.

"That's the nephew speaking!" whispered Ethel. "Now you will hear what the old man has to say—But Ah! they are coming into the garden!"

"What on earth can they want?" exclaimed Trevor, who by a variety of circumstances was now goaded into a positive rage, for he had suddenly learnt to look upon the old parish clerk as a mischief-maker and tale-bearer whom he alike hated and dreaded.

He was rushing towards the door, when Ethel caught him by the arm, saying, "Pray do not be angry with the poor old man, Alfred! He is very harmless and good-natured! I just now gave him leave to walk in the garden to look at the flowers, or to pick some if he liked—"

"Yes—but one does not pick flowers at moonlight!" ejaculated Trevor impatiently. "However, I will not interfere with those persons—"

"No, no! they will do no harm!" said Ethel quickly. "Come back to your seat at the window."

Trevor accordingly suffered the amiable creature to lead him towards the open casement. Then there was a hasty whispering of voices in the garden; but not another syllable could now be caught of what was passing between Mr. Hogben and his nephew; and almost immediately afterwards the sounds of their retreating footsteps were heard, followed by the closing of the garden-gate.

"I really should have been sorry," resumed Ethel, "if you had spoken harshly to the old man. He is simplicity itself! Just now his nephew was telling him that he had seen a Duke in the village—and the old man was so anxious to go and have a peep at the great personage—and so they went away for the purpose—It was while you had gone up to the Red Lion to speak about your horse for to-morrow morning—"

"Ethel," said Trevor, suddenly starting up from his seat, "I do not feel well this evening. I don't know what it is—the atmosphere seems oppressive—I think there will be a storm—"

"Oh, no," exclaimed the young lady; "there

is an agreeable freshness in the air. Oh! you must indeed be unwell, dear Alfred, if you have these sensations! Will you retire to rest?"

"No—I think I shall mount my horse——"

"What! at this hour?" ejaculated Ethel.

"Perhaps it would do me good. But no! I am better now! Sit down, dearest. You are very, very fond of me—are you not, dear Ethel?"

"Ah, you know it! you know it!" she exclaimed enthusiastically; and she pressed his head to her bosom. "I have no thought on earth but for you and our dear child!"

"Dearest, dearest Ethel!"—and Trevor strained her to his heart.

When they retired to rest, Trevor's sleep was troubled and uneasy; and Ethel, who was anxious on his account, and fancied that he was not very well, lay awake to watch if there were aught she could do for him. A light burnt in the chamber: she bent over him—she contemplated his countenance—and she saw that his features were ever and anon convulsed as if they were reflecting the most troubled thoughts, or as if he were under the influence of a painful dream. Several times she was on the point of awaking him, when he turned, and then for an interval he slept more easily—until he gradually began to grow agitated again. The perspiration stood thick upon his forehead: Ethel wiped it away—she pressed her lips to that brow—and she let him slumber on, for she thought it a pity to disturb him. At length he slept tranquilly; and when the affectionate young lady became positively assured that he was no longer agitated, she resigned herself to repose.

When they awoke in the morning, Ethel said naught in respect to the troubled night which Trevor had passed; for as he made no complaint, she thought it was not worth while to allude to the circumstance. He partook of a hasty breakfast: he affectionately embraced Ethel and the child—and mounting his horse, which was ready at the door, he rode away.

About an hour after his departure, a short, stout gentleman, of unmistakable clerical appearance in respect to his apparel—with a very red face, and a self-sufficient important air—entered the garden of Dahlia Cottage.

"Good morning, madam," he said, in a cold and constrained tone to Ethel, whom he beheld seated at the window of the little parlour.

"Ah, Dr. Pickstock?" ejaculated the good-tempered young lady, in a tone that implied a cordial welcome. "Pray walk in and be seated. Did you happen to wish to see Mr. Trevor?"

"Well, madam," replied the clergyman, as he took the seat that was offered him, "I did wish to see—the person who——"

"You mean my husband?" said Ethel, surprised by the singularity of the vicar's look and manner, which she could no longer fail to notice. "He left at about nine o'clock; but he will return to-morrow. Is there any particular business——"

"Madam," interrupted Dr. Pickstock, who now thought it fit to assume the most awful air of indignation, "I had better perhaps come to the point at once, and tell you that everything is discovered."

Ethel looked confounded;—and indeed she was so amazed and bewildered by such an ominous

declaration that she was utterly unable to give utterance to a word.

"Yes, madam—I repeat, everything is discovered; and I cannot help feeling that I have been made a dupe in a very unhandsome manner. Nevertheless, I have no desire to create a scandal and an exposure——"

"Good heavens!" cried Ethel, now suddenly recovering the faculty of speech: "what on earth do you mean?"

"It is useless for you to affect excitement or ignorance," rejoined the reverend gentleman. "You have been a party to a fraud—I may even call it forgery—for such indeed it must have been——"

"Dr. Pickstock!" exclaimed Ethel, starting up with indignation from her seat.

"Come, come," he said; "these airs will not do with me. You must have supposed that the truth would be sooner or later discovered—and you cannot therefore have been altogether unprepared for it. The forgery of such a certificate is a very serious offence; and his Grace, being a legislator, ought to know it."

"Good heavens! what do you mean?" exclaimed Ethel, a vague terror seizing upon her.

"What! do I not speak sufficiently plain?" said Dr. Pickstock, now irritated at what he considered to be the obstinate persistence of the young lady in a course of hypocrisy and duplicity: "or do you wish me to tell you outright that it is no longer a secret in the village that you are the mistress of the Duke of Arleigh?"

For a few moments Ethel stood like one who was suddenly smitten with idiocy: she stared vacantly upon the clergyman as if she were still at a loss to comprehend the full meaning of his words. But all in an instant a light flamed up in her brain—a thousand circumstances swept like a hurricane through her memory—she saw it all in a moment—and with a hollow groan she sank down upon the carpet.

CHAPTER X.

THE DUKE AND DUCHESS.

THE young Duke of Arleigh had succeeded to the title in the year 1844: that is to say, about three years previous to the date whereof we are writing. His mother, the Dowager Duchess, was still alive; but she had lost the use of her intellects in consequence of an injury she had sustained by the upsetting of her carriage some four or five years previous to the time of which we are now speaking. She resided altogether at Thornbury Park, under the immediate care of a female keeper; but the young Duchess, who had ever shown the most affectionate sympathy towards her afflicted mother-in-law, passed no inconsiderable portion of her time at Thornbury in order that she might bestow her attentions where they were so much needed. The young Duke had several brothers and sisters; and they likewise dwelt for the most part at Thornbury, under the care of a tutor and governess. We may as well here add that there was no issue from the marriage of that young Duke and Duchess.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, and the young Duchess was reclining upon a sofa in her elegantly furnished boudoir. She was still in a morning *deshabillé*; and though looking eminently beautiful, as usual, she had a certain air of fatigue as if she had not passed much of the preceding night in her couch.

The door of the boudoir opened; and her Grace's principal maid—a handsome, genteel-looking woman, whose age approached thirty—made her appearance. She bore a silver salver, on which rested a sealed packet; and this she presented to the Duchess.

"Ah! it is from the banker's!" said the brilliant lady, with a significant smile bent with patronising familiarity upon her confidential maid: then opening the packet, she examined its contents.

The confidential maid waited with visible curiosity and suspense for farther intelligence from the lips of her mistress; and the Duchess all of a sudden burst out into a laugh—not loud, but nevertheless unmistakably genuine in the merriment of its silvery tones.

"Only think, Lavinia!" she exclaimed; "he presented himself at the bank as soon as the doors opened this morning—"

"Indeed, my lady!" said the confidential maid,—"but only to find himself outwitted?"

"Precisely so. Here is a note from the managing partner, who tells me what took place; and he has sent me back the note which I penned at the mill. Ah! it is an adventure which I shall never forget as long as I live! To think that I should have after all succeeded in outwitting so very cunning a person as Mr. Timothy Gaffney! How foolish he must have looked when the banker gave him to understand that the order was not to be cashed! It seems that he at first thought there was a mistake; but when he could no longer conceal from himself that by some means or another he was baffled, he lost no time in beating a retreat from the banker's private parlour."

"I am afraid that the man will owe your Grace a serious grudge," said Lavinia; "and he is doubtless a very dangerous character. I should not at all wonder if he keeps vehicles for hire at Maidstone, merely that he may have the opportunity of robbing and murdering travellers whom he undertakes to drive; and perhaps the old mill has proved the scene of many a fearful crime."

"Very likely," said the Duchess; "but it proved the scene of a glorious triumph on my part." Then, after a pause, the patrician lady added, "Go and see, Lavinia, if his Grace has arrived; for if so, he may wish to speak to me."

The maid quitted the boudoir; and the Duchess thought to herself, "I have no doubt that Lavinia is dying with anxiety to learn why I undertook that secret expedition into Kent, and why on arriving at Maidstone I dressed myself in male toilet, and leaving her behind, set out for Addington. Does she take it to be an idle freak? or does she think that I was engaged in some love-intrigue? Ah! she must fancy what she will: but she shall not know the truth from my lips. Besides, she is all discretion; and so long as she is well paid, she only uses her eyes, her ears, and her lips, according to my bidding."

In a few minutes Lavinia returned to the boudoir, with the intimation that the Duke had just

arrived at Ardleigh House and would be with her Grace in a few minutes.

"You can withdraw, Lavinia," said the Duchess, with an air of seeming carelessness.

The confidential maid retired; and in about five minutes the Duke of Ardleigh entered the boudoir. He endeavoured to compose his features as much as possible: but there was a certain under-current, so to speak, of distress and suspense which failed not to be fathomed by the scrutinizing regard which his wife bent upon him.

"I promised to be with you to-day, Mary," he said, taking a seat upon a chair near the sofa on which she was half-reclining; "and I have kept my word. I can scarcely venture to ask upon what terms we are to meet, because after the discovery which you made last evening, I feel, as I then said, that I am utterly in your power, and must yield to whatsoever you may choose to dictate. At the same time—"

He stopped short: the Duchess waited for upwards of a minute to allow him an opportunity to continue; and then she coldly asked, "What were you about to observe?"

"You said something last evening," continued the Duke, "in reference to a paper which you wished me to sign. Of course, whatever its nature may be, I must submit. But I hope to God that you meditate no step which may possibly lead to an exposure before the world! It would do you no good—while on the other hand it would brand the noble name of Ardleigh with infamy: and my brothers and sisters who are growing up, would have to blush for me. And then too, Mary, you will remember the peculiar circumstances under which I married you. You were a mother—you had a child by another when I led you to the altar—and this is the first time that I have ever alluded to the fact during the four years that we have now been united!"

"You have been generous, Herbert," replied the Duchess; "and therefore you may at once set your mind at rest—for I intend to be equally generous towards you. And yet I tremble on your behalf!—for it is evident that you have perpetrated a tremendous fraud towards the unfortunate creature—"

"Yes, yes—I have!" ejaculated the young Duke: "but now that I am reassured in respect to the mode in which you regard the discovery you have made, I will take care to prevent exposures in other quarters.—Answer me one word. Do you intend to stipulate that I shall see Ethel no more?"

"You love her very much, Herbert?" inquired the Duchess.

"Mary, you may conceive how much I love her when in order to possess her I ran the fearful risk of all the consequences attendant upon bigamy! I was maddened and infatuated,—I was not the master of my own actions—I would have sold my soul to Satan sooner than have resigned that beautiful girl! Ah! but perhaps you are offended that I speak thus enthusiastically on a subject which is of course so painful to your own feelings?"

"Speak candidly," said the Duchess. "Proceed—tell me all that is floating in your thoughts. Our marriage was inauspicious, Herbert: it was solemnized in the midst of a delusion. You believed that you loved me with a lasting fervour—"

whereas it was but a transient passion which you experienced for me. And then, perhaps, the idea was incessantly present in your mind that I had borne a child to another——”

“Yes, Mary,” interrupted Herbert; “I *did* think of all this!—aye, I thought of it incessantly! Yet I never once breathed a reproach in your ear—and I exerted preterhuman efforts to conceal what was passing in my own mind. I could not be openly and flagrantly unjust towards you! I married you knowing all the circumstances of your previous career, and how you had become the victim of the villain Edwin St. Clair. And yet I did not less poignantly feel that I had made an immense mistake in supposing that I loved you with that enduring affection which justified me in making you my wife. I will confess the truth—I was even afraid that I should learn to hate you; and I constantly strove to fix my thoughts upon the good traits of your character—upon your kindness towards my afflicted mother as well as towards my brothers and sisters——”

“But still, Herbert,” interjected the Duchess, “you could not forget those past circumstances to which you have alluded?—you could not shut out from your recollection that I had been an actress upon the stage, and that I had become the victim of an unprincipled ravisher?”

“This is true, Mary! this is true!” said Herbert, with a groan; “and it was almost in a state of mind bordering on desperation that I set off with the intention of making a pedestrian tour through some of the most picturesque counties of England. It was under a strict *incognito* that I entered upon my design; and first of all I proceeded into Dorsetshire. I went not elsewhere—you now know how it was that the little village of Southdale in that county became the centre of all possible attractions for me——”

“Who was this Ethel whom you love so fondly?” inquired the Duchess in a low tone.

“Her father was an officer in the East India Company’s service; but she does not recollect him—he died in her infancy, leaving a very modest competency for his widow and his child. Ethel’s mother was a good and prudent woman—and she gave her daughter an excellent education. She died a short time before I became acquainted with Ethel; and thus it was as an orphan—in mourning—living by herself in a picturesque cottage—without a relation in the world, though with every one in that village ready to come forward and succour her at the slightest intimation that she stood in need of a friend,—yes, it was thus that two years ago we met and——But shall I go on with this narrative?”

“Yes—proceed,” said the Duchess. “Now that I know so much, I had better know all!”

“I loved her at first sight—and, Oh! pardon me, Mary, for adding that I *then* comprehended what true love was! It was a perfect dream in which I was at first steeped. At length I was awakened from that Elysian reverie by a well-meant yet delicately-put query from the lips of Mr. Milner, the worthy old clergyman of Southdale. He asked me what were my intentions towards the beautiful orphan in whom every one felt so deeply interested?—Mary, I feel that this must be a strange story for *me*, the husband, to tell unto *you*, the wife——”

“Proceed, Herbert—proceed,” said the young

Duchess, with a look that was completely composed, and in a voice which was mildly severe, without the slightest accent of menace in it, and even with a faint tincture of compassionate sympathy.

“As I have said,” pursued the Duke, “I was suddenly startled from a dream. How was I to act? I will tell you frankly that I thought of making Ethel my mistress: I marshalled a thousand reasons to tranquillize the scruples of my conscience when deliberately making up my mind to become her seducer. But I was deceived;—and I discovered that the most perfect innocence may prove a woman’s strongest defence. It was so in that case. The devoted love which Ethel bore for me, was not a weakness which might lead to her fall—but it was a virtue in all its sublimest chastity and grandest strength. Oh, pity me, Mary! pity me! My God! how I loved her! And therefore I married her—or rather I should say, I passed with her through a ceremony which after all was only the mockery of a marriage!—nay, more, a crime and an outrage—a dark damnable villany on my part!”

The Duke of Ardleigh rested his elbows upon his knees, buried his face in his hands, and wept and sobbed like a child. The Duchess—naturally good-hearted, though her feelings and her principles had been by circumstances much strained and warped from even a period antecedent to her marriage—could not help experiencing a deep compassion for her husband.

“I do not mean to separate you from your Ethel,” she said. “You love her devotedly—and you must not abandon her.”

“Ah, Mary! this is indeed most generous on your part!” and the Duke made a motion as if he were on the very point of throwing himself at his wife’s feet.

“No, no, Herhert!” she hastened to interpose; “do not give me credit for too much genuine sincerity and magnanimity in the present instance! My conduct is swayed only by selfish considerations. In a word, if you are to do precisely what you like in the world, you must not wonder if I expect——”

“Ah!”—and the Duke started: but instantaneously recovering himself, he said meekly, “Yes, I am in your power; and I, the false unfaithful husband, have no right to hope or demand that you shall continue the constant and faithful wife! From this moment forth, therefore, I renounce all control over your actions. Nay, more—I even thank you for leaving me at liberty to enjoy the society of her towards whom I need not deem myself quite a villain so long as of my own accord I do not neglect or abandon her!”

“We seem to be pretty well agreed,” said the Duchess, “in respect to our future arrangements. All that I require from you, Herbert, is a letter or document of some kind which will prevent you from suddenly turning round upon me in case it should please me to indulge in any little fantasy not exactly compatible with the duties of a wife.”

“Good heavens, Mary!” ejaculated the Duke, with a mingled horror and disgust expressed upon his countenance; “how coolly and deliberately you allude to the subject, as if you had already erred, or else had a lover ready to receive you in his arms!”

“You have given me all the details of you.

bigamous connexion," replied the Duchess; "and it is not now for you to play the part of a maudlin sentimentalist."

The Duke coloured to the very hair of his head; and he looked profoundly humiliated. The Duchess was perfectly composed.

"At all events, Mary," her husband presently said, "let the compact between us—infamous as it is—rest upon our mutual honour: but submit me not to the degradation of signing with my own hand a document which if it came before the world, would brand us both with everlasting shame!"

"I will take care of the document," said the Duchess, calmly but resolutely. "It shall be your fault if it ever come to the knowledge of the world."

"Good heavens! am I not already sufficiently in your power?" exclaimed the Duke. "Could you not at the very first indication of hostility on my part,—could you not, I ask, turn round upon me and proclaim this bigamous connexion to which you have so emphatically alluded?"

"Ethel may die, and then my hold over you would cease," answered the Duchess; "whereas on the other hand the first false step that I take, leaves me everlastingly in your power. It is for this reason that I demand the document."

The Duke made a gesture of ineffable disgust; but he was about to seat himself at a table where there were writing materials, when Lavinia entered the room, bearing a letter which she presented to his Grace. He instantly recognised the handwriting: he started as if a serpent had stung him—a deadly pallor overspread his countenance—and he reeled towards a seat. Lavinia meanwhile had retired; or else she would have marvelled how a mere glimpse of the superscription of that letter could have produced upon her ducal master an effect as terrible as if it were his death-warrant which had met his view.

"You apprehend something?" said the Duchess, whose curiosity was much piqued.

"It is from Ethel," he answered, in a hollow voice. "She evidently knows all—for this letter is addressed to the Duke of Ardeleigh!"

With trembling hands he opened it; and a paper fell upon the carpet. He picked it up: it was the marriage-certificate signed by the Rev. Mr. Milner of Southdale. The contents of the letter ran as follow:—

"The thunderstorm which for some hours had seemed to be collecting above my head, has at length burst. It would have proved overwhelming, were it not that God left me strength sufficient to bear up against it for my poor child's sake. Not a syllable of reproach will I address to you: but we must never meet again. It was my pride and happiness to be your's so long as methought I was your's in all honour: but it would be degradation and misery to continue your's in dishonour. As I do not reproach you, do not reproach yourself! Nay, more—I can forgive you because I know that you love me. Yes—you must have loved me, or you would not have incurred the tremendous risk which you have encountered. I enclose you this certificate in order that you yourself may destroy a document the existence of which places you in so much peril.

"That you may be made aware of the precise extent to which the stupendous secret is known, and that you may labour under no unnecessary suspense on the point, I give you the ensuing information:—It appears that when Mr. Hogben and his nephew came back again to the garden last evening, it was that the latter might obtain another view of you and fully identify you to his uncle. The moonbeams played upon your countenance as you returned to the casement; and it was sufficient. The clerk mentioned the discovery to his Vicar, Dr. Pickstock, who called upon me. Between those three persons—the vicar, the clerk, and the nephew—the secret rests.

"I have now no difficulty in conjecturing who the disguised lady was. With her splendid figure—with her handsome profile, her clear complexion, her light brown hair, and her large blue eyes—who could that be but the brilliant Duchess? I entreat you to give such explanations as may convince her Grace that I did not willingly and willfully offend against her. Let her be disarmed, if possible, of angry feelings towards me; and, Oh! may she forgive you as sincerely as I have already bestowed upon you my own pardon!

"You will hear from me again in a few days, when I hope to be enabled to give you one more proof of the disinterested love that I have borne you!—yes, one last proof—and then farewell for ever! I beseech you to remain at Ardeleigh House until you receive the promised communication from me."

There was no signature—and the letter was dated from no place; so that the half-distracted Herbert could not even tell whether it was written at Addington or in London, or elsewhere. All the first part of the writing was firm and steady: but the latter portion was tremulous—and there were evidences that tears had been dropped upon the paper. Oh! the young Duke full well comprehended that these must have been scalding tears of anguish; and in the frightful vividness of his fevered fancy they now seemed to be falling like drops of boiling oil on his own brain and of molten lead on his own heart!

"My God!" he despairingly moaned; "I am righteously punished! Look, Mary, look! Could you wish your most bitter enemy to endure excruciations more horrible than poor Ethel must have felt when penning these lines—or tortures more poignant than I have felt while reading them?"

The Duchess took the letter, and hastily ran her eyes over its contents—while her husband paced to and fro in the apartment like one who was about to go mad.

"I must fly to her! I must fly to her!" he suddenly ejaculated: and he bounded towards the door.

"Be not insensate, Herbert," cried the Duchess, springing from the sofa and holding him back. "You cannot expect her to be any longer at Dahlia Cottage—and you assuredly do not hope to fall in with her in the very first street of this metropolis along which you may frantically fly?"

"True!" he ejaculated: and then wringing his hands in despair, he cried, "Ethel, Ethel! and my darling Alfred! Oh shall I never see ye more?"

"I can tell you where to find them," said the Duchess, coldly but confidently.

"You?" cried her husband, with a look of mingled amazement and joy.

"Yes!" responded the Duchess.

"Then tell me—tell me—Oh! tell me, I beseech you!"

"Give me the document," she said, pointing to the writing materials that were upon the table.

The Duke sat down, and hastily penned a few lines upon a sheet of paper.

"There! will that do?" he demanded with feverish impatience.

"Yes—that will do," said the Duchess. "Here, take your Ethel's letter and the certificate."

"And now for heaven's sake tell me where I shall find Ethel and my boy?" demanded Herbert, thrusting into his pocket the papers which his wife had just handed him. "Oh, tell me where I shall find them!"

"At Southdale, to be sure," rejoined the Duchess.

The Duke flung a look of earnest inquiry upon her for a moment; and then, as a light suddenly flashed in unto his mind, he ejaculated, "Yes, yes! it must be so!" and he darted from the room.

Almost immediately afterwards Lavinia entered, saying, "If you please, my lady, a Miss Hartland wishes to speak to your Grace.

"I will receive her here," responded the Duchess, with that air of seeming carelessness and languid indifference which she was wont to adopt when labouring to conceal a sudden paroxysm of emotion.

Imogen was appalled with that mingled plainness and neatness which we have on a former occasion associated with her walking-dress; and her countenance was concealed by a veil. When she was conducted into the boudoir she waited until the maid had retired ere she raised her veil; and then it was with a frank easy courtesy that she saluted the Duchess,—at the same time saying, "It is precisely twelve days since your Grace was at my humble abode; and you promised to communicate with me."

"Sit down, Miss Hartland," said the Duchess. "You bade me use my own discretion and leisure—and therefore I was not in any haste—"

"Oh! I should have thought," exclaimed Imogen, reproachfully, "that long, long ere this you would have been in haste to embrace your own offspring!"

"Hush, Miss Hartland! hush! The very walls have ears!" interjected the Duchess, with affright depicted on her features.

"I will not speak to your Grace another syllable here on the subject, unless you give me permission," answered Imogen, in a low tone. "On the contrary, perhaps it would be much better that the conversation should take place elsewhere—"

"Yes—for heaven's sake let it be so!" cried the Duchess, but likewise in a subdued voice. "I am terrified to death—surrounded by domestics as I am—And then, too, if any one should recognise you—Not that I mean to give you any offence—for I do not forget that I myself was once upon the stage"—yet a quick flush crossed her Grace's features as she alluded to the fact: "but it would seem so strange that you should call upon me—"

"I am not ill-natured," said Imogen quietly, "and I would not wilfully do anything that shall compromise your Grace; but there are reasons why I wish to be honoured with a little conversation on a certain subject."

The Duchess opened a writing desk, and thence drew forth a number of bank-notes: but Miss Hartland shook her head impatiently, and said, "No! my motives are not pecuniary ones. I told your Grace the other day that I am not selfish nor covetous. Name the time when you will again honour me with your presence at my abode—and I shall be satisfied."

The Duchess reflected for a few moments: and then she said, "If I come to you the day after to-morrow in the evening, will you be at leisure to receive me?"

"The day after to-morrow in the evening I shall expect your Grace," rejoined Imogen: and again drawing down her veil, she took her leave of the Duchess.

CHAPTER XI.

SOUTHDALE.

GREAT was the sensation which was excited in the picturesque little village of Southdale, when it was rumoured that the beautiful Mrs. Trevor, who had gone away a bride from the place nearly two years back, had suddenly returned to pay, as it seemed, a flying visit to a spot which was supposed to be endeared to her by so many associations. There she had passed the greater portion of her existence: there she had first fallen in with him whom she had accompanied to the altar: her father and mother lay entombed in the church. For all these reasons, therefore, it was considered natural enough that she should find an opportunity to revisit, if only for a few hours, the village of Southdale.

Mrs. Trevor arrived in a postchaise; and she alighted at the only inn the village could boast of. She was attended by the nursemaid, who carried her infant boy. The landlord and landlady of the little hostelry, who had known Ethel from her childhood, were delighted to see her; and they lost not a moment in putting the kindest inquiries in reference to Mr. Trevor. Ethel possessed the most perfect control over her feelings; for there are certain circumstances in which the most delicate natures are enabled to arm themselves with a panoply which but a short time back they might have fancied that they were but little able to bear. She replied with a smiling countenance to all the questions that were thus put to her: she gave her querists to understand that Mr. Trevor was perfectly well, but that press of business had prevented him from accompanying her into Dorsetshire.

It was yet early in the evening when the young lady arrived at Southdale; and after partaking of some little refreshment, she set off to call upon her kind friends Mr. and Mrs. Milner. Little Alfred was asleep, and was accordingly left in the care of the nursemaid, who was faithfully devoted to Ethel and by no means prone to gossiping: she was not therefore likely to state at the inn that she knew there was something wrong in respect to

Mr. and Mrs. Trevor, though she was ignorant of the precise circumstances.

Ethel reached the parsonage; and she found Mr. and Mrs. Milner walking together in their garden. They were an elderly couple, with benevolent countenances, which were correct indices to the reading of their hearts. They had no children; their love for each other was proverbial; and they were revered throughout the neighbourhood.

"Why! I do believe this is that dear Ethel Fraser!" ejaculated Mrs. Milner: "or Mrs. Trevor, as I ought to call her!"

"And so it is," added the worthy clergyman.

In a few moments Ethel's hands were warmly clasped by the friends whom she had thus come to visit; and when she shed tears, they naturally thought it was only through affectionate emotion at this meeting.

"Welcome once more to Southdale!" said the worthy couple.

"You look travel-worn, Ethel," added Mrs. Milner. "Pray walk in."

"Oh! I am not at all wearied," she said. "I rested myself at the inn——"

"What! you have put up, at the inn," ejaculated Mr. Milner, "instead of coming straight to us?"

"It is a mere flying visit—and I am going away to-morrow. Besides, I have my servant and my little one with me——"

"Well, Ethel, I suppose you must have your own way if you choose," said Mrs. Milner. "And now tell me, my dear young friend—are you quite happy with Mr. Trevor? Let me see, what was his Christian name? Alfred to be sure!"

"I am perfectly happy," replied Ethel, with a smile that was apparently all cheerfulness, while the heart internally was almost ready to burst. "He is very much occupied at this moment——indeed he is away from home; and so, as I was on a visit to some acquaintances at Southampton, I thought I would come on as far as Southdale to see my old friends."

"And you are truly welcome," said the Milners, again pressing her hands in their own.

"And then too," added Ethel, "I had lost my marriage certificate by some accident or another—I only discovered it the other day——"

"There is no harm done," said Mr. Milner: "you can easily have another copy. I am glad to see you are so particular in the matter. Married people should always have a copy of the certificate which in this sense proves their respectability."

"And moreover," added Ethel, "I thought I should like to take another peep into the village church——"

"You shall speedily be gratified, my dear girl," rejoined the clergyman.

"And while you are thus engaged," said Mrs. Milner, "I will see that the tea-things are got in readiness; for we must entertain you, Ethel, as well as we can."

Mr. Milner procured the key of the chest in which the parish registers were kept; and he escorted Ethel to the church. They entered: and the young lady made her way first of all to the spot where a mural tablet indicated the resting-places of her parents, Captain and Mrs. Fraser. It would be impossible to describe the perfect agony of feelings which for a few moments took posses-

sion of the unfortunate Ethel as she contemplated the spot: but she was still armed with that fortitude which prevented her from displaying more than an ordinary amount of emotion.

She drew her kerchief across her eyes, and then followed Mr. Milner towards the vestry. There the massive chest was opened; and Mr. Milner, seating himself at the table, proceeded to write out a copy of the marriage-certificate.

"Surely that is Mrs. Milner's voice?" said Ethel, as the old gentleman laid down the pen and closed the massive register.

"I did not hear anything," he replied, looking at Ethel.

"Oh! I heard a voice as distinctly as possible," she answered, with an air of confidence; "and it was calling you. I am certain it was Mrs. Milner's voice!"

"We can soon see," said the clergyman; and he walked forth from the vestry.

He went as far as the door leading into the churchyard; but perceiving no one, he returned, and found Ethel just replacing the last register in the chest.

"My dear young lady!" he exclaimed; "handling those dusty books! I am really quite ashamed that you should have the trouble!"

"Oh, no trouble!" she said, with an amiable smile. "But where is Mrs. Milner?"

"It was a mistake on your part, Ethel. You heard no voice——"

"Indeed?" she exclaimed, looking surprised.

"No—it was fancy on your part——perhaps some echo through the church. Have you got the certificate?"

"Thank you, I have taken possession of it:"—and a strange expression of sinister triumph for a moment flitted across the young lady's countenance: but it passed completely unperceived by the worthy clergyman.

They quitted the church, and retraced their way to the parsonage,—where in the meanwhile Mrs. Milner had made the most hospitable preparations for the entertainment of Ethel. They sat down to tea: but they had not been many minutes thus engaged, when a servant entered with an intimation that Farmer White from the neighbouring village of Cherry-tree requested to speak to Mr. Milner. The clergyman accordingly rose from his seat to go out and see Mr. White in the hall: but in a few moments he returned, saying, "You must excuse me for a few minutes: Farmer White wants a certificate of his son George's marriage: for George expects to obtain the situation of bailiff to Squire Ponsford, and the testimonials must all be sent in to-morrow."

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Milner to her husband, "you can easily spare five minutes to give the certificate—and Ethel will excuse you the while."

"Oh, I was not thinking of refusing—nor do I grudge the time," exclaimed the kind-hearted Mr. Milner: "but I was going to observe how singular it was that the very next entry to your's, Mrs. Trevor, in the register is the marriage of George White. I saw it just now as I was making the copy for you."

Having thus spoken, the clergyman again quitted the apartment; and he was soon seen from the window traversing the garden in company with Farmer White. So soon as the two had en-



tered the churchyard, Ethel started up from her seat, saying, "I am sure you will excuse me, my dear madam : but I fear I have neglected my poor child too long !"

"Why, you cannot think of leaving me at this moment?" cried Mrs. Milner. "You have scarcely had time to drink a cup of tea or eat a mouthful——"

"I have forgotten the poor child," said Ethel hastily. "I will just run into the village——"

"I will send a servant with an intimation that your maid is to bring your dear little Alfred hither. You promised that I should see the sweet child !"

"Oh, I will go and fetch him myself !"—and with this ejaculation Ethel threw on her bonnet and scarf, which she had placed upon the sofa ; and she sped from the room.

Taking leave of Ethel for a few minutes—and abandoning Mrs. Milner to the surprise which

No. 7.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

her young friend's precipitate departure excited in her mind—we must now note other incidents which were occurring in respect to the village of Southdale. A stage-coach halted at the door of the inn ; and two travellers alighted from the top. Both were dressed in a sort of sporting style ; and their appearance was not such as to induce the landlord of the tavern to let them run very far into his debt unless they presented the guarantees of substantial luggage. But all the baggage which these two individuals had brought with them, consisted of a small carpet-bag. They however changed a five-pound note as they each took a glass of ale at the bar, and made inquiries whether they could be accommodated with beds at the inn for the night. The landlord was completely reassured by the production of the note ; and he replied in a cheerful tone to the effect that he was enabled to accommodate the travellers.

Having quaffed their ale, they strolled forth into

the village; and one said to the other, "What a lark this is, Jack! Only think! yesterday morning in London—this evening here in a little village at the farther end of Dorsetshire!"

"A lark indeed, Tim!" replied Mr. Peppercorn to the observation just made by his friend Mr. Gaffney. "And what a blessed thing it was that this here business should have turned up directly after you was so preciously cast down about the affair at the bank!"

Tim Gaffney was about to make a reply, when the sounds of another equipage rolling into the usually quiet little village of Southdale, met their ears. It was a postchaise—and a single traveller was seated inside.

"By Jove, I know who he is!" exclaimed Tim Gaffney, as the chaise swept past. "Travelling private—*in cog*, I a'pose, as they call it. But let's go and see."

"Who is it?" demanded Jack Peppercorn. "Don't let's go and neglect other business just to gape at a traveller getting down at an inn. Remember, we ought to go and take a survey of the Firs—"

"Hold your tongue, you fool!" rejoined Tim Gaffney. "This swell cove is a Duke, and how do we know but what it may be worth our while to look after him as well as t'other business?"

"By jingo, yes!" exclaimed Peppercorn; and they accordingly bent their steps back again towards the tavern.

It was the young Duke of Ardleigh who alighted from the postchaise; and the landlord at once coming forth, exclaimed with mingled joy and astonishment, "Why, Mr. Trevor, is it you? Your good lady will be surprised! I hope nothing has happened that you come so quickly upon her heels?—but I'm sure she no more expects you than I should expect Squire Pomsford's daughter to come in and ask for a quarter of gin and a screw of tobacco."

"No—nothing is wrong, Mr. Goodman," said the Duke. "And so my wife—Mrs. Trevor—is here? And the child—"

"Here also," replied the landlord.

"The beautiful infant is sleeping so nice, Mr. Trevor!" cried Mrs. Goodman, the worthy landlady, who now came hurrying down the staircase.

"Up here?"—and Herbert rushing past the landlady, sprang up the staircase.

He opened the first door at random, for he was in a state of considerable excitement; and it happened to be the room where his little son lay sleeping upon a sofa, with Susan the nursemaid seated by the side. As we have already hinted, Susan knew that something serious must have happened between her master and mistress, but she was ignorant of the particulars, and little suspected that the former bore a ducal rank. She had however learnt from Ethel's lips that everything was at an end between herself and her husband, and that they should never meet again; so that Susan started up from her chair with an ejaculation of astonishment—almost of alarm—when her master thus abruptly burst in upon her.

"Where is your mistress, Susan?"—and catching up the child, he strained it to his breast, so passionately covering it with kisses that being awakened from its sleep it began to cry.

Susan quickly gave the intimation that Mrs.

Trevor had gone to see the Milners; and the ejaculation "Ah!" burst from his lips in a manner as if to imply that a suspicion he had previously conceived was now suddenly confirmed by the information just given. Hastily restoring his little Alfred to the sofa, and imprinting another kiss upon the boy's forehead, the Duke left the room almost as abruptly as he had entered it.

Meanwhile Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn had overheard the conversation which had taken place betwixt the Duke, the landlord, and the landlady, immediately after the young nobleman had alighted from the postchaise.

"By goles!" whispered Gaffney to his companion, "this is a rum start! Mr. Trevor—his wife, Mrs. Trevor—and the child! Oh, ho! his Grace must have a mistress, then! Let's see about it."

They advanced to the bar and ordered fresh glasses of ale.

"Who is that genelman that's just arrived?" inquired Gaffney.

"Oh, that's Mr. Trevor," responded the landlord.

"Married I suppose by what I heard him say?"

"Yes—married to as pretty a creature as you could see in a day's march. She lived many long years in this village, at the very cottage you might have seen just at the entrance as you came along on the outside of the coach."

"To be sure, we noticed it!" observed Peppercorn. "But who is Mr. Trevor?"

"I don't know exactly," rejoined Mr. Goodman, "but I think I've heard say he was junior partner in a mercantile house in London."

"Oh, pardner in a mercantile house—eh?" observed Tim Gaffney. "Well, but where did he marry the young lady you was a-speaking of?"

"Where did he marry her?" exclaimed the landlord, with an air of surprise at the question. "Why where the deuce should he marry her but here where she had lived so many years—where her father and mother was buried in the old church—and where she was honourably wooed and won by him who is now her husband? I remember the wedding-day—it was all very quiet and private—but a prettier creature than Ethel Fraser was that morning, I never saw in all my life!"

"A werry pretty sight, I des say," observed Tim Gaffney: and tossing off the contents of his glass, he again issued forth from the tavern, accompanied by his friend Mr. Peppercorn.

They walked on in silence till they reached the outskirts of the village nearest to the church; and then Tim Gaffney, stopping short, looked hard in his companion's face, and said, "Jack, if all this is true that the landlord has told us, we've just tumbled over a secret that will make our fortunes."

"Why, it's nothing but a secret marriage—that's all," interjected Peppercorn.

"You fool!" cried Gaffney; "it's no marriage at all—it's bigamy!—that's the Duke of Ardleigh, that is!—he's been married some years and got a Duchess living in London. So don't you see—"

"By jingo, I do see!" ejaculated Peppercorn. "Why, it ought to be worth a thousand pounds apiece to us. Surely the landlord can't have made any mistake about the wedding?"

"Impossible!" returned Gaffney. "There is evidently something up, though the landlord don't seem to suspect it. Mrs. Trevor, as she calls herself, comes down first: then the Duke—or Mr. Trevor, as he calls himself—comes next—"

"Here he is!" ejaculated Peppercorn. "Now's the time, Tim!"

The Duke of Arleigh was hastening through the village in the direction of the Parsonage: he observed the two men loitering by the side of the road, but little suspected that they would have anything to say to him—until Tim Gaffney stepped forward, and touching his hat, said with a knowing look, "How d'ye do, my lord?"

The Duke stopped short for a moment; he scrutinized Gaffney's face—then he surveyed the countenance of Peppercorn; but he could not recollect that he had ever seen either of them before. He was confounded by being thus accosted by persons who evidently knew him. And the significant glance which had been bent upon him by Tim Gaffney showed how useless it would be to deny himself and thus perhaps provoke an altercation.

"Who are you?" inquired Herbert, speedily recovering himself.

"My name's Timothy Gaffney, at your service, my lord; and this is my friend Mr. Peppercorn—Jack Peppercorn I calls him—also at your Grace's service."

The Duke felt infinitely disgusted at the half flippant, half familiar manner in which the fellow addressed him: but as he suddenly recollected that he had seen the two men lurking at the door of the inn when he had alighted, he at once perceived how absolutely necessary it was to propitiate and to allance them.

"Where have you seen me before?" he demanded.

"At Maidstone t'other day," responded Gaffney. "I was standing by when you bought a couple of horses of one Manning—"

"Ah!" said the Duke. "Well—proceed."

"Your Grace gave Manning a cheque; and when you was gone Manning says to me, says he, 'Tim, should you like to see a Duke's handwriting?'—'Why?' says I.—'Because,' says he, 'here it is; for that civil and polite young gentleman which has just bought the horses, is none other than the Duke of Arleigh, and here's his cheque upon his bankers in London.'—So that a' the way, my lord," added Tim Gaffney, with a bow, "that I come to know you was the Duke of Arleigh."

"Very well, my man," said Herbert. "Have you mentioned the fact to any one else?"—and it was with an indescribable suspense that the nobleman put the question.

"Only to my pal here, my lord."

"Good! It is a secret—and you two will keep it between you, because I shall reward you handsomely. How long do you purpose to stay at Southdale?"

"Why, my lord, we've a little business which will keep us here till to-morrow morning perhaps," replied Gaffney; "but if it suits your Grace's pleasure that we should stay longer, till you have got time to talk to us for instance—"

"I will make time to see you presently," interrupted the Duke. "But you will not seem to

know me—and above all things, be silent if you wish to be well rewarded!"

"Mum's the word, my lord:" and Tim Gaffney, turning on his heel, strolled back into the village, accompanied by Jack Peppercorn.

"My God!" mentally ejaculated the Duke, as he hurried along towards the Parsonage; "how the web of difficulties and embarrassments seems to be closing in around me! At every step that I take it appears as if I was destined to flounder deeper and deeper into an inextricable morass! Good heavens! what will be the end of it? Oh, when once we enter upon the path of deception, how many more falsehoods and duplicities must be adopted to sustain the first!"

An expression of indescribable anguish swept over his countenance as these reflections passed rapidly through his brain; and then all in a moment he gave a cry of joy, for he beheld Ethel speeding towards him. She had left the Parsonage in the precipitate manner which we have described;—and now on the part of the young Duke everything was forgotten—or at least almost completely absorbed, in the thought of straining that beloved creature to his heart again.

"Ethel! dearest Ethel!" he exclaimed, extending his arms to receive her.

"No! no!" and as she stopped short within half a dozen yards of him, it was with a sort of horror that she made a vehement gesture to repel his advance.

"Oh, my God, Ethel!" he cried, "drive me not to despair!"

"Despair?" and no language can convey an idea of the forlorn and desolate expression that for a moment seized upon her countenance, which for having been flushed with excitement, suddenly grew deadly pale. "But here! take these! destroy them, I conjure you!"

"Oh, what have you done, Ethel!" exclaimed the Duke, as she produced a folded piece of paper from her bosom. "My God! it is as I suspected! You have come to destroy the last trace—"

"Yes—the last trace of everything that can criminate you!" said Ethel, emphatically.

"Not for worlds shall you run this frightful risk!" cried the Duke.

"Ah! say you so?"—and at the very instant when he was about to snatch the folded paper from her hand, she tore it into a myriad of the minutest fragments, and flung them into the stream which flowed by the road side. It was all the work of an instant: it was done in the twinkling of an eye; and then, as if the whole concentration of tremendous excitement which the young lady had experienced were now suddenly ended by the deed she had accomplished, she said calmly, "You are safe! Go—leave me! You have naught to apprehend on the face of the earth!"

The magnanimity of Ethel's conduct produced such an overwhelming effect upon the Duke, that he burst into a flood of tears and began sobbing violently. A fearful remorse seized upon his soul—a remorse that was likewise blended with a boundless love for that adorable creature. Oh, how his heart yearned towards her! how he longed to strain her to his breast!

"My God, Ethel!" he murmured, "how utterly unworthy of all your affectionate interest have I been! Do not go! do not leave me!"

"Why did you come to Southdale? Did I not charge you in my letter to remain at your own house until you heard from me?"

"Oh! I suspected that you were coming hither," he passionately exclaimed; "and I hastened to follow you! I cannot possibly live without you!"

"I may not listen to such language as this:" and she spoke coldly and severely; but her's was an unnatural calmness—for while her looks maintained a forced rigidity, her heart was ready to burst with the volcanic emotions that filled it.

"For heaven's sake, hear me!" cried the Duke: "hear me, by all the love you have borne me! by the love I bear for you! hear me, for the sake of our child!"

Ethel started visibly: but instantaneously repressing the outward betrayal of her emotion, she said, "Have you seen our—the child?"

"Our child, our child!" cried the Duke. "Yes!—and I have covered the dear boy with kisses! Oh, Ethel! you will not separate him from his father! My wife—start not!—Oh, do not bend upon me that look so forlorn—so desolate! Listen, Ethel—listen! All is not so bad as you think! My wife's conduct is most admirable! She will never interfere with us—she will allow us to live together unmolested—"

"Enough! enough!" almost shrieked Ethel. "Speak not thus—or you will force me to break a vow which I have solemnly taken within my own heart! You will make me reproach you. Sooner would I perish than live with you as your mistress!—sooner would I die than wilfully become the paramour of an adulterous husband! No! no!—not all my love for you could induce me thus to plunge deeper down into the vortex of degradation and misery! Leave me, I conjure you!"

"Never, never will I leave you, Ethel!" exclaimed Herbert, goaded almost to madness, "until I shall have succeeded in shaking a resolve which can only tend to entail eternal misery on us both!"

"Oh! if you detain me here, you will bring utter destruction on my head!" cried Ethel. "Let me hasten to depart from the village! If you knew the risk that I ran—"

"Risk? My God! I comprehend it!" exclaimed the Duke, literally wringing his hands in the wild frenzy of his affliction. "Fly, Ethel! fly! But, Oh! let me be the companion of your flight!"

"It is too late," she said, again displaying that cold unnatural calmness which we have before noticed. "Look! they come. Let them do their work—I shall deny it—and you will not betray me."

The Duke glanced in the direction of the Parsonage; and he beheld three personages approaching with hasty footsteps. Nothing could exceed the terrible excitement that seized upon him as he judged from Ethel's words the danger that was now threatening her.

"Fly, fly, dearest!" he frantically exclaimed.

"If you ever loved me," she said, in a tone of the most imploring earnestness and with a look of the most appealing entreaty, "I adjure you to be calm! If you value my safety, I beseech you to afford me the only chance of ensuring it, by taking refuge in utter and complete denial of the

deed! Act thus for the sake of that love whereby I have adjured you!"

"Ethel! I am almost heartbroken!" responded the wretched young nobleman; "but I will do as you desire! your words shall be laws for me!"

The three persons who came from the direction of the Parsonage, were now close upon the spot: they were the clergyman, Farmer White, and Gibson the parish sexton.

"Oh, Mrs. Trevor! Oh! Mr. Trevor!" cried the worthy Milner, overwhelmed with grief, and the tears were running down his cheeks; "is it possible that *you*, Ethel, could have done this? In the name of mercy what motive had you? But give up the abstracted leaf, and the matter shall be hushed up!"

"There is no matter to be hushed up wherein I may be concerned," answered Ethel.

"Mr. Trevor, I adjure you," said the worthy and afflicted clergyman, drawing the Duke aside, "if you for any reason have influenced your wife in this unhappy proceeding—"

"Mr. Milner," interrupted Ethel, whose quick ear had caught the kind old gentleman's words, "as there is a God above us, and as I have a soul to be saved, I swear to you that Mr. Trevor has in no way influenced, directly or indirectly, any proceeding which I have adopted or which you may suppose that I have adopted. Accuse not therefore *him*! But if you think *me* guilty of anything, deal with me as you fancy I ought to be dealt with. Ah! I will add something more—and to the truth of this assertion also I invoke the testimony of heaven. It is that methought I was coming secretly and stealthily to Southdale, without Trevor's knowledge—Indeed I wrote him a letter while he was in London, in the hope of throwing him as it were off the right scent: but by some means, as yet unknown to myself, he suspected that I was coming hither, and he followed me. All that I have just told you, Mr. Milner, is as true as the Gospel; and therefore, I repeat, deal with *me* only, if there be any one to be dealt with!"

While Ethel was thus speaking, Mr. Milner studied her countenance attentively, and when she had finished, he again turned aside to the Duke of Ardeleigh, hastily whispering, "Can it be an aberration of the intellect?"

"Yes, yes! it is!" quickly responded the young nobleman, seizing upon the idea with avidity. "I have often thought she was deranged!"

Though both the clergyman and the Duke spoke in the lowest possible tones, yet Ethel heard what passed betwixt them. *This* time, however, she did not think fit to interpose any remark or offer any observation.

"Mr. Trevor," said the clergyman, bending upon Ethel a look of so much distress and sympathy that if he had been her own father he could not have displayed more suffering on her account, "this is a most unfortunate affair! By your bewildered looks I can only too easily suppose that you are ignorant of what has been done. You heard me say something of an abstracted leaf—it was a leaf of the marriage register to which I alluded—and that has been taken by your wife! I am now under the painful necessity—Good heavens, that such a necessity should arise in reference to one whom I have known

from her childhood! — but — but — it is a duty——”

The worthy clergyman's voice was choked with sobs—he could say no more: but Gibson the sexton, who was a sworn constable, stepped forward and said, “It's a hard thing to do—the hardest I've ever done: but I can't help it. Mrs. Trevor, you must consider yourself my prisoner.”

Whiter grew Ethel's already pale face; and for a moment her ashy lip quivered—and she said in a low voice, “If I go to prison, my child——”

“Shall accompany you, unhappy young lady!” replied the clergyman, who was at length enabled to master his emotions.

“And now,” said the sexton, “we must make a move to Squire Ponsford's.”

CHAPTER XII.

ETHEL.

THE seat of Squire Ponsford, Deputy Lieutenant and Justice of the Peace, was at a distance of a mile from Southdale; and Mr. Milner suggested that they should all walk thither, as there was no need to be hasty in spreading the scandal of what had occurred throughout the village. The Duke eagerly adopted the suggestion. Ethel's appearance was now coldly listless, and she remained silent—as if by her demeanour she studied to support the idea which she had heard thrown out, to the effect that she was suffering under an aberration of the intellect. During the walk of about twenty minutes from the village to the mansion, Ethel kept betwixt Mr. Milner and the constable: she would not permit the Duke a moment's opportunity of approaching her or breathing a whispered word in her ear. He comprehended the policy of this portion of her conduct: it was to prevent it from being thought that in whatsoever might be proved against her, she had acted under his influence,—an impression which might arise if they stealthily exchanged communications.

The Firs, as Squire Ponsford's seat was denominated, was an old red brick building, rambling in style and incongruous in the varieties of its architecture, situated in the midst of a spacious park, and having a background of hill rising upon hill to a tremendous height. The dusk was closing in as the party reached the front door; and in the midst of the increasing obscurity, no one observed that they had been followed from the village by Messrs. Gaffney and Peppercorn. These two individuals had however observed the meeting of the Duke and Ethel: then they had seen the approach of the clergyman, the farmer, and the sexton; and though they had not caught a syllable of anything that passed, yet they observed sufficient to induce them to believe that something of no ordinary character was transpiring; and thus they had followed the party to watch the result. But when they found that the destination was the Firs, they exchanged ejaculations expressive of surprise, as if they also had originally come into the neighbourhood for the purpose of transacting some little business at that same country-seat.

The front door was opened by a portly middle-

aged footman, to whom Mr. Milner said, “I am afraid we are about to disturb your master at a somewhat unseasonable hour: but it is an urgent case.”

“Please to walk in, sir;”—and the footman led the way into the library, leaving the door of that room as well as the front door open, in obedience to a general instruction which he had received, the proceedings before a magistrate being public.

In a very few minutes Mr. Ponsford made his appearance. He was a person of about sixty—having naught in his appearance of the country Squire, but much more likely to be taken for a gentleman who habitually dwelt amidst the crowds of fashionable circles. He was dressed in black, with a white waistcoat: his countenance was pale, with a serious if not severe expression: his features were decidedly handsome: he was a little above the medium stature, and inclined to portliness without being corpulent. Altogether his appearance might even merit the term “distinguished.”

On entering the library, he shook hands with Mr. Milner—nodded to Farmer White with a certain degree of haughty reserve—and merely bestowed the most transient glance upon the Duke and Ethel as he proceeded to place himself at the head of the table. He then at once saw that it was a case of some prisoner being charged before him, and that Ethel was the offender; for the constable, according to his wont, made the captive stand at the lower extremity of the table.

“Before I enter upon the case,” said Mr. Ponsford, “I must observe that my clerk is not present; and therefore if there be copious depositions to take, we must wait until we can send into the village to fetch him.”

“I do not think the case will be a long one,” said Mr. Milner. “If it be only as brief as it is distressing——”

“Let us enter upon it,” curtly interjected the Squire, with a significance of tone and look which implied that no one ought to seek to bias his mind for or against the prisoner by any extraneous comment. “Who charges this?”—he hesitated for an instant; he was inclined to say “*lady*,” for there was something unspeakably fascinating and lady-like in Ethel's appearance; but he checked himself and said, “Who charges this *person*?”

“It is with infinite regret,” began Mr. Milner, “that I have to answer to your worship's demand. Perhaps you may recollect that this young lady lived for a number of years in the village——”

“What is the prisoner's name?” inquired the Justice.

“Tell his worship your name,” hastily whispered the sexton.

But Ethel remained silent, and appeared to look unmoved upon the proceedings; so that Mr. Milner continued to make his statement.

“The young lady's name is Ethel Trevor: she is married; and I am compelled by a sense of duty to charge her with the abstraction of a leaf from the parish register of marriages.”

“Where is the leaf?” inquired Mr. Ponsford.

“I know not,” answered the clergyman. “The prisoner may have it about her; and if so, I am sure that I should not wish to press the charge.”

"Let the prisoner be searched," interrupted the magistrate. "Gibson, remove her."

Ethel was conducted into another room, where Mr. Ponsford's housekeeper and a maid-servant searched her—but without effect. We may here seize upon the opportunity to remark that all the domestics of the establishment were gathered at the door of the library to listen to the proceedings; for Ethel was well known by name and by sight to most of them, and the fact of her being arrested on a charge which was so grave and which seemed so extraordinary had excited a considerable sensation. Miss Ponsford, the Squire's only child—a beautiful girl of about eighteen—peeped down the staircase from the drawing-room landing at Ethel when she was conducted into the room where she was examined; and the young lady's heart was moved towards the unfortunate creature. We must furthermore add that when Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn saw the front door thrown wide open after the admission of the little party, their experience in the proceedings before county magistrates at once enabled them to comprehend that it was a judicial inquiry of some sort or another—and they boldly entered the hall. Squire Ponsford prided himself on the publicity which was always given to examinations that took place before him: his servants therefore took their cue from their master; and when one of the domestics beheld Gaffney and Peppercorn, he bade them advance to the door of the library.

Ethel having been examined by the housekeeper and the servant-maid—an ordeal through which she passed with an air of vacant indifference—was re-conducted to the library.

"Has any paper been found upon her person?" inquired the justice.

The sexton made the report which he had received from the housekeeper, to the effect that no paper had been found.

"Under what circumstances was the leaf of the register extracted?" asked Squire Ponsford.

"Mrs. Trevor called upon me," answered Mr. Milner; "and in the course of conversation she expressed a wish to have a copy of her marriage certificate,—alleging that she had lost the one she received at her nuptials. I took her to the church and produced the registers. While there, I quitted the vestry for a few minutes—"

"Did you leave the prisoner in the vestry?" asked the magistrate.

"I did," replied the clergyman.

"And had she access to the register?"

"I am bound to confess that she had. Perhaps the duty which I owe society also compels me to state that I temporarily left the vestry in consequence of the prisoner suddenly declaring that she heard the voice of Mrs. Milner calling me. I went out to see—"

"And what followed?"

"My wife was not there—and I supposed that Mrs. Trevor—"

"The prisoner you mean," interrupted the magistrate severely.

"Yes, your worship—the prisoner. I supposed that she must have been mistaken."

"Was she standing near the registers? were they open? or was there anything in her manner to make you suspect foul play?"

"The prisoner was putting away the registers :

I thought the proceeding natural enough—I regarded it as an act of kindness intended to save me trouble. We went in to tea; and Farmer White called to request me to give him a particular certificate. I took him to the vestry; and my consternation may be more easily imagined than described when I found that a leaf of the marriage-register had been torn out! Indeed I was bewildered: I could even then scarcely believe that Mrs. Trevor—the prisoner I mean—had done it. I hastened home: but, alas! it was then scarcely possible to doubt—In a word, sir," added the clergyman, thus abruptly concluding his speech, "the prisoner had fled."

"What excuse did she make for leaving the house during your absence?"

"The excuse might be a very natural one," Mr. Milner hastened to exclaim; "and if we could by any possibility account for the destruction of the leaf without attributing the deed to the prisoner—"

"You are not to make a speech for the defence, Mr. Milner," said the magistrate, for a moment suffering his features to relax into a deprecating smile. "What excuse did she make to leave your house?"

"The excuse that a mother might well make," responded Milner,—"that of having to go and look after her child. And now, your worship, you will permit me to add my belief that the unfortunate young lady is suffering under an aberration of the intellect."

"What makes you think so?" inquired Mr. Ponsford.

"Several reasons," answered the clergyman. "In the first place, who can conceive a wife in her sound senses destroying the evidence of her own marriage? In the second place, her husband assures me that he has for some time past thought that her brain was affected. Thirdly," continued Mr. Milner, lowering his voice almost to a whisper, "her behaviour when she was arrested was so strange—she addressed me in such a singular style—her looks were so vacant and wandering—and altogether there was something so peculiar in the way in which she took this most serious accusation, that I have no doubt as to her mental derangement. Finally, if your worship will only contemplate her now, you will see that her mien is not that of a rational person."

"Can you conceive any possible motive," asked the magistrate, turning towards the Duke, "that might lead your wife to seek the destruction of that particular leaf in the register?"

"Oh, no! no!" sobbed the young nobleman, who throughout the examination had been labouring under the most terrible excitement; for the bare idea of his beloved Ethel being dragged through such an ordeal, and all on account of her magnanimous behaviour on his part, was fraught with the anguish of excruciation.

"If your worship will remand the prisoner," said Mr. Milner, "until the state of her mind can be investigated, I will myself give bail for her appearance. Or," he added, in a whisper, "you may surely let her go on her husband's recognizances?"

"No," said the magistrate, shaking his head: "it is a felony, and I cannot take bail. I have heard sufficient, to induce me to commit the prisoner for trial. I may possibly share your

opinion in reference to the state of her mind; but that is a subject of consideration for a jury. I must commit in this case to Dorchester gaol."

The Duke of Arleigh gave so sudden a start that all eyes were fixed upon him: for a few moments he gasped as if endeavouring to give utterance to some words which stuck in his throat; and then he suddenly turned towards Ethel, whose hand he took and strained to his lips. That hand she abandoned for an instant; and then she firmly and resolutely withdrew it.

"I understand it all!" hastily whispered the worthy clergyman to the magistrate. "She has taken some unaccountable aversion to her own husband! Alas, poor monomaniac! Your worship will make an order that she may have her child with her in the gaol? for in the present state of her mind it would perhaps goad her to utter madness to be separated from it."

"I will allow the child to accompany her to Dorchester," replied Squire Ponsford; "but it must then be left to the discretion of the civil and medical authorities of the gaol whether the infant be permitted to remain with her."

Ethel averted her eyes from the young Duke; but heaven knows it was not through aversion! It was through fear lest while gazing on him whom she had loved so devotedly, and whom she still loved—the father of her child—the whole structure of her courage should give way, and all the unnatural calmness she had maintained should in a moment dissolve in agonized weeping, or change into paroxysms of maniac lamentation accompanied by piercing screams.

"Let me get her away into another room, apart from the gaze of the people," hastily whispered Mr. Milner in the Duke's ear; "and do you keep out of her sight. I beseech you to do this; for her mind is evidently fraught with a morbid aversion towards you—and that is no doubt the reason she sought to destroy the evidence of your marriage."

"But how will she go to Dorchester? and what about the poor child?" demanded Herbert, in quick petulant tones; for he was full of agony throughout—mentally and physically—and enraged against all the world, with the single exception of the lovely and magnanimous creature who had thus sacrificed herself for his sake.

"I am just going to send off for a postchaise," answered Milner, who, making every allowance for the Duke's hastiness and petulance, was mild and benevolent in his demeanour; "and Squire Ponsford will allow your unfortunate wife to stay here till the vehicle comes. Farmer White is going to see about it; and he will also so arrange that the chaise shall bring up your nursemaid and your child, together with the effects that your poor Ethel may have brought with her."

The Duke of Arleigh suddenly became ashamed of his impatience; and seizing the worthy clergyman's hand, he pressed it with the most grateful effusion.

"Thanks! a thousand thanks!" he murmured, in a broken voice. "Oh, if every Christian minister were like you! But, Ah! to look upon that angelic face, so full of beauty and sweetness—and to think—to think that she is going to a gaol—my God! 'tis enough to drive me mad!"

"Calm yourself—calm yourself, my young

friend!" said Milner: "exert your Christian fortitude! Your poor wife is certain to be acquitted; and then you will be enabled to devote every attention to her. But get you away for the present—and I will conduct her to another apartment."

Herbert rushed from the room: the servants, who all knew him by sight as Mr. Trevor, made way for him with every display of courtesy and every evidence of sympathy. He felt the want of fresh air—he seemed to be in the midst of a stifling atmosphere—it was as if he were suffocating. He was hurrying towards the front door, when he suddenly caught sight of Gaffney and Peppercorn—an idea struck him—he made a hasty sign for them to follow—and he left the house where he had passed through an ordeal more terrible than even that through which poor Ethel had been dragged; for he hated and loathed himself as the cause of all her miseries—whereas she on the other hand had been sustained by the consciousness that her's was a self-martyrdom endured on account of him whom she had loved so tenderly and so well!

Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn were too cautious and wary to follow the Duke instantaneously out of the hall, as by so doing it would betray that he had beckoned to them; and they remembered his injunction that they were not to seem to know him. They therefore lounged out a few minutes after he had taken his departure; and when once in the obscurity of the park, they sped after him. They found him waiting impatiently for their appearance; and he petulantly ejaculated, "I thought you were never coming!"

"You told us to be discreet," responded Gaffney; "and so, if we've done wrong in obeying your Grace's own orders——"

"Hush!" interjected Arleigh. "Yes, yes—I see that you are discreet—and I am rejoiced at it! Now, if I mistake not, you are men who have no objection to earn money without being over nice——"

"To come to the point at once, my lord," said Tim Gaffney, "there isn't two men in all the country that likes to make money more than we do, or that is less partickler how we make it. So don't be afraid, my lord, to speak out your mind to us—for I think there's something you want to say."

"You are acquainted with a certain secret of mine," resumed Herbert; "and I mean to give you a thousand pounds to keep it."

Exclamations of joy burst from the lips of Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn; and they could scarcely restrain themselves from hugging the Duke in their delight at this unexpected liberality.

"But that is not all," resumed Herbert. "I will give you another thousand pounds if that young lady—you know whom I mean—and he pointed towards the mansion—"is enabled to escape from the constable who will presently be directed to convey her in a postchaise to Dorchester."

"It shall be done, my lord," replied Tim Gaffney, with the emphasis of one who felt confident of achieving that which he promised. "Give us an earnest of your Grace's liberality, and trust to us for the rest. We want no better paymaster than your lordship."

Herbert drew forth his pocket-hook; and by the light of the moon which was now rising, he counted ten bank notes for a hundred pounds each.

"There," he said, "is the hush-money in respect to my secret. The other thousand pounds shall be forthcoming when the work you have undertaken is accomplished."

"And if we find any difficulty," said Tim Gaffney, "in changing the notes, your Grace will help us to turn them into gold?"

"Come to me at my house in London," rejoined the Duke quickly, "and I will give you bags of gold in exchange for the notes. No one need know why you call upon me or who you are. You can pretend that you have horses to sell—or in short invent any excuse you like!"

"Good, my lord," said Peppercorn; "that's speaking like a brick. Your Grace's business shall be done. Tim Gaffney knows me, and I know Tim Gaffney; and when we two puts our heads or hands together to transact a bit of business, it isn't our fault if it ain't done in a right superior style. Now, my lord, have you any further orders? and what's to be done with the young lady when she's set free?"

"I know all this part of the country well," resumed the Duke: "I have fished in all the streams for many miles around;"—and he sighed deeply as he thought of the days of dreamy happiness when, a sojourner at Southdale, he was wooing the lovely Ethel Fraser. "You of course know the road the postchaise will presently take?"

"To be sure, my lord," replied Gaffney. "It's the same we took, only in a contrary direction, when coming by the stage from Dorchester this afternoon."

"Good!" observed the Duke. "At a distance of seven miles along the road, is the village of Eleanor's Cross; and I will be waiting for you with a vehicle of some kind just about a couple of miles beyond that village. I shall go and start off at once—and you have no time to lose."

"Trust to us, my lord," interjected Gaffney. "So now let's away to business."

The two men hastened off at a running pace towards a fence at a little distance; while the Duke pursued his way along the avenue of the park leading towards the village. He soon gained the inn; and he was delighted to find that no messenger had as yet arrived from the Firs to order the postchaise to convey Ethel to Dorchester; so that the intelligence of what had happened was as yet unknown at the hostelry. The Duke ordered the chaise that had brought him to be gotten in immediate readiness; and he said in a whisper to the landlord, "I am going with all possible speed to Dorchester on very important business indeed."

"Why, surely, Mr. Trevor," said Mr. Goodman, with an air of surpris, "you are not going to see the prize-fight?"

"What do you mean?" asked the Duke.

"Why, sir, don't say a word," responded the landlord; "but those two men which came this evening by the stage, are concerned in a fight which is to come off somewhere along the road—of course I don't exactly know where, because these sort of fellows always tell you one place when they mean another, in order to throw you off the

scent. But they've asked for my phaeton—it's just getting ready for them—though betwixt you and me, Mr. Trevor, I shouldn't have let 'em have it if they hadn't lodged a fifty pound note in my hand. So it's all right."

"What?" said the Duke, inwardly admiring the astuteness of his two agents' proceedings; "do you think they are prize-fighters?"

"Lord, no, Mr. Trevor!" replied Goodman: "they're what's called the backers. But these kind of fellows always have plenty of money. Of course they only whispered it to me as a great secret that they're connected with the prize-fight, just to account for their wanting the phaeton; and so, as I don't want to spoil their game—"

"Nor I either," added Herbert; "and therefore I shall not breathe a word of all you have been telling me."

He strolled forth in front of the tavern; and at the same moment the hostler was bringing round from the stables a neat phaeton and a very decent-looking animal. Messrs. Gaffney and Peppercorn, having just disposed of a little hot brandy-and-water, were fighting their cigars; and they both flung rapid looks of significancy upon the nobleman. They then took their seats in the phaeton, and drove away at a smart pace. Herbert was just thinking of hastening up-stairs to bestow a kiss upon his child, when his own postchaise made its appearance; and flinging himself upon the seat inside, he gave the order in a loud voice, "To Dorchester!"

About four miles outside of Southdale, the phaeton was seen stopping at the door of a wayside public-house; and by the light which streamed forth from that door, the figures of Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn might be perceived. They were drinking more brandy-and-water: but Herbert well knew that this was only an excuse to allow the chaise that was to convey Ethel, to pass along the road to some spot convenient for stopping it.

"God grant that the plan may succeed!" exclaimed the young Duke to himself: and then, with a deep sense of anguish, he added, "It would kill me—Oh, it would break my heart, to see poor Ethel consigned to a dungeon!"

The chaise rolled on: the village of Eleanor's Cross was presently reached; and when the equipage had passed a couple of miles beyond, the Duke called to the postilion to stop.

"Now, my good fellow," he said, as the man leapt down from his horse and came up to the door, "something will perhaps presently take place which it were just as well to conceal. It is no highway robbery—still less a murder: it is only the rescue of a young lady who has no business to be in custody. Do you think you can hold your tongue on the subject if I give you twenty guineas?"

"Well, sir, I think I can," answered the post-boy with a grin.

"But if you can't for the mere sake of the bribe," added the Duke, "perhaps you may be enabled to do so when I tell you that if the business is found out every one engaged in it will stand a chance of being transported—By the bye, have you a wife and children?"

"Yes—a wife and six childer," was the response.

"Well then, for the sake of your wife and six



children you had better keep a still tongue in your head. Is it a bargain?"

"Yes, sir," rejoined the post-boy,—adding with another grin, "When I can chink the blunt in this here breeches'-pocket——"

"Then let it be a bargain at once!" and Herbert counted the money into the man's hand. "Now, my good fellow," he continued, "we will just halt here until the incident takes place. If any other equipage drives by, or any wayfarer passes, you can be pretending to be fastening a strap or picking out a stone from the foot of one of the horses—anything to make a pretence for stopping."

"All right, sir:" and the Duke found the position was entirely of that degree of astuteness as to render him worthy of being a coadjutor in an enterprise wherein such experienced gentlemen as Messrs. Gaffney and Peppercorn were engaged.

Half-an-hour elapsed—a tedious wearisome

half-hour for the Duke of Ardleigh, and fraught with the most anxious suspense. At length the sounds of wheels and a horse's hoofs advancing rapidly from behind, were heard; and Herbert leapt out from the chaise. A phaeton with a double freight of people, was driving along: there were two females in it besides two men; and, O joy! Herbert now recognised them. The phaeton drew up; and the Duke sprang forward to assist Ethel to alight. She merely laid her hand upon his shoulder for a moment—and her feet touched the ground. He aided Susan to descend; and he affectionately patted the cheek of the sleeping child as he did so.

"Now hasten into 'the chaise!" he exclaimed; "hasten!"

"One word!" said Ethel, in a low but firm voice.

She stepped a few paces aside, and went on saying, "I will avail myself of the further assist-

ance you have so considerably afforded, on the one condition only—that you go not with me!"

"Oh, Ethel! Ethel! let me see you in safety!"—and the Duke actually clasped his hands in the urgency of his appeal.

"If you persist," replied Ethel, "I shall return to the spot where the postchaise has been left with the postilion and the sexton both bound and gagged. I will surrender myself into the constable's custody again—"

"My God! what misery for both! But do as you like, dearest and best beloved! It is your safety only that I think of or care for!"

"Now you speak as I could wish," answered Ethel, "and I will go in that case. Farewell."

"What! no kiss? no grasp of the hand?"

"My hand—yes!" and she gave it him.

"Oh, Ethel! Ethel!" murmured the Duke, in a broken suffocating voice, as he strained that hand to his lips: "is it possible that we are to part—that you tear yourself away from me—and that I must likewise separate from this dear infant?"

"Yes—it must be so," answered Ethel, firmly, yet not severely: and she withdrew her hand. "Farewell."

"You want money, Ethel—"

"No. I have enough for my purposes. Nothing was taken from me when I was searched at the magistrate's house."

"And that document, Ethel," pursued the young Duke, "sealed up in the envelope—which you received the other day from Mr. Warren, the stock-broker—"

"I have taken care of that document," replied Ethel; "not from any selfish feeling, because I can work for my own bread; but for the sake—for the sake"—her voice trembled for a moment; then instantaneously rendering it firm again, she said, "for the sake of that dear child."

"Oh, suffer me to double the amount, Ethel!" said Herbert, in an impassioned tone,—"to treble or quadruple it!"

"No," interrupted the young lady, "that sum is sufficient. But tell me—are you sure that there will be no difficulty in the way of my making use of the interest of that money?"

"No difficulty, Ethel," replied the Duke. "When you open the envelope, you will comprehend why I directed Warren to seal it, and why I enjoined you not to examine the contents until after my death. But now all those precautions have been rendered needless—and you may break the seal."

"Farewell," said Ethel, "and—and—may God Almighty give you happiness!"

"One word more!" sobbed the Duke, whose heart seemed to be well-nigh broken. "Will you not write to me from time to time, if only to tell me that dear little Alfred is in good health?"

"Yes, yes," replied Ethel, hurriedly: and she hastened to take her seat in the chaise.

Herbert now took the child and strained it to his breast: again and again he pressed the infant to his heart; and then he restored it to the care of the nursemaid, who was already seated by Ethel's side in the vehicle.

"God bless thee, Ethel," murmured the young Duke; "and may heaven likewise protect our dear child!"

"Farewell," replied Ethel, in a voice that was

scarcely audible: and then she added, in a firmer tone, "I conjure you to let this scene end at once!"

Herbert closed the door of the chaise: the postilion, who was already mounted, whipped his horses—and the equipage rolled away. All the unnatural courage which had hitherto sustained Ethel, now suddenly broke down: she burst forth into an agony of weeping—she wrung her hands in despair; and then straining her child to her bosom, she continued to weep and sob over the infant, heedless of the entreaties of the good-hearted Susan that she would tranquillize herself, and be comforted with the hope of better times.

When the postchaise rolled away from the spot, the young Duke felt as if he were being separated from everything on earth that was worth living for: but no more tears came from his eyes—and not another sob convulsed his heart. A blank despair seized upon him.

"Beg pardon, my lord," said Tim Gaffney, approaching and touching his hat: "but it won't do for us to remain loitering here after the business that has just taken place."

"True!" said the Duke, awakened from the forlorn and desolate reverie into which he sank as the postchaise disappeared from his view. "You must take me with you to Dorchester." Then having seated himself in the phaeton along with the two men, he inquired, "Did you accomplish the business in such a way as to ensure your own safety in case of a hue and cry?"

"We have no fear on that score, my lord," responded Gaffney. "The constable couldn't recognise us again—and the postboy wouldn't do it."

"Ah! is it so?" ejaculated the Duke. "But explain yourself."

"Why, my lord," rejoined Gaffney, "for the sake of a five pun' note the postboy agreed to be knocked off his horse and to be stunned on the spot, so that he might be bound hand and foot without any difficulty. Of course, therefore, the rap on the head we gave him was a werry gentle one, and he tipped me a knowing wink, when he laid upon the ground and ought to have been stunned. So Jack Peppercorn, and me, with black masks on our faces—"

"Yes, my lord," interjected Jack, coolly, "we always make it a rule to travel with masks in our pockets. It's sometimes convenient to have 'em ready for use."

"Well, as I was saying," continued Gaffney, "we opened the door of the chaise in a jiffy, we drags out Gibson the constable—we whips a handkerchief over his head, and ties it round his neck—we binds him hand and foot—and we lays him alongside of the postboy. Then we gets the lady and the nursemaid to the phaeton, which we had left a little further a-head, and there's an end of the business."

"It was cleverly done," remarked the Duke of Ardleigh, "and you will presently have the promised reward."

On the outskirts of the town of Dorchester, the Duke counted out a second sum of a thousand pounds in Bank of England notes; and having bestowed the amount on his two delighted co-adjutors, he separated from them. Carrying his carpet-bag in his hand, he sought the nearest hotel, where he ordered a postchaise to be gotten

in immediate readiness, his intention being to return with the least possible delay to London.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CIRCUS.

How crowded was Astley's Theatre!—and how tediously did the first piece seem to drag its slow length along, before the performances in the circle commenced! No one cared for the tremendous rant of the hero of that piece, although he represented some grand historic character who had won countless battles and was now on the point of leading a mighty army to another victory. Nor was the enthusiasm of any one particularly excited when that mighty army, consisting of six terrific-looking warriors on horseback, and thirteen supernumeraries, carpenters, and scene-shifters, clad in picturesque uniforms which looked wonderfully well at a distance, came trampling across the stage, led by that wonderful hero. Neither were the sympathies of the softer sex particularly enlisted when the heroine of the piece—who of course could be nothing less than a princess of very high degree—went looking over the battlefield for her lover, giving vent ever and anon to such passionate outbursts of woe as indeed completely out-did everything which usually occurs in real life. But all curiosity, all emotion, and all excitement appeared to be suspended or kept back, to be concentrated presently on one object—the favourite without whose presence at the house there would have been comparatively empty benches.

And during that tedious piece which opened the performances, how many were the whispered conjectures that were exchanged in pit, boxes, and gallery, relative to Mademoiselle Imogene! Some wondered whether she had yet arrived at the theatre—others whether she dressed there or before she came: some hoped that she would take particular attitudes, because they set off her beautiful form to such advantage; and others, carrying their speculations to still more mysterious and delicate topics, marvelled whether she were privately married, or whether she lived under the protection of anybody—or whether it were true that, as some people affirmed, she was a model of virtue—or whether faith might be attached to the rumour which was occasionally whispered abroad to the effect that Mademoiselle Imogene was a mother without being a wife.

At length the first piece terminated to the infinite satisfaction of every one of the spectators; and the performances in the circle presently began. In came the clown, furnished with the usual supply of ugly faces, and jokes of such immense platitude that nowhere else would they be received as jokes at all; but at Astley's everybody seems to consider oneself bound as a matter of course, or even as a veritable point of honour, to laugh at the clown. Besides, on this occasion the audience were now getting into a particularly good humour, as the moment was rapidly approaching when Mademoiselle Imogene was to make her appearance.

As the reader has already seen, it was her usual custom to dress at her own lodgings, whence, en-

veloped in a cloak, she hastily made her way to the theatre; and she generally managed to arrive only a few minutes before her services were actually required in the performance. She thus avoided as much as possible the necessity of coming in contact with the other performers, amongst whom she had no friendships except with Alice Denton and a young French girl named Rose. And then too, if there were any lounging intruders behind the scenes,—any of those gentry young fellows, who dress in the style of half-groom, half-gamekeeper, and constantly have a quizzing glass stuck in their eye—if, we say, there were any of these impertinent puppies lurking behind the scenes, Miss Hartland was enabled to escape from any lengthened ordeal of their insolent looks and perhaps equally bold overtures towards conversation.

And now, amidst the triumphal music of the orchestra, Mademoiselle Imogene makes her appearance in the circus. She does not glide in on foot to curtsy in the midst, and then accept the assistance of a groom to mount:—but she comes dashing in with *eclat*, guiding three horses at the same time, and standing on the back of the central one—for they are abreast. And with what tremendous enthusiasm is she received! It is a veritable enthusiasm—genuine, and sincere: there is no affectation in it, for Imogen is indeed an immense favourite. Notwithstanding the mystery which seems more or less to enshroud her moral character, she is as great a favourite with the ladies as with the gentlemen. There is so much honest frankness in her looks—she is so exceedingly beautiful—her figure is so striking and brilliant—and all her gestures display so much refined elegance and grace, that the female portion of the audience are actually proud of her as they might be of any splendid specimen of their own sex. And then too, there is nothing wanton in her looks nor in her movements: her regards, always vivacious, never seem to settle into an expression of immodest encouragement upon any male admirer who may be putting himself forward to attract her notice. Although there is naturally something softly sensuous in the part which she performs, arrayed as she is in that fantastic dress,—yet it is impossible to say but that the strictest propriety characterizes her proceedings in the circle. For these reasons, therefore, the women like her and she is so great a favourite with them. But not the less welcome is her appearance to the male portion of the assemblage. She rides with such mingled ease and fearlessness! she poises, as it were, her attitudes and her postures, as if she were illustrating all the most graceful positions which ever could have been conceived by ancient sculptors in reference to the female form! She soars above the common level of equestrian performance: she throws *sentiment* into it—she endows it with *intellectuality*. Yet she does not open her lips—unless it be to smile affably when acknowledging the plaudits of the spectators: she neither speaks nor sings; and yet she exercises all the power of an actress upon those who contemplate her. Ah! and how many of the male sex also congregate there to feast their eyes upon her fine form, and to suffer the fancy to revel in rapturous imaginings while following with the eye the flowing lines and swelling contours which the picturesque garb defines or delineates.

In a retired part of the theatre—at the back of the great mass of the crowd—stood a young man whose eyes were riveted upon the beautiful equestrian; but not with the same gross sensual feelings that inspired so many others of his own sex who were at the same time devouring her with their regards. It was with the fervour of tenderest admiration mingled with a strange pensive melancholy, that this young gentleman contemplated Imogen Hartland. He beheld nobody but her: he seemed to be utterly isolated as it were from the rest of the assemblage—isolated by his own thoughts—unaware that he was in the vicinage of so many of his fellow-creatures—intent only on the *one* object which thus absorbed all his attention. For, as the reader may have already conjectured, this young gentleman was Launcelot Osborne.

All of a sudden some one laid a hand upon his shoulder, and said in a familiar tone, "Well, Osborne, my dear fellow, how are you?"

Launcelot started: he was suddenly awakened as it were from a dream: he became all in a moment conscious of the assemblage that was there, the brilliant gaslights that were burning, and all the circumstances by which he was surrounded. A blush overspread his countenance: but almost immediately recovering himself, he said in a somewhat reserved and cold tone, "Good evening, Mr. Casey."

"Splendid creature—isn't she?" said Sylvester, sticking his glass into the socket of his right eye so as to concentrate his visual rays upon Imogen. "Stunning performance! By Jove, she's a brick of a rider!"

"Yes—she rides admirably," faltered Launcelot.

"I mean to get an introduction to her," pursued Sylvester Casey, with a certain knowing self-sufficient air. "It isn't every one however who can do *that*; for she's deuced particular, and plays the prude as well as she manages those three prads. But I'm behind the scenes to a certain extent——"

"You, Mr. Casey?" said Launcelot.

"Why the devil are you so formal with me?" demanded Sylvester. "I think we ought to drop the *Mister* betwixt us; for ain't you going to be my brother-in-law? and isn't it all settled?"

"I heg your pardon," said Launcelot: "I was perhapp rather too ceremonious. But you were telling me that you were behind the scenes to a certain extent?"

"Of course I am," ejaculated Sylvester, as if there ought not to have been any doubt or ignorance on the point. "I tell you what, old fellow—since circumstances place you and me on an intimate footing together, I don't mind letting you into a little bit of a secret: but of course you won't let out a word before my old governor—or I'm blowed if he wouldn't keep back half my allowance!"

"Well, Mr. Casey—Casey, I mean——"

"Can't you call me Sylvester right slap out plain at once—and I will call you Launcelot——"

"Well, be it so," said Osborne, who however shrank from the coarse familiarity of the miser's son. "This secret of your's, Sylvester?"

"You know Alice Denton——"

"I know her by sight and by name."

"Well," rejoined Sylvester Casey, "betwixt you and me and the post, I'm rather intimate in that quarter. Alice only remains at the circus just by way of a blind—it isn't for the sake of the salary—because the ten guineas a week I allow her——"

"You, Sylvester?" ejaculated Launcelot in astonishment.

"Well, yes—but don't say a word to anybody. Alice is my mistress; and Alice is on most intimate terms with Mademoiselle Imogene—Indeed I fancy that she and a certain Mademoiselle Rose are the only young ladies in the company that Imogen at all associates with; and so I mean to try and get an introduction through Alice. D'ye see, Launcelot—eh? d'ye twig, old fellow—eh?"

"And for what object," inquired Osborne, "do you seek an introduction to Miss Hartland?"

"Come, come, Launcelot!" ejaculated Sylvester; "that's rather too good! Why the deuce does a man about town get introduced to any pretty woman? I like Alice very much—but of course there's no comparison betwixt her and her friend. And then too I'll just tell you what, Osborne," continued Sylvester, with his most impertinent air of self-sufficiency; "it would be rather a fine thing to get hold of Mademoiselle Imogene—something to be talked about—eh? Why, it would make a fellow the object of envy on the part of every soul he met! Not, you know, that I believe in the virtue of Mademoiselle Imogene; because it's generally known she's had a child—but I think since then she has kept herself uncommonly quiet——"

"And do you mean," interrupted Osborne, speaking in an altered and even hoarse voice, "that you meditate making certain overtures to Mademoiselle Imogene?"

"Overtures?" echoed Sylvester, bending upon him a look of surprise: "and why not? You don't think that I've vowed eternal fidelity to Alice? Deuce a bit! Besides, a man may have two mistresses; and since Alice costs me so little——"

"I thought you just now told me that you allowed her ten guineas a week?"

Sylvester coloured up to the very hair of his head; and then endeavouring to turn off his confusion with a laugh, he said, "Well, I forgot that I'd let *that* cat out of the bag. But for heaven's sake don't breathe a syllable before the governor! And now come behind the scenes, and I'll introduce you to Alice."

Launcelot Osborne was on the point of giving a cold refusal, when a quick revulsion of feeling took place within him, and an indescribable impulse in a moment urged him to assent. His temporary hesitation was not therefore noticed by Sylvester; and he said, "I have never been behind the scenes of a theatre: I should like to accompany you."

During the latter portion of this colloquy, Mademoiselle Imogene had disappeared from the circus amidst the enthusiastic plaudits of the spectators; and now the clown was performing some antics to while away a few minutes until the next phase in the equestrian proceedings should develop itself. Sylvester led Launcelot Osborne behind the scenes, where it was evident that the former was very well known; for he nodded

familiarly to everybody and addressed two or three underlings by their Christian names, as if to ask them some questions, but in reality to impress Osborne with an idea of his familiar acquaintance with everything and every person behind the scenes and how completely he was at home there.

Launcelot was astonished when he found how completely a close survey disenchant the view in reference to things theatrical. The scenery which had looked beautiful from a distance, now seemed to be a vile daub and a miserable jumbling of colours coarsely and clumsily laid on: men who had presented a very attractive appearance when parading before the curtain, now seemed to be coarse, ugly, vulgar individuals; and many of the females who had looked exceedingly well—some absolutely beautiful—when seen from a distance, suffered even still more disadvantageously by a close inspection. The rouge seemed plastered instead of artistically applied: eyes that had shone bright from a distance, were now observed to be sunken and hollow: faces that looked attractive, proved to be seared with the small-pox, though the artificial complexion effectually concealed the marks when the countenance was viewed from a distance. As for the costumes, Launcelot was positively amazed when he perceived what a brilliant show the most wretched tinsel could make.

"Ah, now you see the illusion!" exclaimed Sylvester, laughing. "But do you know why those two or three dirty-looking chaps are hanging about you?"

"No. Why?" asked Launcelot.

"Because, as this is the first time you've set your foot behind the scenes, you are expected to stand treat. Give them a crown to get some beer."

Launcelot did as he was desired; and the dirty-looking fellows glided away to procure the refreshment for which the funds were thus liberally furnished. Launcelot kept looking round, his heart palpitating with suspense; for he thought it probable that Imogen might make her appearance, though he felt an insuperable loathing at the idea that she should herd, as it were, amidst the painted, bedizened, tinsel-and-fustian set of beings whom he beheld lounging about.

"Look," whispered Sylvester, "that short, thick-set, vulgar-looking fellow in the flesh-coloured clothes, is Blundell, the acrobat. He's a precious scamp—I was compelled to put him down a peg or two, because he affected to pay attentions to Alice, and I'm not a fellow to stand any nonsense. Acrobat or no acrobat, it's all the same to me: I would punch his head for him. Ah! look at that sweet pretty girl who has just crossed from the wings on the other side! She is one of the stars—But of course you recognise her? It's Mademoiselle Rose. She looks as well when seen close as on the stage or in the circus. I'll introduce you—But she does not look this way."

"Where did she emerge from?" inquired Launcelot.

"Oh! that door over there leads to the ladies' dressing-room; and that's where Alice no doubt is at this moment with her friend Imogen. I don't think it would be quite the thing for us to walk coolly in; so we must wait a minute or two. Ah! here she is!"

At that very moment forth from the ladies' dressing-room came Alice Denton, dressed in the manner which has been noticed in a previous chapter when her portrait was alluded to. She was by no means surprised on beholding Sylvester Casey there, for he was frequently in the habit of penetrating behind the scenes; but on the other hand nothing could exceed her amazement on recognising in his companion the object of her friend Imogen's devoted love. She started for an instant: but immediately recovering herself, she curtseyed gracefully while Sylvester introduced him.

"Alice," said young Casey, "this is my very particular friend the Hon. Launcelot Osborne."

"I have seen Mr. Osborne before," said Alice. "I remember that he was on board the same steam-packet some months ago—and I have since noticed him at the theatre—"

"Yes, Miss Denton," said Launcelot hastily; "I occasionally look in for a few minutes—"

"Sylvester," suddenly interjected Alice, "I am dying with thirst! It is most fortunate that you came at this moment. Do go and procure me some ginger-beer, or some sherry-and-water."

For an instant young Casey looked suspicious, as if he thought that Alice Denton was devising an excuse to get rid of him: but his conceit and vanity prevented him from entertaining the idea more than for that single instant; and he set off to comply with the young woman's request.

No sooner was he beyond earshot, than Alice Denton bent a look full of meaning upon Launcelot, at the same time saying, "What has brought you here, Mr. Osborne?"

He coloured—he looked confused for an instant; and then affecting to give a light laugh, he said, "For what other purpose could I come but to see how things look behind the curtain and to be introduced to Miss Denton?"

"No, sir—these were not your objects," replied Alice, in a low but emphatic tone. "I know your secret—but it is safe with me! If you really love Imogen, see her—see her, I conjure you! You know not how you have misjudged her—Oh! you know not!"

"Misjudged her?" echoed Launcelot. "What in the name of heaven—"

"That child—"

"Ah!"—and it was with suspended breath that Osborne prepared to listen.

"Here's some ginger-beer, Alice," said Sylvester, who at that moment reappeared, having encountered at the stage-door a female who vended the cheap effervescent beverage which he was now about to present to his mistress; for with his wonted thoughtfulness he had calculated that a bottle of the luxury aforesaid would cost precisely threepence, while a glass of sherry-and-water would cause the disbursement of an entire shilling.

Scarcely had Alice touched the tumbler with her lips, when she was required to hasten into the circus; and as Osborne felt assured that Sylvester would stick close to him for all the rest of the evening, and would not afford him any farther opportunity of speaking a word alone to Alice, he thought it inexpedient to remain any longer behind the scenes. Besides, he did not wish to be seen by Imogen, for fear she should think that he was purposely throwing himself in her way; whereas he had not as yet made up his mind how

he should act:—he was indeed bewildered by the words which Alice had spoken to him, and uttering at a loss what interpretation to put upon them.

Thus, all things considered, he felt that he required leisure for reflection and deliberation; and after having waited in front of the curtain to see Imogen appear in a second performance, Launcelot Osborne took his departure,—not without difficulty getting rid of Sylvester, who, as he had foreseen, stuck to him like a leech, proud of being observed in the company of a scion of the aristocracy, and anxious to induce him to go to some supper-rooms and pass the remainder of the evening. But Launcelot peremptorily declined; and eventually shaking off his unwelcome companion, he returned to Trentham House, to think of Imogen, and ponder on the brief, mysterious, unfinished allusion which had fallen from the lips of Alice Denton.

CHAPTER XIV.

LAUNCELOT.

It was the evening of the day following the performances to which we have just been referring; and Imogen Hartland, apparelled in her fantastic garb, was seated in her neat little parlour, waiting for the moment when she must set off for the theatre. Little Annie was playing with her doll, and singing to it in her sweet infantile voice; while ever and anon Imogen bent a look of tenderness upon the child, or else leant forward and caressed her plump cheek of velvet softness.

Yet Imogen was restless and agitated—for she was balancing, so to speak, betwixt disappointment and suspense. Her friend Alice Denton had told her what had occurred on the preceding evening; and Imogen had almost made sure that she should that day receive a visit from Launcelot Osborne. But as hour after hour had passed, hope had gradually yielded to disappointment; and while endeavouring to conjure up a thousand excuses to account for Launcelot's non-appearance, she continued a prey to suspense as to whether he might purpose to come to her at all.

She had just been replying to some artless question which little Annie had put to her, when there was a low double knock at the front door. She started—and her heart palpitated violently with the suspense of her feelings; for she knew not whether it might be Launcelot Osborne who was coming, or the Duchess of Arleigh,—this being the evening on which the latter had promised to visit her. She listened with up-heaved bosom: she heard Fanny open the door; and then it was a masculine voice that spoke, Oh! how Imogen's heart beat now! Was he indeed coming at last? Should she send the child from the room? No!—she need not be ashamed of its presence; and she allowed the little innocent to remain. A few moments and the door opened,—Launcelot Osborne appearing on the threshold.

His face was pale: he stopped short—he seemed to be labouring under a violent agitation, as if he knew not how to reconcile himself to the step which he was thus taking, and foresaw not what would be its result. Imogen rose up from her seat:

and instead of rushing forward to welcome him, as she had ere now fancied that she should do—instead of being full of a wild haste to proclaim from her lips how cruelly she had been misjudged—she was seized with confusion: she was riveted to the spot—she felt full of shame and bashfulness—and her eyes were bent down, while the colour glowed in richest crimson upon her cheeks.

“Miss Hartland,” said the Hon. Launcelot Osborne, “I ought perhaps to apologize for this intrusion; but still, after everything which took place between us the other day at that strange scene when you received certain avowals and explanations from my lips, I the while taking you for another—”

“Do not apologize for coming hither,” said Imogen, in a low tremulous tone. “It is I who ought to apologize for receiving you in such a garb as this.”

“Though it may not be the garb which I should best like to see you wear,” answered Launcelot, now advancing into the room and closing the door behind him, “yet you need not be ashamed of it; for it indicates that you eat the bread procured by the exercise of a legitimate avocation. But without another syllable of preface let me ask you—”

“I know what you mean,” interrupted Imogen: and then as a sudden feeling of bitterness and disappointment seized upon her, she said, “But of what avail is it for me to justify myself in your eyes, since you are about to become the husband of her for whom you took me the other day when I sat at your feet—when I pressed your hand to my lips—”

“Imogen,” said Launcelot, in a low voice which was broken and tremulous in its accents; “prove to me that you have been wronged by report—and—and it may make a great difference in my views and intentions—it may prove a turning-point both in my career and your's—”

“Oh, if this were possible!” she murmured, clasping her hands before her: then in a voice that was inaudible to little Annie, but yet powerfully emphatic in its tone, she said, “That child is not mine!”

“Not your's? it really is not your's?”—and Launcelot appeared to reel and stagger under the influence of his feelings, while mingled hope, joy, and suspense were depicted on his countenance.

“No—not mine!” repeated Imogen. “I can look you in the face”—she raised her handsome countenance as she spoke, and met his gaze with her large beautiful blue eyes that appeared to beam with candour and frankness,—“I can look you in the face and declare that as I have a soul to be saved I have never done a deed for which I ought to blush!”

“Good God! is this possible?”—and there was now a sort of wildness in the very joy which filled the look that Launcelot bent upon Imogen. “But why—why have you allowed yourself to remain under imputations so injurious?”

“Yes, so injurious,” said Imogen bitterly, “that even at this very instant you scarcely believe the assurance I have given you!”

“I would give half of my life,” responded Osborne, emphatically, “to be enabled to believe it so thoroughly and completely that it should amount to an absolute conviction.”

Imogen rang the bell: Fanny answered the summons; and the actress said, "Take little Annie away for a few minutes."

At the same time she bent down and kissed the child with every evidence of an affection which was indeed little short of being maternal. A doubt shot like a pang through the mind of Launcelot Osborne; and the expression of anguish which it conjured up to his face, was caught by the eye of Imogen ere it fitted away. She understood its meaning; and she said in a low deep voice, which indicated mingled distress and coldness, "You think I am deceiving you? Then why remain another moment with one of whom you must entertain so bad an opinion?"

"Oh, Imogen!" exclaimed Launcelot, with impassioned fervour; "I have told you that I would give half the years which yet remain to me on earth, to have the conviction of your innocence so strongly established in my mind that I cannot possibly doubt it! God knows my own inclination is to believe you guiltless!—and when I look in your face I think it impossible that you can be otherwise than pure and stainless! But still—hnt still—you remember when I met you in the Westminster Road about a month ago—you had then the child with you—it was the first time I had ever seen you with such a companion—it seemed to me as if the burning blush of shame swept over your countenance—"

"Shame only because I instantaneously comprehended the idea which struck you and why you became so deadly pale! Oh, that I had conjured up the courage to address you—or that you had been just and merciful enough to question me without prejudging me!"

"Ah, Imogen," said Launcelot, "I scarcely merit this reproach! So soon as I had recovered from that first shock, I resolved not to suffer my mind to arrive at any hasty conclusion—"

"I understand you," observed Imogen mournfully: "you instituted inquiries in the neighbourhood of my abode—you went from shop to shop—I saw you—and doubtless at each one you heard a repetition of the same calumny. No! I can scarcely call it calumny; for my neighbours believe the tale which they tell—and under existing circumstances they are justified in so believing!"

"But surely, Imogen—surely," interjected Osborne, "you might have found means to convince them of your innocence? And then, too, the other day when you were at Trentham House—surely you could have breathed a single word to proclaim your innocence to me?"

"I was about to breathe that word," interrupted Imogen, "when you passionately and wildly broke in upon what I was saying!—you declared that we must part for ever—and you rushed in frenzied haste from the room. Oh, Launcelot! you know not how I have suffered on account of that dear child!—and yet there is not so much as the slightest kinship between her and me. However, it is useless for me to expatiate further upon the subject—"

"To whom belongs the child?" asked Osborne: "how came it in your keeping? Oh, tell me everything, Imogen!—tell me everything!—for it is my life's happiness that is now at stake!"

"God knows," she fervidly replied, "I am most anxious to convince you of my innocence.

Listen! In this house there used to be a happy family:—that was when I dwelt here with my father, my mother, and my brother. We were poor: but we were all honest and respectable. My parents had seen better days: my mother was a woman of accomplishments, and some of these she imparted to me. It was purposed that I should endeavour to earn my own bread as a nursery-governess at first—afterwards as a governess when I should grow older and more experienced. It was about four years and a half ago—when I was sixteen—that I obtained a situation in the first-mentioned capacity, in a family that was going to travel on the Continent. I was absent for about four or five months, when a sudden circumstance—it was a gross and unpardonable insult which I received—led me all in a moment to quit my situation. I returned at once to London. It was late at night when I reached the paternal home,—this very house which I now occupy. That same night a child, two or three weeks old, was brought hither, my parents having agreed to receive and adopt it in consideration of a handsome sum of money that was furnished for the purpose. Now, observe, Launcelot! On the very night that I returned was the child brought hither; and as my parents had not previously breathed a syllable, not even to any intimate friend, of the bargain which they had made and of their expectation of receiving the little stranger, the coincidence was altogether a most unfortunate one for me."

"Proceed, Imogen—proceed," said Osborne, watching her countenance with the most earnest interest.

"Nevertheless," she continued, "it did not strike my parents that the coincidence might become the source of evil rumours; while such a thought assuredly did not occur to me. My own imagination was too pure and innocent for the entertainment of such apprehensions. My parents had obtained a considerable sum of money as a reward for adopting the child, and likewise to become a provision for little Annie's future benefit; and thus poverty being no longer a guest in the house, my mother resolved that I should not be again exposed to such insult, amounting almost to outrage, as that which had induced me to abandon my situation all in a moment. I therefore remained at home. I grew passionately fond of little Annie: I reared her by hand—and the child got to love me so devotedly that it would let no one else do anything for it. I pitied its worse than orphan condition—abandoned, repudiated, rejected by its parents as it was; and that feeling of commiseration, mingling with the love that I bore for little Annie, strengthened the attachment, itself and made my heart yearn towards the innocent as if she were veritably my own child. And it is for this that I have suffered!—for this that I at length became aware that calumnious whispers were circulated concerning me!—for this that I had to endure the jeering smile or contemptuous toss of the head on the part of a neighbour when I attempted to say something to efface the injurious opinion which was thus spreading concerning me! Misfortunes were at the same time coming upon the family. My father—who in the former part of his life had impoverished himself by his mania for speculation—no sooner got possession of the money which he received on little

Annie's account, than he launched out into fresh ventures. These, alas! turned out to be as unfortunate as the former ones; and all that money was lost. Then came pestilence, ravaging this neighbourhood. You recollect perhaps that two years ago a virulent fever broke out through the district of Lambeth? My father and mother died within the same week; and then poverty entered the house. My brother went to sea—I obtained an engagement at Astley's—and now you know everything."

"Oh, if the conviction were only established in my mind," exclaimed Launcelot,—“you know to what I allude, Imogen!—then, Oh! *then* how deeply should I sympathize with you!”

“Perhaps I may be enabled to establish this conviction,” murmured Imogen, trembling almost like a guilty person at an idea which she had previously conceived, and which was now rapidly expanding in her mind.

“For God's sake do so! Oh, do so, Imogen! I conjure you!” exclaimed Osborne: and seizing her hands, he pressed them both in his own. “Yes—by everything sacred I adjure you to prove to me your complete innocence! I already believe you, Imogen—dear Imogen!—but Oh! for your own sake you will satisfy me so fully that never hereafter shall there be a moment when even the slightest misgiving may enter my mind—no cloud to flit across the heaven of that happiness which we may perhaps enjoy together!”

“Oh,” murmured Miss Hartland, reclining her head upon the shoulder of that handsome young patrician, as he held her hands clasped in his own; “I would make any sacrifice to prove myself worthy of your love! Yes—I would be guilty of any treachery—any perfidy, no matter how vile!”

“Good heavens! what mean you, Imogen?” cried Osborne, starting back and gazing upon her with consternation.

“It means,” she replied, “that I have a right to vindicate my own character, even though by so doing I may ruin that of another!”

“Ah! then your parents, when they agreed to adopt that child, and received a sum of money as a reward, were acquainted with the infant's parentage?”

“No,” replied Imogen: “they died in ignorance of the truth. The whole affair at the outset was negotiated with my parents so warily, and the child was delivered into my mother's arms under such circumstances of extreme precaution, that no clue was left for the slightest scintillation of a discovery.”

“Ah!” said Launcelot: and a shade of doubt once more crossed his features.

“Again mistrustful!” said Imogen, in a tone of gentle reproach; “and you judge me even before I have well finished speaking! Exactly a fortnight has elapsed since I discovered the parentage of that child, at least so far as the mother is concerned; for she called here—doubtless her heart yearned to see the offspring whom for upwards of four years she had ignored and abandoned—and so she came—”

“Therefore you know her?” said Launcelot eagerly. “Oh! think not that I am inspired by any ungenerous or impertinent curiosity; but it is for your sake, Imogen—yes, and for the sake of my own happiness—”

“I believe you, Launcelot! I believe you! Yes—I know who the mother is.”

“Oh! then you can satisfy me—”

“Hush!” said Imogen, as her ear caught a low double knock at the front door.

“You expect a visitor?” said Launcelot inquiringly.

“Yes,” quickly responded Miss Hartland in a whisper; “and you shall overhear every syllable that takes place between that visitor and myself. But I charge you not to let it be known that you are a listener! This way! This way!”

She hurried him into an adjoining room: she placed the door ajar; and then she glided back into the front parlour, where she awaited the visitress whom she had been expecting. Fanny ushered in a lady dressed with the utmost plainness, and with a black veil so folded over her countenance that it was impossible to catch the slightest glimpse of her features. Fanny withdrew: and the young Duchess sank down upon a seat, overpowered by her emotions.

“I have kept the appointment, Miss Hartland,” she at length said: “but, Oh! it is so very difficult for me to take such a step as this and escape observation!”

“No doubt, my lady,” observed Imogen.

“Hush! for heaven's sake give me no titles!” interjected the Duchess. “I tremble from head to foot—and if I were not sure that I could thoroughly trust to you—”

“Shall I go and fetch your child, madam, that you may press the innocent to your bosom?”

“No, no, Miss Hartland!—not now! not now! I am not equal to such a task—”

“A task?” echoed Imogen. “What! to embrace your own offspring?”

“Ah! you cannot comprehend the dreadful feelings which I now experience,” said the Duchess, with a concentrated emphasis that corresponded well with the sense of the words themselves. “The other day my heart yearned towards my child—it was an irresistible impulse that I obeyed when I came hither—and yet the step was taken with fear and trembling, and with a strong shuddering. Do you not know the sensation of looking from a dizzy height and longing to plunge down into the abyss? Well then, it was that fearful sort of feeling which impelled me to come hither?”

“And you expected not,” said Imogen, “to meet an actress in her fantastic garb—and you were shocked and you repented the step you had taken—and you would have retreated—you would have fled—yes, without embracing your child! But I was alike indignant and shocked at the heartlessness of your conduct—I tore the veil from your countenance—and behold, it was the Duchess of Arleigh who stood before me!”

“Hush! hush!” exclaimed the brilliant lady, convulsed from head to foot with fear. “Why do you thus breathe my name? why do you thus endanger me? Is it that you seek to compromise me?”

“No,” replied Imogen: “but I am endeavouring to move your heart by some means, if I can. Shall I fetch down the child?”

“No, no!” almost shrieked forth the Duchess, with a convulsing anguish. “I loathe and hate the infant, to me the cause of so much unhappiness! It was not in the weakness of love that I surren-



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dered to the father of that child: it was as a victim that I succumbed to the treachery of a ravisher! Now then, will you ask me to love that child? No, no! you could not! It were against nature itself to do so! I could not have been in my right mind when I came the other evening to see the child! No, no! I was mad—as indeed I often think I am on other points as well as on this!”

The Duchess had spoken with an exceeding vehemence; and now she gasped for breath—and doubtless feeling the air oppressive, she raised her veil. Imogen contemplated her with earnestness; for she did indeed fear that the patrician lady

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was going mad, and that she would burst forth in some still more violent paroxysms of emotion.

There was a pause of nearly a minute; and then Imogen said, “I feel that I was wrong to persist in urging your child upon your notice. There was a compact made with my parents—and that bargain ought to be honourably fulfilled. Neither can I forget that a complete pecuniary provision was made for the child, and that the sum thus furnished was dissipated by my father. Madam, I will urge nothing more upon you—neither will I molest you further. You shall henceforth hear naught of Imogen Hartland; and you may rest assured that whether you hate or

love that dear little Annie, she shall always find a true friend—aye, a mother in me.”

“Miss Hartland,” said the Duchess, in a voice that was now low and tremulous, “you are speaking in the most generous manner! Your conduct is altogether so admirable——”

“No, no!” interrupted Imogen hastily: “do not address me thus! I have been wrong to persecute you even for a moment. If ever you wish to hear of your child, you may seek me for that purpose: but otherwise you will see me no more.”

The Duchess gazed upon the actress with a look which was as much as to say, “Singular and unaccountable being that you are!”—then rising from her seat, she drew forth a purse, which was heavy with gold and with bank-notes; and proffering that purse, she observed, “Here are a thousand pounds for your use.”

“No, madam!—no!” exclaimed Imogen emphatically. “You provided well for the child at the outset; and it is for me to act precisely as if my poor father had not by his speculations lost the amount that you thus furnished. Ah! I said that you should hear from me no more! But in case that I became unable to earn bread for that dear child, then most assuredly would I appeal unto your bounty—but not till then!”

The Duchess again pressed the money upon Imogen; but it was still refused firmly though respectfully; and then the patrician lady, lowering her veil, said, “Farewell, Miss Hartland. Never, never can I forget the generosity of your conduct!”

She pressed Imogen’s hand and hastened from the room. She opened the front door for herself, and issued forth, at once closing that door behind her. She had not proceeded a dozen yards along the street—the dusk having now closed in—when she was suddenly caught round the waist by the strong arms of a man, and in the twinkling of an eye lifted into a cab, which was drawn close up against the kerbstone, and the door of which was standing open. The man sprang in after her, closing the door; and the vehicle rolled away at a rapid pace.

Meanwhile Imogen Hartland, the instant the Duchess took her departure, sank down upon the sofa; and covering her face with her hands, burst into a convulsive fit of sobbing and weeping. Launcelot Osborne was almost immediately by her side: and then he threw himself at her feet.

“Imogen, Imogen!” he said, forcing her hands away from her countenance and pressing them to his lips; “for heaven’s sake tranquillize yourself! What is the matter? Speak to me, dearest, dearest Imogen!”

“Oh! now I know,” she murmured, her voice broken with those convulsing sobs, “you will hate me! The very means which I have adopted to make you love me, will cause you to detest me!”

“No, no, Imogen! no, no, dearest!” cried Launcelot. “I swear that I love you more than life! Oh, heaven only knows how I love you!”

“But this dreadful act of treachery which I have committed towards that unfortunate woman——”

“I forced you to do it—and you were justified under the circumstances!”

“Oh! if you think so!”—and with a cry of joy Imogen threw herself into his arms; and the lovers were locked in a fervid embrace.

CHAPTER XV.

THE FIRS.

NOTHING could exceed the excitement which prevailed in the usually quiet little village of Southdale, when the postchaise which had been hired to convey Ethel and her maid to Dorchester, returned to the inn, the postilion and constable bearing the intelligence of the rescue which had been effected. Of course the posthoy, having received the five-pound note from Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn to enter into the plot, told his tale in such a way as completely to screen those two worthies from all suspicion. He declared that he obtained a perfect view of the two men who knocked him off his horse; and he gave such a description as quite separated their persons from the remotest idea of identifying them with the strangers who had hired the phaeton. He represented them as two men of herculean size and colossal strength; whereas Gaffney was of moderate stature, and Peppercorn was a dapper little fellow, thin, wiry, and active. The constable Gibson, willing enough to snatch at any apology for suffering himself to be overpowered so easily, corroborated the posthoy’s tale, though in point of fact he had not obtained so much as the slightest glimpse of the two men; for he was dozing at the time when the vehicle was stopped, and scarcely had his eyes opened from his snooze than they were closed again by the stunning effect of the blow which stretched him in the road as he was dragged out of the chaise. Thus not for a single instant did suspicion attach itself to the real authors of the occurrence.

On the following day Messrs. Gaffney and Peppercorn, with cigars in their mouths, and their hats perched jauntily on one side, drove up to the inn, and alighted from the phaeton. They instantaneously ordered glasses of ale; and with a knowing wink, gave the landlord to understand that they had won no end of money by the prize-fight, which they said had come off at a very early hour that morning. They seemed to be perfectly astounded when the unsophisticated Mr. Goodman told them of the rescue of Mrs. Trevor; and when they heard the personal description of the two villains, according to the representation of the posthoy, they both suddenly recollected that they had met two such fellows along the road, and were rather alarmed at the time for their own safety. Thus everything considered, Mr. Goodman was perfectly convinced that his two sporting-looking customers had no more concern than he himself had with the particular affair that was now exciting so strong a sensation in Southdale.

But Mr. Trevor—otherwise the Duke of Ardleigh—did not pass equally free from the taint of suspicion until the prompt institution of an inquiry resulted in the clearing of his character also on this special point. Another local constable, a trifle more astute than Gibson, was sent off very early in the morning to Dorchester to find the postilion who had driven the so-called Mr. Trevor from Southdale. But the postilion was fully prepared for any questions that might be put to him, inasmuch as he had the Duke’s twenty guineas in his pocket and his Grace’s

threat of transportation before his eyes. He therefore vowed that he had seen nothing of the lady or her servant—that he had driven Mr. Trevor to the door of the coach-office, where that gentleman had alighted—and that there was an end of the business. The constable returned with this information to Southdale, which pleasant little village was accordingly more mystified and bewildered than ever it had been since its name first appeared in Domesday Book, where the archaeologists of the place declared that it was to be duly found.

Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn spent the greater part of the day at the inn, where they feasted upon the best which the house could furnish, and finally paid their bill with such liberality that Goodman, the worthy landlord, almost regretted he had not begged to be permitted to stake a little money on the prize-fight, under their auspices, that he might have reaped proportionate gains. Thus firmly believing in the fiction of that prize-fight, he continued unsuspecting that his two liberal customers were of a character at all different from what they represented themselves to be. They took their departure at about five o'clock in the evening, by a coach which passed through the village; and the landlord regretted the loss of such good customers. These two individuals alighted from the coach at a neighbouring hamlet; and when it was dusk, they began to retrace their way—or at least to return by a circuitous route through the woods and fields, into the neighbourhood of Southdale.

But taking leave of Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn for the present, let us proceed to introduce the reader somewhat more intimately to Squire Ponsford and his daughter than we have yet done. We have already stated that Mr. Ponsford was about sixty years of age, of very gentlemanly appearance, with a pale and severe expression of countenance. In respect to his daughter, we merely alluded to her as a beautiful girl of about eighteen; but we should not be in error if we were to add that a more lovely creature than Pamela Ponsford was not to be seen throughout Dorsetshire. She was short and slightly formed, of the most exquisite symmetry, and with an aerial fairy-like appearance. Her complexion was dazzlingly fair and transparent, the most delicate hues of the carnation softly blending with the pure whiteness of the lily. Her hair was of a very light chestnut; and it showered in myriads of ringlets upon her shoulders. Her eyes were of violet-blue, and replete with the most amiable expression. Nothing could exceed the beauty of the classically cut lips nor the purity and regularity of the rows of pearly teeth. Though she had numbered eighteen years, yet there was something of girlish artlessness about her—something even of childish gaiety and innocence—as if she were completely unacquainted with the cares of the world and had never experienced anything to impair the equanimity of her thoughts.

Pamela had lost her mother when she was in her infancy; and thus having never known a maternal parent's care, she had not been doomed to sorrow for its absence. She had been reared under the care of trustworthy and competent governesses; and thus she had never incurred the risk of acquiring the taint which the minds of young girls are sometimes too apt to derive from the at-

mosphere of boarding-schools. In short, she had been carefully but tenderly and indulgently brought up; she was good and she was beautiful—accomplished and well-mannered—bashful and retiring before strangers, but affable and of a charming good-nature amongst friends and acquaintances.

Squire Ponsford had no near relations of either sex; and thus there were no kinsmen to dwell beneath the same roof and become guides or companions for Pamela. The governesses who reared her, had supplied the place of the mother whom she had lost in her infancy; but these ladies had gone to settle elsewhere when their services were no longer required; and thus Pamela now resided alone with her father at the Firs. She however frequently had some of the young ladies of the neighbourhood to stay with her—the Squire gave frequent evening parties on his daughter's account (for he himself secretly detested them); and thus Pamela was never dull at that secluded country-seat, nor did the time ever hang heavy upon her hands.

Squire Ponsford was reputed to be very well off: he had a good estate—and it was believed that he had a considerable sum of money in the funds. Pamela was his only child; and she was looked upon as an heiress. Thus, beautiful and accomplished as she was, and with the prospect of inheriting a fine fortune, she naturally became the object of attention on the part of several of the scions of the principal families in the county: but she never seemed to understand their attentions—it never appeared as if she noticed that one young gentleman was more assiduous to her than another; and thus no one received any encouragement to attach himself deliberately and studiously to her as an enitor. She was not volatile—much less was she a flirt or a coquette: but she seemed to receive with the same good-tempered affability the attentions of all who approached her, just as readily giving her hand for a quadrille to one as to another, and appearing to be completely indifferent whose arm she took when being escorted from the drawing-room to the dining-room, or who became her cavalier at a pic-nic or rural excursion. In short, at eighteen Miss Ponsford was still completely unacquainted with the sentiment of love; and every one marvelled who the happy individual would be that was destined to win her heart and lead her to the altar.

Before we continue the thread of our narrative, we must place on record a few particulars relative to the estate possessed by Squire Ponsford. This was double the size of the domain which he had inherited from his father. At that time—looking back for a period of about five-and-twenty years—the estate called "The Firs," the property of the Ponsford family, was joined by another property called "The Southdale Farm." This belonged to a young man of the name of Pringle; he was a wild reckless fellow, who thought more of hunting and shooting over his lands than attending to their culture, and who kept open house with a hospitality that could not fail to be ruinous. John Ponsford—at that time unmarried—was very intimate with Rupert Pringle: but there was a difference of ten years in their ages, and Squire Ponsford was proportionately more experienced in the world than his friend Pringle. The consequence was that while the former carefully lived

within his income, though enjoying himself with all kinds of pleasures, the latter was soon floundering in a maze of pecuniary difficulties; so that he fell into the hands of usurers and money-lenders. Then there arose a sudden breach between John Ponsford and Rupert Pringle. No one knew the exact cause of the quarrel, though it was whispered that some female was at the bottom of it; but certain it is that the animosity which ensued between those two was even greater than their former intimacy had been. And then in a very short time Rupert Pringle's affairs came to a crisis—Southdals Farm was seized by the money-lenders to whom it was mortgaged—and Pringle himself suddenly disappeared. There was a good deal of mystery attending these proceedings at the time; and indeed no one seemed to understand the exact rights of the matter; for it seemed strange that Pringle should vanish so abruptly after having surrendered up everything to his creditors, and without even waiting to see whether the sale of his property would not suffice for the liquidation of his debts and leave some little surplus for his own benefit. And then too, to render the mystery still deeper, and to afford additional scope for surprise and conjecture, who should become the purchaser of Southdale Farm but Squire Ponsford himself?—not openly and at public auction, but quietly, if not secretly, by private contract with the creditors who had taken possession of it! And thus the Pringle property became incorporated with that of the Ponsfords; the distinctive appellation of "Southdale Farm" soon ceased to exist—and the amalgamated whole was known under the general title of "The Firs." As for Pringle, it seemed that he was never again heard of: indeed his fate remained enveloped in the utmost mystery,—some persons maintaining that he fled to another part of the country or else to a foreign clime—other people confidently expressing their opinion that he had committed suicide at the time of his irretrievable difficulties, and that his corpse had fed the fishes in some adjacent river. There were likewise at the time certain whispers to the effect that Ponsford had dealt harshly and unfairly towards his late friend: but no direct accusation was levelled against the Squire. On the other hand, it is only fair to state that there were persons who were fully convinced that the origin of the quarrel was entirely attributable to some nefarious conduct on Rupert Pringle's own part, and that in respect to the purchase of the Southdale Farm the Squire had only availed himself of a legitimate opportunity to increase his own domain in a suitable and honourable manner.

Now, as we have before said, a quarter of a century had elapsed since those occurrences, the details of which were therefore only dimly remembered in the neighbourhood, while Squire Ponsford himself had completely outlived any evil opinion or prejudice that might possibly have existed concerning him among the Pringle partisans at that date when the events themselves took place. As for Pamela, she had scarcely ever heard of the matter at all,—her entire knowledge thereof being confined to the fact that a portion of her father's present estate had not always existed in the family, but had been purchased from a spendthrift of the name of Pringle some years before she herself was born.

We now resume the thread of our story. It was the evening—the dusk had closed in—the lamp was lighted in the parlour—and Squire Ponsford sat with his daughter, discoursing on the mysterious rescue of Mrs. Trevor.

"I must say, dear father," observed Pamela, raising her frank beautiful countenance and looking him with smiling ingenuousness in the face as she let her embroidery fall in her lap,— "I must say that I am not sorry the poor lady is saved from the horrors of a prison; although it was of course very wrong for her to tear the register. But still if her brain be affected—"

"Of which there is little doubt," interjected Mr. Ponsford. "You remember her—do you not?"

"Oh, certainly! when she was Miss Fraser, and lived in the ivy cottage. But I never knew her to speak to," continued Pamela. "How was it, dear father, that she did not visit at the Firs?"

"It was not my fault," answered the Squire. "Her widowed mother led a very retired life in that cottage, courting no society, and visiting only Mr. and Mrs. Milner. When she died, several families showed the kindest attention towards her orphan daughter Ethel—and I was often thinking that we would call upon her, but something always occurred to prevent it; and then Mr. Trevor came into the neighbourhood, married her, and took her away."

"Poor creature!" said Pamela, with a sigh of compassion. "I wonder how it is that her brain has become affected? But I suppose, dear father, that you will do nothing more against her?"

"Well, I think not," replied Mr. Ponsford. "I did my duty as a magistrate; but I am not sorry that the case has ended thus. At the same time it is a very very hard thing for those whose marriage-registries are destroyed by the act of this unfortunate woman."

"I thought I once heard Mr. Milner say," remarked Pamela, "that duplicate copies of the parish registers are kept?"

"Yes—at the diocesan courts," rejoined Mr. Ponsford: "but the books are only sent every two years to have copies taken of the entries that may be made during that time; and as all the entries upon the leaf which Mrs. Trevor tore out, happen to be within the two years, there are no duplicates and the records are lost."

"And what will those persons do," inquired Pamela, "who may possibly some day stand in need of their marriage-certificates?"

"I scarcely know what they can do," responded her father; "but it is of course very awkward. For instance, there is George White the farmer's son, who meant to apply to me for the situation of bailiff: but he is now unable to complete his testimonials—"

"But every one knows," observed Pamela, "that Mr. George White was married about eighteen months or two years ago."

"Very likely, my dear," said Mr. Ponsford: "but in these cases I hold to the very letter of the usual formality. My father and grandfather and great grandfather did the same—and I assuredly shall not deviate from the rule."

"Then George White will not obtain the situation?" said Pamela.

"Unfortunately for him he will not. I am very sorry—but there are certain hereditary

customs which ought to be preserved in families as religiously as if they were heirlooms—”

The Squire's sententious speech was interrupted by the entrance of a livery-servant, who said, “If you please, sir, here is a person come to apply for the situation of bailiff.”

“Why, this is rather an unreasonable hour—nine o'clock in the evening,” observed Mr. Ponsford, drawing himself up and looking severely as he glanced at the time-piece on the mantel.

“He says, sir, that he only got down to the village just now; and thinking that there might be a great many applicants for the situation, he hoped you would look over his testimonials, sir—”

“Well, let him step in here,” said the Squire; “for after all,” he added, as the domestic withdrew, “it is a cautious business-like proceeding on this applicant's part, and speaks well for his character.”

Pamela took up her embroidery, and only just slightly glanced at the door as it opened to give admittance to the applicant for the vacant situation.

“Where do you come from?” inquired Mr. Ponsford.

“I come from Hampshire, sir,” answered the applicant in a voice so pleasing that Pamela could not help noticing it; and she now glanced again towards the individual.

She observed that he was a young man, a little above the middle stature, very neatly dressed; and though it was a matter on which she ordinarily felt perfectly indifferent, yet she could not help hoping that so respectable-looking a person might obtain the coveted post.

“Why, you are young,” said the Squire, “to seek for such a situation. How old are you?”

“I am twenty-five, sir,” was the response, “although perhaps I may not seem to be quite so old.”

“And your testimonials?”

“They are here, sir:”—with which words the applicant advanced towards the table, on which he laid a small packet of papers, at the same time making a respectful bow.

“Your name, I perceive, is Stephen Ashborne,” said Mr. Ponsford; “and you have already filled the situation of bailiff to Sir Norton Bridgeman?”

“Yes, sir. I think you will find Sir Norton's testimonial satisfactory.”

“Yes—I don't know but that it is very satisfactory. I see that Sir Norton says you have merely left his service because he has no further use for you. What does that mean?”

“It means, sir,” replied Stephen Ashborne, “that Sir Norton is going abroad immediately in consequence of the encumbered state of his affairs.”

“Ah! I heard something of the sort the other day,” said Squire Ponsford, “when I was at Southampton. It was quite by accident—I think my information was derived from hearing two gentlemen speaking on the subject in the coffee-room of the hotel—and they said Sir Norton was going all to pieces.”

“I am afraid, sir,” replied Ashborne, “that the poor gentleman will never get over his difficulties. He was an excellent master—and I am profoundly sorry for him. You will see, sir, from those testimonials, that I have served him well

and faithfully. I saw your advertisement in a Dorsetshire paper, and I lost no time in coming to present my testimonials for your inspection.”

There was something frank, almost amounting to independence in Stephen Ashborne's manner; and yet it was courteous and respectful. But there was nothing servile nor cringing in it. It was as much as to say, “There are my testimonials—take me if you like: but if not, I know that with such certificates as those I shall not be long in obtaining such a situation as I require.”

But it was precisely because Stephen Ashborne seemed thus frankly confident and ingeniously self-reliant, amounting as we have said almost to a spirit of independence, that Squire Ponsford thought it necessary to assume a high ground. He therefore said, “Well, my good man, I will think over the matter. You can call to-morrow at noon, and I will give you my answer.”

“I beg your pardon, sir,” responded Ashborne; “but I have copied half-a-dozen advertisements from gentlemen requiring bailiffs in this and the neighbouring counties: and if I have not the honour to please one off-hand, I may succeed in giving satisfaction to another. I cannot afford to let the grass grow under my feet.”

“But I cannot give you an answer all in a moment,” said the Squire somewhat angrily.

“I thank you for your courtesy, sir, in receiving me at this hour,” said Stephen, with the most perfect good-tempered frankness and with unabating respectfulness: and gathering up his papers he was about to retire, with a polite “Good evening, sir. Good evening, Miss.”

“Stop!” said Mr. Ponsford, who was determined not to let slip through his hands an individual who was so excellently recommended. “I like this anxiety on your part to obtain a new situation without delay. Perhaps you are married?”

“No, sir—I am single: but I do not want to remain idle on that account: the truth is, I am almost certain of obtaining the bailiff's place at Hazledon Park: but I thought that if I should be fortunate enough to please you, sir, I would rather stop short at the Firs than go on any farther.”

“Then you are at once prepared to enter on your duties, provided I agree to take you?”

“At once, sir. My trunk is at the inn, and I await your commands.”

Pamela felt pleased that an individual who seemed to be of so frank, honest, and straightforward a character, stood a chance of obtaining the vacant situation; and she again raised her eyes for a moment from her work to glance towards him. He was not tall—but there was something in the manly symmetry of the figure, the full development of the chest and shoulders, and the well-knit limbs, which appeared to give height to his stature; while there was a veritable gentility if not actual gracefulness in the careless ease of the attitude in which he stood near the door, awaiting the Squire's decision. His countenance was handsome—of a bold striking masculine beauty—open and honest in its expression. The hair, of rather a light brown, curled around the fine contour of the head and waved in a luxuriant mass above a high noble brow: the large blue eyes were clear, and seemed as if they were enabled by the conscience of their owner to look

the whole world proudly in the face: the nose was slightly aquiline: the mouth, a trifle too large for the hypercritical perfection of that face, expressed good-nature, determination, and a proper manly pride. There was nothing coarse in the lips, though they were thus somewhat largely chiselled: and when parting, they revealed two rows of magnificent teeth as white as ivory. And yet, above all this young man's appearance of independence, self-reliance, and open-heartedness, there was a certain polish subduing the boldness of the general effect—an unstudied courtesy and a becoming respectfulness.

A little more conversation took place between the Squire and Stephen Ashborne, in respect to pecuniary terms and other details; and the bargain was concluded.

"You can either sleep at the inn," said the Squire, "or you can have your luggage brought up to the house and pass the night here, if you think fit. In this case, you can be introduced to the possession of the bailiff's cottage the first thing in the morning."

As Stephen Ashborne thought that the latter was the plan which the Squire preferred, he said, "I thank you, sir—and I will take up my quarters here for the night; so that I shall be ready to enter on my duties the very first thing in the morning."

The newly appointed bailiff then withdrew; and as the door closed behind him, Mr. Ponsford said, "I like the appearance of that man very much: and if he is not too forward in his manner, and too full of what the common people call a spirit of their own, he will doubtless suit very well."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SQUIRE'S BED-CHAMBER.

It was midnight, when two figures with smock-frocks—or rather long loose gaberdines, concealing their other clothes, made their way stealthily and cautiously through the wood adjoining Squire Ponsford's park. Every now and then they paused to listen—or when they drew near the outskirts of the wood, they peeped forth; and thus from time to time assuring themselves that the coast was clear, they continued their route.

"Hark!" presently said Jack Peppercorn; "isn't that a footstep?"

Tim Gaffney fancied he likewise heard a step: he listened—all seemed to be still: but not being quite certain on the point, he lay down flat upon the ground, applied his ear to the earth, and held his breath as long as he was able.

"It's all right, Jack," he at length said, rising up to his feet again.

They entered the park. The moon was now shining brightly, and they were therefore compelled to proceed circuitously in order to keep entirely within the shade of the trees. They soon drew near the mansion itself; and Tim Gaffney, pointing to two particular windows on the ground floor, said, "That's where the library is."

The plans of the two men were evidently preconcerted and arranged to the veriest details; for they lost not a moment in commencing operations.

There were shutters inside the room; and the window itself was fastened. Gaffney drew forth a glazier's diamond, and made a semicircular cut on the pane through which it was necessary to effect an opening. The piece was removed in a skilful and noiseless manner: the bolt of the fastening was then easily pressed back—and the lower sash of the window was slowly raised.

It now required but three or four pressures of the hand against the shutters to show the burglars exactly where the iron bar stretched across inside; and the blade of a clasp-knife was introduced in the chink formed by two of the folds of the shutter. A peculiar upward jerk lifted the bar from its spring-socket; and in a few moments the shutter was opened. Gaffney and Peppercorn entered; they then shut down the window and closed the shutter again, so that if any one should happen to pass by outside there might be nothing to excite suspicion.

The burglars, having put on black masks, and satisfied themselves that their pistols were convenient to be clutched in case of need, opened the library door and peeped into the hall, whither the beams of the moonlight were penetrating. All was silent; and they now took off their boots, which they secured in the large pockets of their gaberdines. Noiselessly they began the ascent of the staircase: they reached the first landing—and here they paused.

They had made a careful survey of the premises on the preceding evening, when following Ethel thither on the occasion of her arrest. There was an array of five windows in front; and as they were precisely uniform, Gaffney had calculated that they probably belonged to the principal drawing-room, or else that if only the three middle windows pertained to that apartment, the remaining ones must belong respectively to bed-rooms. If so, those would assuredly be the chief chambers of the mansion. Now therefore, on reaching the landing, Gaffney noiselessly opened one leaf of an immense pair of folding-doors which appeared facing the staircase: he peeped in—and he counted five windows in the drawing-room. There were consequently no bed-rooms on that landing, in the front part of the house. But on each side there were doors; and there were long passages branching off, leading into the wings. These doors must belong to the principal bed-chambers. Such was the conviction which struck Gaffney immediately after he had surveyed the interior of the drawing-room.

With the utmost caution he tried the handle of the door on the right hand: it yielded; and having opened the door to the extent of hardly an inch, the foremost burglar listened. In less than a minute he closed the door as gently as he had opened it:—he had ascertained that the room was occupied, but he could tell by the breathing that it was that of a female, or at least of some young person. He now approached the opposite door—namely, that on the left-hand side; and he soon found that it was locked. Applying his ear to the key-hole, he listened with suspended breath; and at the expiration of about a minute he made a significant sign to his companion, as much as to imply that this room was likewise occupied, but that its tenant was a man.

The moon, shining brightly through the staircase window, aided the operations of the burglars.

Gaffney now drew forth a small bottle of oil: he poured some upon a little piece of sponge, by means of which he ejected that oil into the lock,—thus lubricating all its wards. He then took from beneath his gaberdine a peculiar kind of instrument made of very strong wire, and consisting partly of a pair of pincers and partly of a skeleton key. This he introduced into the lock in such a way that it seized upon the key that was already there: it griped it fast—it turned it—not the slightest sound was heard—and the door was unlocked. Then, having withdrawn the skeleton key, Gaffney again listened for upwards of a minute; and still the deep regular breathing which came from within the chamber, assured him that it was a man who occupied it and that he continued to sleep. He also ascertained that a light was burning in the room.

Gaffney now made a sign to Jack Peppercorn, who furnished himself with a pistol in one hand and a clasp-knife in the other. As for Gaffney himself, he merely took out his handkerchief, which he rolled in a peculiar manner to serve a special purpose. He then noiselessly opened the door; a lamp was burning on the toilet-table—its beams revealed the countenance of the sleeper—and this was Squire Ponsford. It was profoundly that he slept: the burglars entered silently with their shoeless feet; and while Gaffney paused an instant to close the door, Jack Peppercorn glided up to the bed, where the ghastly blade of his clasp-knife was at once placed within half an inch of Ponsford's throat. The next moment Gaffney joined his companion there: he leant over the couch—he applied his folded kerchief to the Squire's mouth—he then touched him on the shoulder—and as he opened his eyes with a sudden start, Tim Gaffney, half-dexterously, half-forcibly, drove the kerchief completely in between his teeth, thus gagging him at once. At the same instant Jack Peppercorn laid the cold blade of the knife flat upon the Squire's throat; and Gaffney said in a quick low voice, "Be quiet, or you are a dead man!"

Squire Ponsford was broad awake in a moment, and at the same instant smitten with the hideous consciousness of his position, gagged and powerless in the hands of two ruffians with black masks and white gaberdines. He was a man of nerve and courage: but to be startled up from one's sleep to such a state of things as this, was sufficient to daunt the bravest and to paralyse the energies of the most self-possessed.

"Now I tell you what it is, sir," said Tim Gaffney, at once, "we don't want your life—we don't want to rob you. We will explain our business in due course: but in the first place it will be as well to let you know that we feel we are doing a desperate thing—and so if you try to give any alarm or make a disturbance, you'll be the sufferer."

"This here is a knife," said Jack Peppercorn, making the back of the blade indent itself somewhat into the Squire's neck—a process whereat a hideous cold shudder passed through his entire frame; "and this here is a pistol the butt-end of which would do your work in a jiffy if so be the knife should happen to fail."

"Now look you," said Gaffney, "if you mean to take your salvation oath to hold your tongue and not cry out, just lift up your right hand as a

sign, and then I'll take the gag from your mouth. But if so be you won't agree to no civil terms, then lay still and we shall know what to do."

The Squire raised his right hand; and Gaffney at once withdrew the folded kerchief from between his teeth; but at the same instant the horrid cold steel again pressed upon his throat, and the butt-end of the pistol was tapped against his temple.

"Wait a moment," said Tim Gaffney, "and hold on, mate!"

With these words he drew forth his own clasp-knife; and mounting a chair, cut down the bell-pull which was by the side of the couch.

"For God's sake what do you require of me?" asked Ponsford. "You have declared that you do not want my life? I beseech you to relieve me from suspense!"

"All in good time," responded Tim Gaffney, now seating himself on one side of the bed, while Jack Peppercorn was performing the part of sentinel on the other with his poniard-like knife and his pistol.

"Stand away from me," said the Squire; "stand away from me, I entreat!—and I swear that I will not cry out!"

"We'd rayther not trust you," said Jack Peppercorn: "there's nothing like the precaution of a cold blade and a pistol's butt-end."

Ponsford could scarcely repress a groan, as he said, "Be quick then, and tell me what you require of me, I beseech you!"

"Don't be in a hurry," replied Tim Gaffney; "but lay quite at your ease while I discourse to you a bit. It's a matter of twenty-five year ago that a certain Rupert Pringle left this country through fear of you."

"Ah!" said Ponsford, electrified by an allusion to a matter the revival of which was so utterly unexpected.

"Not too loud!" said Jack Peppercorn; and again the cold blade was ominously pressed against the magistrate's throat.

"Who are you?" he asked, looking up earnestly at Tim Gaffney's masked countenance.

"You cannot be—"

"No, no—I'm not Pringle: that's sure and sartin enough! But don't talk except to answer my questions. Upwards of twenty-five years ago you and Pringle was intimate. Pringle got into difficulties—he wanted money—he was ashamed to tell you of his needs—but in his desperation he forged your name to a bill, which he got discounted at the Dorchester Bank. Wasn't that true?"

"Perfectly true," replied Ponsford. "Pringle was a villain—"

"I dessay he was," answered Gaffney coolly; "I ain't here to defend his character. But let's go on. Pringle hoped to be able to take up the bill before it came due, as he told the bankers some tale to prevent them putting it into circulation—"

"He told them," interjected Ponsford, "that I had done it for his accommodation, and that I would not have the thing known for the world."

"Well, you discovered what he had done," continued Gaffney; "and you found out at the same time that he had seduced your mistress, of whom you were passionately fond."

"That is also true," said Ponsford. "But why this questioning? You seem to know all the facts—"

"Stop a moment!" interrupted Gaffney. "It suits me to go over the story along with you; and if we find ourselves of one accord, so much the better. Don't think I'm going for to defend Rupert Pringle's conduct—that's not my business. Well, as I was sayin', you make the two discoveries at the same time—and something happens to lead Pringle to suspect that you have found out the forgery—but he hasn't the slightest idea that you've discovered the seduction of your mistress;—and so he writes you a letter—he confesses the forgery—he explains his motive—he throws himself upon your mercy—he begs you to take up the bill at once and save him from the gallows. Isn't that part of the tale right?"

"Yes, yes," said Ponsford, who seemed to forget his own ominous condition, with a knife at his throat and a pistol at his temple, in the feeling of bitter burning hatred which was aroused within him by these recollections; so that he literally ground his teeth together.

"Well," continued Gaffney, "you had your false friend completely in your power: but in order to get him more thoroughly under your thumb, you went and took up the bill for fear lest by any means Rupert Pringle should be able to compromise it with the bankers. And then you made use of the weapons you had thus got into your hands, to crush and ruin the poor devil altogether—"

"To punish him," said Ponsford. "Do you come here to avenge him? If so, you will be only aggravating his crimes. I dealt mercifully instead of harshly with him. I might have sent him to the scaffold: but I sent him only into exile! I might have exposed him: I hushed the matter up!"

"No—I am not come to avenge him," said Gaffney: "I've nothing to do with vengeance. You shall see what I am come for, when we've done our confab. So please to answer me a few questions. When you had discovered the forgery, received his letter, and got the forged bill in your possession, you sent for him and reproached him with the seduction of your mistress?"

"I did," answered Ponsford.

"You then told him that if he did not immediately leave the country, you would hand him over to the grasp of justice?"

"I did. It was all the punishment that I chose to wreak upon him."

"Very right," said Gaffney: "you was acting as the judge in the case. Well, and you told him that you'd always keep the letter and the bill—that you'd never part with them documents—so that if ever he should dare to show his face again in his native land, you would to a certainty do your very worst? I think this was it—wasn't it?"

"Right," answered Ponsford. "None but Pringle himself could have told you all this!"

"Don't be too fast," interrupted Gaffney: "we have got a little more to say. Now, the truth is that twenty-five years have passed away since those things happened—you benefited by Pringle's ruin—"

"I?" ejaculated Ponsford.

"Come, not too loud!" said Jack Peppercorn: and again the back of the blade was indented into the throat.

"Yes—you!" continued Tim Gaffney: "for you bought the Southdale Farm at half its value.

Now don't interrupt me!—I know that's a fact, though it seems to be the only thing I've yet said which you ain't very ready to admit. So now to the point."

"Ah!"—and the Squire eagerly awaited the coming explanation.

"If Rupert Pringle lives, and comes for'ard, and throws himself at your feet to beg your pardon for his wrongs towards you—will you forgive him and let him buy back the farm at the price you gave for it?"

A sinister fire flashed from Ponsford's eye, as he at once and with eagerness exclaimed, "Yes—yes—I'll forgive him! I'll give him back his farm! Let him come to me! There, my good fellows! if this is your mission it is ended—and though you said you did not want to rob me, you are welcome to take my purse off the toilet-table there, and go about your business."

"Ah!" said Gaffney, with a laugh, "so you've fallen into the trap—have you?"

"What do you mean?" asked Ponsford, looking bewildered and dismayed.

"It means that you've still got the papers in your possession—I mean the letter and the forged bill; and that was the reason you snapped so eagerly at the question I put—because you would like to get Rupert Pringle into your clutches that you might hand him over to justice as a forger. *That* would be your game!—but it isn't to take place."

"Then what do you mean?" asked the bewildered Squire. "Do you want to murder me?—has Pringle sent you? Good God! have mercy!"

"I tell you again we don't want your life. What the devil is the use of it to us?"

"What use indeed, as long as he remains quiet?" said Jack Peppercorn. "I'd see you hanged before I'd take your life unless I wanted it."

"The fact is," continued Gaffney, "I've been pumping you. If I'd said to you point-blank, '*Have you got them papers still?*' you would have been up to the dodge, and you would have said '*No*' off-hand. But now I know you *have* got them, through your eagerness for Pringle to come and throw himself into your clutches. So now to the point:—and then Gaffney went on to say, emphatically accentuating every syllable, "What we want, and what we've come for, is them papers—the letter and the bill."

"You shall have them," said the Squire. "Let me get up."

"Why, you must take us for fools! You can lay there cozie enough, while you tell me where I can go and find the papers; and that being done, our business with you is done also."

"The papers are in the library," said Ponsford. "There is a bunch of keys on the toilet-table—"

"I have them," said Gaffney. "Go on."

"That small key"—and the Squire pointed to it—"opens a writing-desk, which you will find upon a side-table between the two windows. The papers are in the upper compartment—they are in a sealed envelope, on which the name of Pringle appears."

"Very good," said Gaffney. "Of course, if you're deceiving me, it will be the worse for you; for I'll come back to see my pal here cut your throat with all the pleasure in the world.—Now,



mate, look sharp! He's a knowing old file, this. Don't let him speak a word; and don't so much as look round if you hear the door open, for you'll know it's me coming back. In short, don't give him an instant's advantage."

"Never you be afraid," responded Jack Peppercorn: and the cold blade again touched the throat of the prostrate prisoner.

Tim Gaffney quitted the room as cautiously as he had entered it—descended the stairs—and stole towards the library. For an instant he thought that he heard the creaking of a footstep behind him: he stopped short—all was still—and he advanced. The moonbeams, penetrating through the holes in the shutters, guided him to the table between the windows; and he was just on the very point of putting the key into the lock, when he was suddenly seized from behind and hurled upon the floor, with one strong hand grasping his throat and the other brandishing a

cudgel, with which the victor threatened to beat out his brains if he dared attempt the slightest resistance.

The incident happened so suddenly, and Tim Gaffney was taken so' completely unawares, that he was seized as it were with a consternation and dismay, so that he did not even so much as endeavour to clutch one of his pistols. His conqueror—whom we may as well at once state to have been Stephen Ashborne—had all his own senses completely about him; and suspecting that a hurglar would be well armed, he laid down his cudgel for a moment and passed his hand rapidly over the fellow's upper garments. He felt the pistols with which Gaffney was furnished; and hastily snatching one forth, he declared he would beat in the fellow's brains if he dared offer any resistance. He got hold of the other pistol; and thus having Tim Gaffney completely in his power, he felt in his pockets to ascertain if he had any

additional weapons. He found a clasp-knife, which he took away from the man; and then he demanded, "How did you get hold of the keys with which you were going to open that desk?"

"Whoever you are," said Gaffney, without answering the question, "I could make it better worth your while to help me than to go against me."

"How so?" asked Stephen Ashborne, with a certain sensation of curiosity.

"Perhaps you think I've come to rob the house—"

"It looks uncommonly like it."

"Well then, it's nothing of the sort," pursued Gaffney. "I only want a certain packet of papers, and though you may be surprised to learn what I'm going to tell you, it's the truth that I was coming here to get the papers with the consent of Squire Ponsford himself."

"A likely story!" ejaculated Stephen Ashborne. "But what did you mean by saying you could make it worth my while to help you?"

"First tell me who you are," said Gaffney. "Everybody's price is according to his position."

"Well, I am a farm-bailiff," replied Stephen. "And now what have you to propose?"

"Just you go off to bed and leave me to follow up my own business—and it's a fifty pound note in your pocket."

"The offer is a tempting one," said Ashborne, appearing to reflect. "But what papers are these you are anxious to possess, which are contained in that desk?"

"I've no interest in deceiving you," replied Tim Gaffney; "you shall satisfy yourself. Open that desk, and in the upper compartment you will find a packet in a sealed envelope, on which is written the name of Pringle. Hey! why did you start like that?"

"I thought I heard footsteps," answered Ashborne: "but it was nothing. Tell me why you came here—who sent you—and what you have done to find out where the papers were? Satisfy me, in short, that your tale is true—or I will alarm the house without further delay."

"And if I tell you the truth?" said Gaffney.

"If you tell me the truth, and convince me that it is such, I will let you escape."

"But I have a comrade in the house—"

"Ah!—a comrade?"

"Yes. I see you mean to accept the proposal I have made: but you must let me help my pal out of the difficulty in which he would be placed if I wasn't to go back to him."

"Then where is he?" demanded Ashborne.

"Up in Squire Ponsford's chamber," replied Gaffney, who made sure that the bailiff was going to enter into a treaty with him and accept a bribe for placing the seal of silence upon his lips.

"This is strange—most strange!" muttered Ashborne to himself. "But what is your comrade doing in Mr. Ponsford's chamber?"

"Very much the same thing that you are doing to me," replied Gaffney,—“keeping the Squire in check till such time as it might suit us to let his worship be in peace and take our own departure.”

"Now tell me," said Ashborne, in a determined tone,—“who engaged, hired, or bribed you to enter the house for the purpose of obtaining these papers?"

"Must you know all these particulars?" said Gaffney.

"To be sure! I must know everything! If I fall into your plot I must ascertain the depth of it, so that I may calculate how to measure the amount of profit that ought to come to myself. Be quick!—speak! Time is passing!"

"It is a gentleman in London that hired us," replied Tim Gaffney.

"His name?" quickly demanded Ashborne.

"Well, I don't know it. Perhaps it's Pringle himself for anything that I can tell to the contrary."

"This is ridiculous!" ejaculated Ashborne.

"You pretend not to know his name—"

"It's the truth," answered Gaffney: "I don't know it—or yet where he lives—"

"Then you must have an appointment with him—or you have the means of communication with him?"

"As a matter of course," replied Gaffney.

"Come, I see you want to be let farther into the business than I at first calculated—"

"Yes—such is my intention," ejaculated Stephen Ashborne: "See here! Move not hand or foot—or I'll shoot you as I would a dog!"

The preceding colloquy between the bailiff and the burglar had taken place far more rapidly than we could detail it; and throughout the discourse the former had continued to keep his knee upon the latter's chest, and one hand at his throat, while the other held a pistol menacingly towards his forehead; so that the villain was completely powerless. Ashborne now arose from off the prostrate one; but he maintained the pistol pointed down towards him; and the moonbeams were sufficiently bright to show Gaffney the proceedings of his conqueror. The latter took up the bunch of keys which had fallen from the burglar's hand; and he demanded which key opened the desk.

"The small one," replied Gaffney.

The desk was accordingly opened; and in the upper compartment Stephen Ashborne found the sealed packet, with the name of Pringle written upon the envelope.

"Tis well!" he muttered to himself; while it struck Tim Gaffney, as he gazed up from his recumbent position on the floor, that a strange expression passed over the handsome countenance of the bailiff, as the moonbeams penetrating through the holes in the shutters played upon his features.

"Now," continued Ashborne, securing the document in the inside breast-pocket of his coat, and buttoning up the garment over his chest, "I shall leave you to get out of the premises, you and your companion, as best you can. Ah! I forgot to observe that I merely hold this document as a trustee for the person who employed you, be his real name Pringle or anything else; and whenever that person shall apply to me for the packet, I will give it up to him."

Tim Gaffney looked astounded as he still lay upon the floor, not daring to move, inasmuch as the pistol was still ominously pointed towards him.

"Get up," said Ashborne; "go and rejoin your companion, and get out of the house as quick as ever you can. Perhaps the Squire may have his reasons for not giving you into custody on the very first occasion that he shall next fall in with

you. But I shall stand upon no such scruples, if you disobey me in respect to the injunctions I am about to give. These are simply that you say nothing to the Squire of your meeting with me, nor of the fact that you have failed to obtain possession of this sealed packet. Not that I should care very much if you did reveal these facts," added Ashborne carelessly, "though perhaps it would better please me that you should not."

While the bailiff was thus speaking, Tim Gaffney had raised himself up from the floor; and he made a rapid calculation of all the chances for or against the success of a sudden attack upon his opponent. But he had lost all his weapons; and experience had moreover shown him that he was inferior in strength to the other. He therefore abandoned the idea: but he said sullenly, "You think to get all the reward for the delivering up of that packet of papers to the person who wants to get hold of them?"

"You are mistaken," replied the bailiff coolly: "I want no reward at all. Make your own bargain with the person—get out of him all you can—all I require is that he shall apply to me for the papers."

"Ah, that's another thing altogether!" said Tim Gaffney, to whom the entire proceeding was replete with mystery. "If you hold to that bargain, I'll bind myself on the other hand to say nothing to the Squire about you and me meeting here and your having got hold of the packet."

"Let it be a bargain," said Stephen Ashborne.

"But, Ah! one word! How do you intend to effect your departure without doing any violence to the Squire? for it seems to me that if you have set your comrade to keep watch over him—"

"I know what you mean," interrupted Gaffney: "but you needn't be afraid—we ain't a-going to silence him by knocking him over the head. A little chloroform does it—"

"Enough!" said the bailiff: "I consent to this arrangement. And now depart. But, Ah! take the bunch of keys with you to the Squire's chamber."

Tim Gaffney stole forth from the library, ascended the stairs, and reached the Squire's room, where he found the aspect of affairs precisely the same as when he had quitted the apartment a quarter of an hour back. There lay the Squire in his couch—and there was Jack Peppercorn bending over him with a clasp-knife at his throat.

"What a deuce of a time you've been!" said Jack impatiently.

"I thought I heard a noise in the house," replied Tim; "and so I was obliged to lay quiet for a few minutes."

He now drew forth a very small phial from his waistcoat-pocket: he poured some of the contents upon his handkerchief—which he then applied to the Squire's nostrils. The effect was almost instantaneous—Mr. Ponsford became insensible—and the two burglars speedily made their exit from the premises.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DEN.

We must now return to the young Duchess, whom we left at the moment when on issuing

from Miss Hartland's house, she was suddenly caught round the waist by the strong arms of a man and thrust into a cab,—the fellow following her into the vehicle, which immediately drove away at a rapid rate. It was all the work of an instant: the street was one that was little frequented by passengers—the dusk was closing in—and the countenance of the Duchess was so muffled in the thick folds of her veil that even the ejaculation of surprise and alarm to which she at once gave vent when thus seized upon, was stifled, or at least so far subdued as to prove unavailing. The windows of the cab were closed; and scarcely had the Duchess time to glance towards the fellow who took his seat opposite to her, when he produced a pistol, holding it by the barrel, and saying at the same time, "If you make any noise I shall be obliged to silence you with a touch of the butt-end of this here barker."

The patrician lady shuddered; and to the very depths of her whole being did she recoil, as much from the coarse language of the ruffian as from the threats which it conveyed. Through the folds of her veil she could perceive that he was an ill-looking fellow, with a dark complexion—not tall, but stoutly built—and dressed in a suit of black. She soon recovered a sufficient degree of self-possession to enable her to say, "You surely cannot suppose that I shall be overawed by your shocking threats. You would therefore do well to let me alight at once, ere I dash my hand through the window and cry out for assistance."

"It's of no use, ma'am, for you to come this gammon with me," said the fellow. "My orders is positive. I'm to take you to a certain place; and if so be you don't come by fair means, you shall by foul."

The Duchess, who had now completely recovered her self-possession, was half inclined to make one desperate clutch at the pistol, and then while struggling with the fellow, shriek out for assistance: but she feared lest she might experience some violent treatment at his hands—and a glance flung through the window showed her that the cab was proceeding amidst the narrow streets of that low neighbourhood whose very aspect appeared inimical to the idea that succour could be readily obtained. Suddenly an idea struck her; and she said, "Depend upon it you have made a mistake. For whom do you take me?"

"Now I tell you what it is, ma'am," replied the man with dogged insolence; "I know that women is up to all sorts of tricks, but you won't succeed in humbugging me. So it's of no use your saying any more. I won't hear, and I won't answer. I'm deaf and I'm dumb!"

The Duchess was just upon the point of proclaiming that if she had been taken for Made-moiselle Imogene a tremendous error had been committed, when she thought to herself, "In this case the ruffian may insist on seeing my face—and then he may perhaps recognise me!"

Her next idea was to offer him a liberal reward to let her go: but then she said to herself, "If I display the contents of my purse, he may perhaps murder me! I must try the former plan at any risk!"—then at the expiration of a minute, during which she again reflected profoundly, she said, "Perhaps you took me for the equestrian actress—?"

"It's no use, ma'am! it's no use!" interrupted the fellow in a savage tone. "I know what I'm about—and you'd better hold your tongue."

"Do not think that because I am a woman I am afraid," said the Duchess, making a display of all the fortitude which she could possibly command. "A single scream sent pealing from my lips would raise the neighbourhood!"

"You'd better try it. It would save me a world of trouble—I should just give you one knock over the head—and then you wouldn't speak another word before we reached the place that I'm to take you to."

"Twenty guineas if you let me go!" said the Duchess, now in her desperation offering a reward and hazarding a sum which might be far too much and far too little, she knew not which.

"Twenty guineas?"—and the man laughed with insolent irony.

"Does he think that I am Imogen and that I cannot possess such a sum?" asked the Duchess of herself: "or is he so well bribed by his employers, whoever they may be, that he scorns the puny reward I have offered?"

Indeed the Duchess was perfectly bewildered how to act; and as she surveyed the fellow's sinister expression of countenance, as he sat opposite to her, evidently watching her with the keenest vigilance—holding the pistol in a manner which showed his readiness to use it in case of necessity,—then, as she glanced right and left through the windows, and saw that she was still being borne rapidly through that maze of vile narrow obscure streets,—and as she reflected that the driver of the vehicle was no doubt an accomplice in the plot, whatever its nature and object might be,—a cold terror crept over her and paralysed her energies.

Some few minutes elapsed in silence; and then the vehicle suddenly drew up in front of a house in one of the obscure and half-deserted streets whereof we have been speaking. That house was larger than the rest, and by its size and appearance seemed to have been a habitation snatched up from some street of a better class, carried off bodily, and then dropped down on the spot where we now find it.

The instant the cab stopped, the front door of the house opened. First a young female came forth—then an elderly woman—and then a man of an appearance as sinister as the individual who was with the Duchess in the vehicle. The young female was about sixteen, very slight and pale, with her dark hair arranged in plain bands, and with a simple and neat attire. The elderly woman was of enormous size: her head, naturally large, seemed to be set upon her shoulders without the intermediary of any neck; and as she had a voluminous double chin, the flabby flesh thereof actually rested upon the vast and revolting exuberance of the bust. Yet she was gaily apparelled; and she had a smirking, insolent, leering air, as she rubbed her hands with satisfaction when coming forth from her dwelling. The man has been sufficiently described as an ill-looking person, very much resembling the individual who had carried off the Duchess: for indeed they were brothers.

"Now, ma'am," said the person inside the cab, "you will be so good as to step out."

Then quick as the eye can wink, he threw a

large silk pocket-handkerchief over her head, dexterously drawing it across her mouth, crushing the plain straw bonnet that she wore, and effectually gagging her for the brief period that sufficed for conveying her forcibly into the house. Yes—such was the mode by which she was borne into the dwelling; for she resisted desperately and strove to cry out; but it was all the work of a few instants, the other man and the elderly woman helping the wretch who had been seated with her in the cab. As for the pale-faced girl,—young though she were, there was an expression of hardened depravity upon her countenance, so that it did not appear as if she was very likely to sympathize with the unfortunate lady who was being thus carried into that den of infamy. A couple of guineas were thrust into the hands of the cabman, who nodded significantly to the group and then instantaneously drove away.

The Duchess was borne into a back room on the ground floor: she was placed in a chair—the handkerchief was taken from off her head—and the two men and the pale-faced girl retiring, the elderly woman remained alone with her Grace.

"Now, my pretty creature," she said, in a voice that was rendered rough and hoarse by drinking and dissipation, "it's of no manner of use for you to give yourself any airs. There will be some one here presently who'll tell you why all this has happened. Don't waste your breath by screaming or crying out, because it won't do any good; and don't think of jumping out of the window, because the back-yard is a dozen feet lower than the level of the street, and so you'll only get broken bones for your trouble."

Having thus spoken, the woman turned and quitted the room, locking the door behind her.

Two candles were burning on the table; and the instant she found herself alone, the Duchess started up, flung back her veil, and glanced hastily around. It was a parlour in which she found herself, tolerably well furnished, but with a visible air of dirt, as if the place were seldom dusted, and as if it were also the frequent scene of orgies; for the table-cover and the carpet showed many wine-stains, and there were three or four ends of cigars in the grate. The heart of the patrician lady heaved at the aspect of the place; and she mentally ejaculated, "Good God! that I who live in mansions, should be brought to such a den as this!"

She sank down upon the seat almost in despair; but soon recovering a certain degree of self-possession, she exclaimed, "Who could have done this? who on the face of the earth could have perpetrated this outrage? However, he will be here presently—and verily I am curious to know who can be the author of the infamy! Surely, surely I must have been mistaken for Imogen, unless indeed any evil-disposed person had watched and dogged me, and availed himself of that opportunity to carry out his nefarious design."

Here we must leave the Duchess in a state of completest perplexity, while we shift the scene.

It was a West-End hotel, and in a private apartment two gentlemen were dining. One was Sir Abel Kingston; the other was Mr. Sylvester Casey. The Baronet was dressed with his usual elegance: the garments, faultlessly cut, set off his slender form to all the advantage of its well-knit proportions. As he lounged back in his

chair with an easy fashionable languor, he sipped his claret from a glass which he held in one hand, while the other hand, drooping over the arm of that chair, dangled a perfumed cambric kerchief. In strong contrast with his elegant appearance, was that of Sylvester Casey. He was dressed in what he called evening costume:—that is to say, a black coat with a velvet collar and silk facings, a blue neck-tie so fastened that the ends pointed out horizontally at great length towards the shoulders, a shirt with the bosom very full and wonderfully embroidered, and with studs about the size of shillings—a flaring silk waistcoat, over which two or three gold chains festooned—black pantaloons, and patent leather boots. He wore half-a-dozen rings upon a pair of hands which looked as if they would have been all the better for a little more soap and a little less jewellery. He had been drinking a great deal of wine; his face was very red; and his large green eyes, looking as if they were hoiled gooseberries, stood out staringly from their sockets. Always full of pretension in his sober moods, he was boastful and full of braggadocio when in his cups.

The reader may be well assured that so exquisite a gentleman as Sir Abel Kingston would not have condescended for a single instant to remain in the society of such a vulgar individual as Sylvester Casey, if he had not some very good reasons of his own: but he had actually invited the usurer's son to dine with him at this West-End hotel—though it certainly cost Sir Abel little, or we ought rather to say *nothing* to entertain him, inasmuch as he had credit at the establishment—and though he had a grand idea of ordering dinners, he had not the slightest notion of paying for them.

"Well then, my dear Casey," said the Baronet, as he sipped his claret, "you will just drop a hint to your father that he would do well to wait a little while longer and not send me those threatening letters. He knows very well that I have got a little matter in hand—an affair of gallantry—that will no doubt turn out well—though, by the bye, he has't dropped a word about *that* in your hearing; and that's a very kind and honourable of him."

"Don't be afraid, old fellow," cried Sylvester familiarly: "I'll make things all right with the governor—I'll take him when he's in the humour. No one knows how to manage him better than I do. Deuced good claret, this, Kingston?"

"Yes—passable. Well then, I may trust to you—"

"Right as a trivet, my boy! Hang the fellow that wouldn't do anything for a friend! I always stick to a friend like a brick. That's my rule."

"And a very good one too," said the Baronet. "And therefore you'll join me in that little note of hand to-morrow—only for a cool thousand, you know—if a mere matter of form on your part—"

"Oh, well, we shall see about it," interjected Sylvester, who was not yet quite intoxicated enough to give the required promise. "By the bye, talking about affairs of gallantry, I've got something that's most likely to come off this evening. I told you, you know, that if I dined with you, old boy, it must be at six o'clock—for that I should most likely have to cut off at about nine."

"Well, and how will you know whether you are to go or not?" asked the Baronet.

"I'm so sure of it that I mean to go," replied Sylvester. "There's no failure in any plan of mine, I can tell you! Deuce a bit! And by Jove, won't the world talk! My eyes, what a sensation there'll be! Every one will be saying, 'What a lucky dog that young Casey is!' And yet it isn't luck in these matters," he added affectedly, as he thrust his fingers through his horrible hair: "it's good looks."

"No doubt of it," said the Baronet, with a short cough. "Good looks and a certain appearance."

"Yes—a certain appearance," added Sylvester, casting a complacent glance over his own person.

"But about this fair one of your's?"

"Ah! won't you be surprised when you know it! Why, every one admires her—and *you* as much as anybody."

"I?" said the Baronet with a slight start; and then he thought to himself, "Good heaven! this conceited wretch never can be lifting his impudent eyes towards the Duchess! Pshaw! he does not even know her!"

"Yes, old fellow," continued Sylvester, "you'll envy me as much as any man, I can tell you!"

"The deuce!" thought Sir Abel: "this is really getting closer and closer to the point!—Do I, then, know her?"

Sylvester winked his eye with a vulgar familiar significance; and then said, "Come, come, it won't do to pump one too close!"

"May I guess it if I can?" asked the Baronet.

"Guess if you like," replied Sylvester. "But I'll just give you a hint and no more. The stage!"

Again Sir Abel started as he thought within himself, "Ah! the Duchess was once upon the stage!"

Sylvester looked knowingly at him; and again winking his eye with a vulgar familiarity, he said, "Do you begin to twig?"

"You don't mean me to understand," asked the Baronet, endeavouring to be cool, "that you allude to a certain brilliant creature—"

"By Jove, I think you are getting pretty near the mark!" cried Sylvester. "Don't you think I am to be envied?"

"But you don't know her!" exclaimed Sir Abel: "or if you do, it can only have been for a very few days—for I remember your telling me—"

"Well, and what if I don't know her to speak to?" proceeded Casey: "don't you think there are other means of getting at one of the fair sex and ending by having an assignation made?"

"By God!" ejaculated Sir Abel, clenching his fist and striking his knuckles with such force on the table that all the decanters, glasses, and dessert-dishes appeared as if they were suddenly seized with St. Vitus's dance: "I will only believe what I see!"

"I'll make you a bet upon it," said young Casey, who was fond of being thought a sporting character, and liked very much to make bets when he knew he was sure to win.

"Done!" cried the Baronet. "Yes, done! for any amount you like!"

"A hundred guineas," suggested Sylvester eagerly.

"With all my heart!" exclaimed the Baronet, springing up to his feet. "But how shall we decide it?"

"You shall go with me at once, and I'll show you the splendid creature anxiously waiting to receive me in her arms."

"Insufferable coxcomb!" muttered Sir Abel, as he suddenly turned aside to conceal the rage that was rendering his countenance white and his lips ashy. "But good heaven! is this possible? the brilliant Duchess stoop to such a jackanapes as this!"—and he paced the room in a hurried and agitated manner.

"Why, what the deuce ails you, old fellow?" asked Sylvester. "It really looks as if you yourself had been hankering after the Beauty, and that you are already envious and jealous of me on account of my good luck."

"When shall we set out? and where are we to go?" demanded Sir Abel, without heeding Sylvester's observations.

"We'll set out at once: but as to the place where we are to go to, I shan't tell you until we've settled the terms on which the business is to be conducted."

"Proceed," said Kingston, with assumed composure, but with a veritable inward burning impatience.

"Now, though I want to show you, old fellow," continued Casey, "that I'm no idle boaster—and though I should also very much like to win your money, yet of course I don't want to insult the fair one's feelings, and she musn't think I'm making a show of her."

"Let me catch but one glimpse of her," said the Baronet; "let me obtain a single glance at her countenance, either through a key-hole or a window, or during the opening or shutting of a door—and I will acknowledge myself fairly beaten—I will pay you the wager even though I sell the last two horses that remain to me—and I will moreover look upon you henceforth as one of the cleverest, most fascinating and irresistible of men! In short, I shall regard you as a veritable Adonis, and contemptuously look upon those fellows whom I have hitherto thought very handsome, as nothing less than monsters and vulgarians."

There was a bitter irony in the concluding part of this speech: but Sylvester did not perceive it; his self-conceit blinded him. He therefore smiled with such a coxcombical complacency that the Baronet could scarcely resist the inclination to knock him down.

"You chaps in the Guards," he said, "used to think you could carry everything before you: but some of us civilians are teaching you different. Now you shall come along with me: and mind! when by some means or another I've satisfied you that it's all as right as a trivet, you'll just be so good as to take yourself off at once and leave me to enjoy the fruits of my conquest."

"That is a bargain," said Sir Abel. "Have you any other conditions to dictate?"

"None," replied Sylvester.

"But I have something more to say on my own account," resumed the Baronet. "I've told you what I shall think of you if you satisfy me that your statement is correct and that you are really and truly favoured in this instance. But if on the other hand I find that you have deceived me, I shall expose you as a blackguard and a

scoundrel—yes, regardless of all consequences that may arise from provoking your father's anger!"

"Come, come, old fellow," interrupted Sylvester, colouring up to the very roots of his red hair, "this isn't the right sort of thing—you're coming it a little too strong—"

"True, my dear fellow! true!" said the Baronet, with a peculiar smile. "I had no right to address you in such language. Forgive me. Here is my hand."

"Oh! it's all right," said young Casey; "there's no ill-will betwixt you and me. Only when you talk in that style, you know, it was putting my monkey up—and I'm a devil of a fellow if I once get into a passion. However, you and I don't want it to get into the newspapers that there's been 'an affair of honour in high life'—Sir Abel Kingston, Captain in the Guards'—Sylvester Casey, Esquire—and all that sort of thing."

"No, no!" interjected the Baronet with a smile of passing irony and contempt: "there is not much fear of that. But now let us set off."

The two gentlemen left the hotel and took their seats in a cab, which at once drove away, Sylvester simply saying to the driver, "Cut over Westminster Bridge, and then I'll tell you where to go to."

The Baronet now studiously avoided a topic which he felt he could not approach without experiencing an almost irresistible inclination to inflict personal chastisement on his companion. For through Sir Abel's mind was floating a species of logic to the following effect:—"If the young jackanapes is deceiving me, as a matter of course he deserves a sound thrashing: and if on the other hand by any inconceivable combination of circumstances he is telling me the truth, it is equally my duty to trounce him within an inch of his life, for having outrivalled me. But we shall see."

When the cab had entered upon the Westminster Road, Sylvester presently bawled out, "To the right!"—and then, as it turned into the maze of narrow streets, lanes, and alleys composing all that part of Lambeth, Sir Abel thought to himself, "The fellow is lying after all! As if she would ever come into such a neighbourhood as this!"

The cab rolled on; Sylvester presently leant half-way out of the window, and gave some final instructions to the driver. The Baronet continued to discourse on indifferent topics; but his irritation kept on increasing on finding that there was a certain flippant and impertinent accent of confidence—a sort of overweening superciliousness, in Sylvester's voice.

At length the cab drew up at the door of a house in one of those obscure wretched streets; and Sylvester, springing out of the vehicle, said "Now, old fellow, we are here!"

He rushed into the house; and meeting the elderly woman in the passage, he hastily demanded in a whisper, "Is it all right, Mother Grills?"

"All right," was the answer. "But who is your friend?"

"Not a word about the trick! not a syllable!" said Sylvester quickly. "He must think she came of her own accord! There's a bet on it 'twixt me and Sir Abel. You twig?"

Mrs. Grills nodded significantly to young Casey; and at this moment Sir Abel Kingston entered the passage. The pale-faced girl shut the front door; and Mrs. Grills begged the two gentlemen to step into the front parlour,—observing that “she was all alone there, for that Mr. Grills and his brother Jasper were just taking their quiet glass and pipe together in the kitchen down stairs.”

“She’s here, old chap!” said Sylvester to the Baronet, the moment they entered that parlour.

Sir Abel was on the point of thundering forth the words, “You lie! It is impossible!”—but he restrained himself, and said with assumed composure, “Well, if so, I congratulate you. But now for the proof?”

“You post yourself in the passage,” said Sylvester, after a brief exchange of whispered observations aside with Mrs. Grills, “in such a way that you can see into the room; and the old woman here will just step in to ask the sweet creature if she wants anything. Mind now! it will only be the work of a moment—and you must keep yourself as much in the shade as possible. If she does happen to catch a glimpse of you, I shall tell her presently that it was me she saw in the passage.”

“Good,” said the Baronet. “And now let it be done at once.”

Mrs. Grills led the way into the passage; and she posted the Baronet in an angle formed by a turning contrived for the arrangements of the staircase. He was there completely in the shade, even when the light should stream forth from the room which the woman was about to enter. Sylvester Casey remained on the threshold of the front parlour, watching with some little anxiety, but yet with more confidence, the proceeding which he hoped would establish him in the Baronet’s estimation as the most successful young *roué* about town. As for Sir Abel himself, he was utterly bewildered what to think; for on the one hand it seemed to be most stupendously preposterous to suppose that the brilliant Duchess of Ardeleigh could have come to such a den of iniquity as this—while on the other hand it was difficult to comprehend how or why Sylvester should be carrying on a delusion and a farce to such an extreme point.

All uncertainty on Sir Abel’s part was however soon destined to be put an end to, for Mrs. Grills now opened the door of the back parlour; and there, sure enough! rising up from a chair near the table, in a plain dress, and with her veil thrown back, was the brilliant Duchess of Ardeleigh!

Mrs. Grills immediately closed the door: but the Baronet had seen enough. Rage—fury—madness took possession of his brain. Springing forward like a bounding tiger, or an unleashed hound, along the passage, he tore open the front door, seized upon Sylvester Casey, and with one tremendous kick sent him flying across the threshold into the street. He then banged the door violently, and rushed towards the room wherein he had caught that momentary glimpse of the brilliant Duchess. Mrs. Grills was at the instant coming out; and she exclaimed in an angry voice, “Hey day! what does all this row mean?—Grills! Jasper!” she shouted, evidently summoning her husband and brother-in-law from

the lower region; “are you asleep down there?”

“Hold your tongue, beldame! and let me pass!” cried the Baronet, who was labouring under a fearful state of excitement:

“Oh, if all you want is to go into this room,” said Mrs. Grills, suddenly pretending to soften down, “I’m sure I’ve no objection. As well you, sir, as any other!”

She accordingly stood aside: Sir Abel Kingston burst into the back parlour—but he stopped suddenly short, literally transfixed with amazement: he found no one there!

“Where is the lady whom I saw here scarcely three minutes back?” he demanded, suddenly recovering his self-possession.

“What do I know about ladies?” said Mrs. Grills, putting her hands upon her hips and looking at the Baronet with an insolent air of defiance. “It’s for the gentlemen to take care of the ladies, and not for me!”

The Baronet strode up to a cupboard—tore open the door—but beheld no one. He looked under a sofa and under the table; and then hastening to the window, he flung up the sash, and was just leaping upon the sill, when the woman called out, “Take care, you lunatic! there’s a fall of a dozen feet beneath the winder!”

A glance flung downward showed Sir Abel that the woman had spoken truly; and he stepped back into the room, exclaiming, “Twenty guineas if you’ll tell me what has become of her!”

Meanwhile there was a violent and continued knocking at the front door; and Mrs. Grills gave a hasty instruction to her husband and his brother Jasper, who had just emerged from the premises below. They seized upon the Baronet; and Mrs. Grills also lent her assistance. Despite his struggles, his threats and imprecations, they carried him to the front-door, which the pale-faced girl at once opened. Sylvester Casey, who had been thundering with the knocker for the last two minutes, was about to rush furiously in when the form of the Baronet was literally thrown at him, and the two rolled together in the street.

The front door was banged—a chain might have been heard to be fastening inside—then in the twinkling of an eye every light was extinguished in the habitation—and an up-stairs window being thrown open, the head of Mrs. Grills, decorated with a great white nightcap, was thrust out, her hoarse voice exclaiming, “Get along with you, you drunken blackguards! What do you mean by kicking up this row at the door of a respectable house? Police! police!”

“Come quick, you fool!” cried the Baronet to Sylvester Casey, who was whimpering and crying out that he had been infamously treated: but he now thought fit to follow Sir Abel Kingston in the retreat which he rapidly beat from the neighbourhood of the house where such singular adventures had taken place.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BARONET AND SYLVESTER.

We left Imogen locked in the arms of Launcelet Osborne, when, after the departure of the Duchess,

he had sworn to her in the most enthusiastic language that he loved her more than life. With what fervour did he strain her to his breast! with what fondness did she cling with her arms about his neck! How happy were they at that moment! Everything was forgotten on the part of Launcelot except that he might love her! everything on the part of Imogen except the sweet knowledge of being thoroughly and completely beloved by him!

"And now, dearest Imogen," said Launcelot, at length, "go and fetch that pretty little child: for as you love me, so will I love her—and since she cannot look up to her own parents for affectionate care, she shall receive it from us!"

It was impossible that Imogen's warm heart could have received a greater proof of Launcelot's love than this which he was now affording her. Of her own accord she threw her superbly modelled arms again about his neck—she pressed him to her bosom—she kissed his lips unasked. Then she glided from the room, her exquisitely shaped feet scarcely seeming to touch the carpet on which they moved so glancingly; and up the staircase she bounded. Though she was only absent half a minute, yet it was with the fondest impatience that Launcelot awaited her return; for he longed to show all possible kindness towards the child whom his Imogen loved so tenderly. He felt that she must be a young woman of a wonderful excellence of heart that she had displayed so much mingled devotedness and self-sacrifice for the sake of that child, and that she was therefore one of those rare sterling creatures who possess qualities even more attractive and endearing than their physical beauty.

Imogen returned to the parlour with little Annie in her arms; and then the child wondered why the gentleman should take her upon his lap and caress and fondle her so: but she smiled with the innocent sweetness of infantile gratitude—and then she seated herself in perfect happiness at the feet of the lovers, as they sat half-embraced upon the sofa.

All of a sudden Imogen started up—glanced at her watch which lay upon the table—and then pressing her beautiful white hands against Launcelot's cheeks, she said, "I must leave you, dearest! I must fly to the theatre! I am already late."

"Must you go?" he asked, with a look of mingled fondness and regret.

"Oh, yes! it is absolutely necessary! And I am so happy—and my heart is so light! Oh! my performance will be perfectly brilliant this evening!"—and with an ingenious smile she displayed her teeth of dazzling whiteness, while her pure fragrant breath fanned his cheek.

"Well, you must go, dear Imogen—yes, you must go for the present!" said Launcelot. "But you must soon give up this life!"

She again threw herself into his arms—they embraced tenderly—and he took his departure; for with the natural delicacy of his feelings, he understood that Imogen would stand a chance of being compromised if he were to escort her to the theatre.

The Star of the equestrian circus was indeed only just in time to take her part in the performances; and never had she appeared more ravishingly beautiful!—never had she ridden the horses

with greater spirit! There was all the suppleness of the Bayadere in the form which was so striking and brilliant: her eyes shone like stars; and her teeth appeared to be like orient pearls between the parting roses of her lips. The applause she elicited was, if possible, more enthusiastic than ever.

Launcelot was not there to behold her. He had hastened home, that he might indulge in the luxury of his own thoughts—that he might abandon himself to the delicious ideas which were now floating in his mind—that he might bask in that roseate flood of lustre which is shed upon the heart from the sun of fancy's own-created heaven!

Let us now return to Sir Abel Kingston and Mr. Sylvester Casey, whom we left as they were hurrying along the street where Mrs. Grills' habitation was situated, and fearing that the hoarse voice of that dame should bring the police into the neighbourhood. At length they relaxed the celerity of their pace; and then Sylvester said sulkily, "Now, Sir Abel, what the devil does all this mean? You—you—owe me explanations. I—I—am in a deuce of a rage!"

"One word first of all!" interjected the Baronet, stopping short and catching hold of Sylvester forcibly by the wrist. "There is a mystery in all this—"

"I should think there is," said Sylvester surlily: "so perhaps you'll explain why the deuce you kicked me out into the street?"

"Where is the letter," demanded the Baronet, "in which the assignation was made?"

"Letter? Oh, ah! But that's of no consequence to you," continued Sylvester, who for an instant was thrown off his guard, he having forgotten the tale he had told Sir Abel at the hotel. "You owe me the bet—and you owe me an apology too—"

"Apology!" echoed the Baronet with disdain.

"Come, come—that's too good," said Sylvester, affecting to be courageous and spirited. "You have used me shameful! What the deuce must Imogen think—"

"Imogen?" echoed the Baronet with a quick start of surprise.

"Why, yes—that is her name—isn't it? But what is the matter with you now?"

"Nothing, nothing," said the Baronet, infinitely relieved in one sense, for he saw that some tremendous mistake must have been committed—but nevertheless getting more and more bewildered as if he were floundering farther and farther into a perfect morass of perplexities. "Now, do tell me, my dear fellow," he continued, addressing Sylvester in a coaxing tone of familiarity, "how was all this managed? I really have a reason for asking?"

"Well, do you acknowledge that you have lost your bet?" demanded young Casey.

"Let us consider that the bet is off altogether," said the Baronet. "I will tell you why. Of course we were speaking all the time of Mademoiselle Imogen—were we not?"

"Of course we were," replied Sylvester. "Who else could we have been talking of?"

"No one, certainly. We understood each other all along—and it was that which made me so savage when on looking into the back parlour, I saw it was not Imogen at all!"



SELINA.

"Not Imogen?" ejaculated Sylvester in astonishment. "Come, come, this won't do——"

"On my soul I am telling you the truth!" rejoined Sir Abel. "Besides, you can soon satisfy yourself; for we will go straight to the theatre and see whether Mademoiselle Imogene performs this evening."

"To be sure! that's the very ticket! But how the deuce could such a mistake have happened?"

"Well, it *has* happened. Of this you may be assured. The moment I caught sight of the face of the female who was in that back parlour——"

"Did you know her?" demanded Sylvester eagerly.

"Oh, no: I never before saw her in my life. And now tell me how your proceedings were managed, so that we may fathom, if possible, the mystery of so much confusion?"

"Why, the truth is," said Sylvester, who, now that his project had completely failed, saw the necessity of endeavouring to gloss over the ridiculous predicament in which it had placed him as a discomfited braggart,— "I have long had a fancy for Mademoiselle Imogene; and between you and me I have got tired of Alice—she is so dreadfully extravagant! Well, I am not a sort of fellow to go running after girls and making love to them—I hate showing that I am spooney

upon them—it makes them take all sorts of advantage of one. I like to go in and conquer at once. So having made up my mind in the present case, I went to those Grills—I've known them for some time—very useful people they are——”

“No doubt. Proceed.”

“Well, I gave them their instructions. I have learnt, you see, Imogen's habits of Alice Denton, who is her intimate friend: I therefore knew that when she had dressed for the theatre in the evening—which she always does at her own lodgings—she wraps herself up in a great long mantle, puts on a bonnet with a thick veil——”

“Ah, ha! I begin to comprehend,” said the Baronet. “What a daring fellow you are, Sylvester!”—and Sir Abel pretended to chuckle with the most good-natured familiarity, because he saw it was only by such means he could extract the real truth from the self-sufficient jackanapes. “You had her carried off by force—eh?”

“Well, that's the history of the whole proceeding,” said young Casey. “But, I suppose, from what you tell me, that they must by some means or another have got hold of the wrong person?”

“That they assuredly did,” answered the Baronet. “And now what do you think of yourself for having endeavoured to persuade me that it was an assignation made by Imogen herself?”

“Oh, well! people do draw the long bow a little in matters of love,” laughed Sylvester.

“Ah! but the bet that you sought to win of me under such circumstances?” interjected Sir Abel.

“All fair likewise:—but young Casey's wonted assurance now forsook him somewhat, for he could not conceal from himself that Kingston thoroughly saw through his mean, dirty, pitiful behaviour.

“I do not think it *was* all fair,” said the Baronet coldly; “and the business, if made public, would rebound, Mr. Casey, but little to your credit. Indeed you would be regularly cut by everybody; and instead of becoming a regular fashionable gentleman about town—as I know you wish to be thought——”

“Oh, but my dear fellow,” said Sylvester, thoroughly frightened and bitterly humiliated, “I thought the business was entirely between you and me?”

“So it is for the present. Ah! by the bye, you will just send me your acceptance, to-morrow morning, to that little bill for a thousand pounds which I asked you for; and then we need not talk any more, you know, of the adventures of this evening.”

Sylvester made a horrid grimace: but he faltered out an affirmative; and in a few minutes the door of Astley's theatre was reached. The two gentlemen entered; but while they were ascending the staircase to the boxes, their ears caught the tremendous applause which they knew full well could only be elicited by the Star of the Circus. And sure enough, in a few moments, they beheld her performing in her favourite character—more radiant in beauty and more spirited in her achievements than ever!

“Well, it is as you told me,” whispered Sylvester to the Baronet, “and it wasn't Imogen who was carried off. But, Ah! what the deuce does this mean?”

His looks were attracted towards a particular

box, in the front row of which were seated a stout vulgar-looking lady of about five-and-forty, and a very pretty girl of eighteen or twenty, whose mien was altogether as pleasing as that of her elderly companion might be said to be the reverse. The dame was fanning herself—for she was very hot; and she thoroughly answered to that description which is summed up in the somewhat vulgar but expressive word, “blowzy.” She was dressed in flaming colours, her toilet displaying the worst possible taste; while that of the young lady was simple, plain, and yet elegant.

“Who are they?” inquired the Baronet, following the direction of Sylvester's looks.

“Why, my mother and sister, to be sure! Who would have thought they were coming to Astley's to-night? You don't know them, I think? Come along, and I'll introduce you.”

For a moment Sir Abel Kingston recoiled from the bare idea of being seen in a public place of entertainment in the company of the blowzy dame with the red perspiring cheeks, the huge fan, and the dress that was so trumpey and ridiculous with its pretence of flaming gorgeousness. Was it not sufficient that he ventured to appear at a theatre with the vulgar gentish-looking son? He was therefore on the point of declining the honour of an introduction to Mrs. Casey, when on taking a second look at her daughter, he all in a moment changed his mind; and he said with a bland smile, “Thank you, my dear friend—nothing will give me greater pleasure.”

Sylvester was hugely delighted at the thought of being enabled to introduce a real living Baronet, who was also a Captain in the Guards, into the same box where his mother and sister were seated; and he already looked about him with the mien of a person who was fully prepared to give himself all sorts of airs. He and Sir Abel made their way to the box where the ladies were placed; and it happened that the benches immediately behind had just been vacated by a party on account of one of its female members fainting through the heat of the place. There was consequently ample room to enable Sylvester and Sir Abel to approach Mrs. Casey and Selina.

The introduction was effected in a style most eminently characteristic of the gentleman who performed that duty.

“Why, mother, who would have thought of seeing you here this evening? This is my friend Sir Abel Kingston—a regular brick. I think you've heard the governor speak of him? My mother, Sir Abel. And this is my sister Selina—a deuced nice girl, though I say it which shouldn't say it.”

The elderly lady bowed and simpered: the young lady gracefully inclined her head and blushed; while the Baronet thought to himself, “Good heavens! is it possible that this sweet and beautiful bird can belong to such a brood?”

“Very 'appy to make Sir Habel's acquaintance,” said Mrs. Casey. “You'll pardon Sylvester, Sir Habel, for throwin' in a flatterin' word about his sister——”

“Oh, certainly, madam. But I have no doubt that Miss Casey deserves everything amiable and complimentary that can be said of her.”

The object of this piece of adulation blushed slightly, and with a reserved air she took up her playbill.

"Yes, Selina," continued Mrs. Casey, pronouncing the *i* quite broad, instead of calling her daughter Seleena,—“Selina is a very good gal—plays the 'arp and the peanar—and can make a tart or pudden as well as the best cook in all Hingland.”

Sir Abel coughed very loud, and he likewise coloured very much; for there were some ladies in the next box who were infinitely amused by these displays of vulgarism on Mrs. Casey's part.

“Betwixt you and me and the post, Sir Habel,” continued Mrs. Casey, who not perceiving the effect her discourse was thus producing, talked louder and louder for the behoof of those persons who were seated in her immediate neighbourhood, “Selina is as good as disposed of, so to speak. A nobleman's son is a-keepin' company with her—”

“Mamma, do look at Mademoiselle Imogene!” hastily said the young lady in a whisper, while a crimson glow suffused her countenance, descending even to her neck, which an instant before was of ivory fairness.

“I see Himogin!” replied the dame; “and I should enjoy myself much better if there wasn't snob a heat that makes one all perspiry. But where are you going, Sir Habel?”

“Hem! hah! ma'am!”—and the Baronet coughed and looked very much confused. “I thought I saw a friend across yonder:” and he pointed at random at some visionary acquaintance on the opposite side of the house.

“What, that gentleman with the 'ook nose and the yaller waistcoat? Why that's Mr. Shiney-brass, the pawnbroker up in 'Oborn! He witsa sometimes at our 'ouse in 'Atton Garding—”

Fortunately the rest of Mrs. Casey's observation was drowned in the perfect *furor* of applause which accompanied the exit of Mademoiselle Imogene from the circle.

“But let me see,” resumed the dame, as Mademoiselle Rose, a beautiful French girl, now took her place in the ring, where she rode with an elegance and skill inferior only to the proficiency of Miss Hartland,—“let me see, what was I a-sayin'?”—Oh! I was tellin' you, Sir Habel, that my Selina is almost as good as engaged to the Honourable Launcelot Osborne; and when the weddin' takes place, we'll send you a billy:”—by which word the worthy dame meant to express the French term *billet*.

There was an universal titter in the adjoining box; and the Baronet, unable to endure the ordeal any longer, suddenly pleaded a violent headache as an excuse for his departure.

Mrs. Casey was one of those persons who always shake hands with everybody, even though her acquaintance with them be of no longer duration than two or three minutes. If she made a morning call at a house where she found twenty other visitors in the drawing-room at the same time, and all strangers to her on her entrance, she would shake hands with them every one on taking her leave. Was it therefore to be supposed that she would let Sir Abel Kingston depart without conferring upon him the usual testimony of her friendship? She extended a hand that was large enough to fell an ox, and which felt very hot even through the kid glove,—at the same time saying, “I know you've been to 'Atton Garding

on business; but the next time you find yourself there, you must come up into the drawing-room and just 'ear Selina play one of her hairs. We always lunched at one; but if you like some day to drop in and take pot-luck with us at five, we shall be very 'appy to see you and you'll have a corjial velcum.”

The Baronet was suffering excruciations; but with an appearance of the most gentlemanly ease, he turned towards Selina, saying, “I shall not fail, Miss Casey, to avail myself some day of your mamma's kind invitation.”

He then shook hands with the daughter—though she was very far from offering her own hand; and he bowed himself out of the box, thinking to himself, “Good heavens; what an old vulgarian! But one might do worse than marry the daughter;—and hy Jove! if she weren't engaged—though perhaps even *that* need not be an impediment; for Launcelot Osborne is a sentimental milksoop—”

Here the Baronet's reverie was rudely interrupted by Sylvester Casey, who slapping him familiarly on the shoulder, said, “Let's go up into the Strand and play billiards. It's slow work here.”

Sir Abel was about to decline, when on a second thought he accepted the proposal; for it occurred to him that he might just as well avail himself of the opportunity to obtain from Sylvester all the information he could in reference to the engagement between Launcelot Osborne and Selina.

CHAPTER XIX.

ARDLEIGH HOUSE.

THE reader is doubtless anxious to learn how it was that the Duchess of Arleigh contrived to escape so suddenly from the house belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Grills. It will be borne in mind that she had been prepared to expect the visit of some one who would give her explanations in reference to the outrage which had been perpetrated towards her. She had thrown back her veil because the atmosphere of the room appeared to stifle her; and there she sat revolving in her mind the circumstances of her position, and the mode in which she should act when the individual, whoever he might be, should appear in her presence. She was more than half-inclined to fancy that she had been carried off in mistake for Imogen: indeed she could scarcely see any other possible solution to the mystery. Being therefore under this impression more than under any other, it was by no means in accordance with her intention to let her face be seen when the door opened. But that door had opened so suddenly—the Duchess was in so profound a reverie at the instant—and she was thus taken so completely by surprise, that she started up, forgetting her veil had been thrown back; and thus was it that Sir Abel Kingston had obtained that glimpse of her features which was sufficient to show him who she was.

Mrs. Grills had instantaneously closed the door again, and it was an ejaculation of astonishment which hurst from her lips. The Duchess comprehended it; and she said in hasty tones, “I am not the right person whom you expected?”

"No, that you ain't! Why, how is this?"—and Mrs. Grills looked almost bewildered.

"It was a mistake! Tell me, was it not intended to carry off the actress Mademoiselle Imogene? Speak, and you shall be rewarded!"

"Yes—that was what was meant. But who are *you*, ma'am?"

The Duchess was rejoiced to find that she was not known; and she said, "No matter who I am! Ah, that disturbance!"

"The two gentlemen who have come!" ejaculated Mrs. Grills. "I do believe one's fighting with the other!"

"Good heavens! who are they? who are they? Speak, woman! I mean to deal liberally with you!"—and she drew forth her purse.

"Well, its young Mr. Casey—and how disappointed he'll be!"

"And the other?"

"I heard Mr. Casey call him Sir Abel."

"Heavens!" was the ejaculation which again burst from the lips of the Duchess; and for a moment a violent trembling seized upon her: but the next instant recovering her presence of mind, she said, "Fifty guineas if you let me escape!"

"Done!" cried the delighted Mrs. Grills.

The Duchess flung a bank-note and some gold upon the table; and Mrs. Grills caught up the money with avidity. The next instant she threw up the window, and simply said, "The ladder!"

This was immediately supplied; and the Duchess descended—and she found Mr. Grills and his brother in the yard below.

Now the fact was these worthies, instead of smoking their pipes in the kitchen, had been sitting on the sill of a window beneath the room where the Duchess was confined; for they thought it prudent to keep watch lest she should attempt to make her escape. Hence the promptitude with which they obeyed the summons of Mrs. Grills; and they asked no questions—neither did they pause for the slightest syllable of explanation—inasmuch as they knew that whatsoever the dame herself might do, would be the result of a sudden necessity or else of an equally potent appeal to her personal interests. The whole proceeding was conducted in the course of a few seconds; and while the Duchess was traversing a little yard towards a back gate, Mrs. Grills was facing Sir Abel Kingston in the passage.

Having given these explanations, we may resume the thread of our narrative.

It was the day after the adventures of which we have been writing, and between one and two o'clock in the afternoon, when the door of the drawing-room in which the Duchess of Ardleigh was seated, was thrown open; and the domestic announced Sir Abel Kingston. It was exactly ten days since she had last seen him, at Thornbury Park, when she had enjoined him not to seek her presence again until he should receive some communication from her.

"Can he have found out where I was last evening?" was the first question which instantaneously occurred to the Duchess; and a flush swept across her countenance: but the next moment it had disappeared, and it was with the most perfect self-possession so far as the outward demeanour was concerned, that she gave him her hand.

There was nothing peculiar in the Baronet's manner,—nothing significant so as to make the

Duchess suspect that he knew aught of her adventure of the preceding evening: but he wore that look of love and tenderness which he had of late assumed towards her; and there was likewise somewhat of respectful entreaty in his tone, as he said, "May I hope, dearest Mary, that you are not angry because I come without receiving permission from you?"

"Let that scene which your words recall, be entirely forgotten?" said the young Duchess; for her soul now recoiled from the man who she naturally thought frequented such dens as that where accident had so nearly thrown them together on the preceding night. "I beg you, Sir Abel, to look upon me as an acquaintance—a friend, if you will: but—but—"

"Mary, what means this coldness? Perhaps you have not made any discovery of the kind which I mentioned in reference to your husband? And yet I swear to you that it was the truth!"

"Who told you," asked the Duchess, "that Herbert was keeping a mistress in the neighbourhood of Tunbridge Wells?"

"It was a person named Manning—a horse-dealer at Maidstone. He sold some horses for me—your husband bought them—he gave a cheque signed with his own name—"

"Yes, yes—I recollect! You told me at the time," said the Duchess. "But I had forgotten—"

"And have you willingly forgotten all the kind and hopeful things you said to me on that occasion when I walked with you in the grounds at Thornbury?"

"Do not remind me of it! But come, Sir Abel," said the Duchess, assuming a lively air, as if suddenly throwing off some cause of restraint: "let us talk on general subjects. What think you of the prospects of the opera season? how do you like the new novel?"

"Oh, Mary!" exclaimed the Baronet; "how can you find it in your heart to treat me thus? Now listen to me while I tell you that I know you *have* discovered the truth of my statement in reference to your husband's mistress at Addington."

"How so?" ejaculated the Duchess, with a start.

"Because I received a letter from some one, telling me that the establishment at Dahlia Cottage is broken up—"

"And that *some one*?" inquired the Duchess.

"That very same Manning the horse-dealer. The animals have gone back into his hands; and the lady herself left the place precipitately, with her nurse and her child. But of course you know all this as well as I can tell you."

The Duchess remained silent. She remembered her pledge to the Baronet; and though the love, or rather the fantasy she had conceived for him, had very much subsided, she nevertheless knew not how to answer him.

"What were your words, Mary,—the words from your own lips?" he proceeded to say. "Did you not swear that if you found I had deceived you in reference to your husband, everything should be at an end between us?—but if on the other hand you discovered that the facts were precisely as I had represented them, *then* the first vengeance which you would wreak upon your husband, should be to fulfil your pledge of love

unto me—in a word, that you would be mine? Now answer me, Mary!—have I deceived you? If you tell me that I have—or if you hesitate to answer—I will then take it upon myself to convince you——”

“Sir Abel Kingston,” interrupted the Duchess, while the colour went and came in quick transitions upon her countenance, and her bosom heaved and fell visibly; “a woman in a moment of weakness may promise more than is consistent with her safety on earth and her salvation in heaven——”

“Answer me one word, Mary,” said Sir Abel in a sombre voice and with gloomy looks: “you are seeking to fly from your word and to break the compact of love which existed between us?”

“If I have the courage to stop short on the very verge of an indiscretion—a crime!” she answered, while the red blood again flushed her cheeks, “is it for you who pretend to love me, to seek to drag me down into the abyss? Oh, you ought to strengthen me in my resolve!”

“This is ridiculous, Mary!” interrupted the Baronet, with anger and disgust, which he did not particularly study to conceal; for he saw that she was playing a part, though he was at a loss to surmise upon what grounds or for what purpose. “If you ever loved me, you love me now!” and he took her hand.

“She withdrew it, saying, “Let us be friends—only friends!”

“I will not be thus trifled with!” cried Kingston. “By what motives are you swayed in your present conduct? Not by any returning love for your husband; because you have discovered his infidelity! Not by any reviving fondness on his part towards you; because he is absent, and unable to show it! What then am I to think? That you are a prude—a jilt—a coquette? that you have deliberately trifled with me? I should be sorry to think so!—and yet before I come to a conclusion, I will ask you for the last time whether you still keep your compact with me?”

“And if I refuse?” asked the Duchess, who experienced a presentiment that the present scene must now be brought to a crisis of some kind or another.

Sir Abel Kingston bent upon her a strange look; and he said in a low sombre tone, “If you trifle with me, all my love will turn into hatred, and you shall be made to feel that you are in my power!”

The brilliant Duchess started: her cheeks flushed—her bosom heaved as if it would burst through its prisonage of corset: then she became very pale—and she murmuringly repeated the words, “In your power?”

“Aye!—and deeply, deeply would it grieve me to come to angry words with you and prove that such is the fact!”

“Explain yourself, sir,” she said, determined to put him to the fullest test.

“Need I ask the Duchess of Arleigh where she was last evening?”

“What do you mean?”—and the air of astonishment which she assumed appeared to be the most natural.

Sir Abel was not deceived by it; and he replied with a look of the most wicked significancy, “When a door opened and a certain woman en-

tered a particular room, I was in the passage—and I obtained a glimpse of the lady in that room. She was plainly dressed, with a large muffing cloak—she had on a simple straw bonnet, and the veil was thrown back from over her countenance. That lady was you!”

“Indeed? This is an extraordinary delusion!”—and the Duchess laughed.

“Do not compel me to test it by such rules as shall prove it to be a veritable fact. How was it that the brilliant Duchess of Arleigh could have placed herself in a position to be carried off in mistake for the actress Mademoiselle Imogens? I confess that at present I know not: neither am I as yet aware how your Grace escaped from that room wherein I saw you. But there are ample means of proving the whole mystery—and by heaven, I will do it!”

The Duchess now felt as if a mask had fallen completely from the countenance of the man who had pretended to love her; and she saw that he was a selfish, malignant, ungenerous individual. So much the more reason, thought she, for dealing with him in a manner consistent with the utmost prudence and with the astutest policy. But how? She required time for deliberation; and in the interval she must play the hypocrite.

“You are unkind towards me,” she said, in a soft murmuring voice: “you will not help me to save myself when I wish to be saved. I must yield—not to your threats, but to the weakness of my own feelings. On the third night hence, between nine and ten o’clock——No! better that it were later!—between ten and eleven—you will meet me at Thornbury—in the same avenue—you know where I mean—close by the statues——”

“Enough, Mary!” said the Baronet, overjoyed at the idea of the triumph which he considered to be already as good as achieved. “A thousand, thousand thanks, dearest, for the hope with which you have now filled my soul!”—and taking her hand, he pressed it to his lips.

“I need not ask, Abel,” she said, in a low voice, and with a flush upon her cheeks, “whether you took care that no one else but yourself should become acquainted with the fact that I was carried off by force——”

“No one else knew it!” exclaimed the Baronet. “But how in heaven’s name, dearest Mary, could you have been in such a position? how was it that you were either coming out of the house of the equestrian actress, or else passing through that street at the moment——”

“It was a fantasy on my part—I wished to know her. But I will tell you all about it when we meet at Thornbury. And now leave me, Abel!—leave me, I beseech you! I am not well—I am nervous and agitated from the incidents of last night——”

“No wonder! I will leave you, my sweet Mary. But, Oh! it will appear an age until we meet again at Thornbury, according to the appointment which you have given me!”

He again pressed her hand to his lips and then took his departure.

“Miserable hypocrite!” ejaculated the Duchess, as the door closed behind him. “You profess to love me—and yet you frequent such dens as that where you saw me last night! Ah! and you would use coercion to bend me to your purpose? And then you kiss my hand, and thank me, and

“speak sentimentally, and vow that you love me! Yet what motive can you have for this base hypocrisy? Is it that you burn to possess me? or is there some other motive which I cannot fathom? No, no—I will not succumb! There was a time when I liked you—yes, might have loved you!—but it is past—and you now seem to be altogether a different being! The mask has fallen from your countenance—you are hideous in my sight! But, Oh, my God! I am in your power!”

The Duchess clasped her hands together, and she shivered from head to foot as she thought of the tale which the Baronet might tell in reference to the incidents of the preceding night.

“At all events,” she said to herself, “I have got three days before me to arrange some plan; and that is an advantage! Who knows what may turn up?”

It was thus that the Duchess gave way to her reflections; but the day passed without enabling her to settle in her mind any project by which she might emancipate herself from the power of Sir Abel Kingston.

In the evening the Duchess learnt that her husband had just returned to Ardleigh House, but that he had at once repaired to his own chamber, alleging that he was ill, and desiring that he might not be disturbed. She did not therefore go near him. In the morning she sent her favourite maid Lavinia to inquire after the Duke's health; she was informed that he was much better—that business compelled him to go off immediately into the City—but that he should see her Grace in the course of the day: and then for form's sake before the servants, he superadded some message couched in terms of seeming affection.

The young Duke fancied that Ethel would most probably come up to London with the least possible delay to see Mr. Warren, the stockbroker, in reference to the sum of five thousand pounds which had been invested in the Bank in her name. He longed to see her—to implore that she would change her mind, and that she would not separate herself eternally from him! It was therefore in the hope of falling in with Ethel that the Duke proceeded to Mr. Warren's office in the neighbourhood of the Bank of England. The stockbroker had not yet arrived. Herbert waited and waited with the most feverish impatience. Would Ethel come? or would Warren make his appearance? He was anxious to enlist Warren as an intermediary to plead on his behalf with Ethel, in case she should call at an hour when he himself should not be there waiting for her. At length, between one and two in the afternoon, a servant came from Mr. Warren's house at Highbury, to tell the head clerk that his master would not be there until the next day, as he had run down into the country to secure the purchase of some celebrated race-horse which he had suddenly learnt was to be disposed of.

“I will call to-morrow morning at ten punctually,” said the Duke to the head clerk. “Tell Mr. Warren that I shall be here, if he happen to arrive before me.”

Herbert then returned to the West End; and on reaching Ardleigh House, he was informed that two persons desired to speak with him on very important business. They were waiting to see

him, and in the meanwhile had been shown into the library. Thither the Duke accordingly proceeded; and he found, as indeed he had expected, that his visitors were Mr. Timothy Gaffney and Mr. John Peppercorn. They were dressed in bran new apparel from head to foot: a ready-made clothing mart had supplied them with suits confectioned after the sporting fashion which they both affected: they had gold chains festooning over their waistcoats and rings upon their fingers. Altogether these worthies were better up in the world than ever they had before been in all their lives: and as a matter of course they were in the greatest possible spirits.

“Beg your Grace's pardon, my lord,” said Tim Gaffney as he and his companion both made a very respectful bow to the Duke; “but you told us as how we might come—”

“You have not heard or seen anything of—that lady?” demanded the Duke hurriedly.

“Nothing, my lord,” was the response.

“I believe you returned to Southdale—you said you thought of doing so—Was anything suspected there?”

“Nothing, my lord. Everything was so well managed—”

“Enough!” said the Duke. “I suppose I can guess what you require of me—you have experienced some difficulty in changing the notes—”

“Just so, my lord,” responded Gaffney; “and we therefore thought we would take the liberty—”

“It is no liberty. I told you that you might come. But hush!”

At that instant the handle of the door was heard to move; and hence the ejaculation with which the Duke's speech abruptly closed. The door opened—and the Duchess made her appearance. She had been told that the Duke had returned and that he was in the library; she did not know that there were persons with him; but on the contrary, she thought the opportunity favourable for learning how he had fared at Southdale in his pursuit after Ethel. On perceiving however that there were two individuals with him, the Duchess was just on the point of retiring, when she caught sight of Tim Gaffney's countenance. She recognised him immediately: but she maintained the utmost composure upon her own features, as she now advanced into the library, saying to her husband, “I thought to have found you alone; but I suppose you are not particularly engaged?”

“Not very particularly,” answered the Duke. “Only these persons called to speak to me about some horses which they have to sell—”

“Ah! then, it is not a subject,” exclaimed the Duchess, “which need exclude me from the room? On the contrary, I am very much interested in it—especially as I myself want you to treat me to a new pair for my light open carriage—and I must also have another saddle-horse.”

Then, with the most natural air in the world, the Duchess advanced into the room and took a seat near her husband on one side of the table, while the two men were standing on the other side.

“I do not know that these persons have got anything that will exactly suit you, my dear,” said the Duke, who as a matter of course wished that his wife had not taken it into her head to

make her appearance at that particular juncture.

"Oh, we will see!" cried the Duchess. "This person"—turning towards Tim Gaffney—"will perhaps have the goodness to inform me—But, by the bye, what is your name, sir?"

The fellow had started on hearing the Duchess of Ardleigh's voice. He looked at her very hard from under his eyebrows; and he fidgeted about with his hat. Could it be possible that the Duchess of Ardleigh and the disguised lady whom he had driven between Maidstone and Addington, were one and the same person? If so, would she continue to pretend not to know him? And was she now asking his name for the purpose of helping out that pretence? Such were the questions which the fellow asked himself; and he very naturally concluded that her wanderings in masculine apparel, if the same lady it really were, must be unknown to her husband, and that she would not therefore for the world seem to recognise Mr. Timothy Gaffney!

"My name, your Grace?" said the man, after a brief hesitation. "Why, it's Gaffney, at your service."

"Gaffney?" repeated the Duchess, with a merry laugh. "What a singular name! Gaffney! I wonder whether I ever heard it before?"

The Duke looked annoyed; and he hastily whispered, "Don't offend the man, Mary."

"I have not the slightest intention of giving Mr. Gaffney any offence," said the Duchess, speaking audibly. "I am sure he will excuse me for making myself merry at his name—will you not, Mr. Gaffney?"

"Oh, to be sure, your Grace!"—and now Tim affected to laugh also; but somehow or another he did not altogether feel completely at his ease.

"Well, Mr. Gaffney," continued the Duchess—and there was a roguish merriment, lurking in her clear liquid blue eyes,—“have you anything in the shape of horseflesh that will suit me, according to the requirement which you just now heard me mention to his Grace? Or perhaps your companion there—By the bye, permit me to ask his name?"

The individual thus alluded to felt somewhat abashed: but Tim Gaffney, plucking up his courage as he beheld the mirthful appearance of the Duchess, basted to say, "This is my friend Mr. Peppercorn."

"Oh, indeed! Gaffney and Peppercorn—horsedealers! an excellent firm, no doubt!"—and again the Duchess laughed merrily, her musical voice ringing through the room, and her parting lips displaying the two rows of her beautiful teeth, so white and so even.

The Duke looked at her in a perplexed manner: he felt as if there were a scene passing before him which he could not understand.

"And pray," she went on to inquire, "where may your establishment be situated—in London or in the country?"

"Oh, in the country, your Grace," answered Gaffney. "At Maidstone."

"Ah, at Maidstone? Let me see!" continued the Duchess, as if she were deliberating within herself. "I think I have heard of another horse-dealer of some celebrity in the same neighbourhood. I believe I've had some dealings with him. To be sure! I recollect now! His name was Bax."

Jack Peppercorn now gave a sudden start; for all in a moment it struck him that the Duchess of Ardleigh must be the disguised lady of whom his friend Tim Gaffney had told him, and who had played the said Gaffney so clever a trick in stopping the draft or order which she had given on a banking establishment in the Strand. Tim instantaneously trod on Peppercorn's toe, as an intimation that he was to keep quiet and betray nothing before the Duke; so that Jack was again instantaneously on his guard.

"Ah! Bax, I believe," said the Duchess, "is a highly respectable man."

"I do not remember ever to have heard of him," said the Duke, again gazing upon his wife in bewildered astonishment.

"Indeed? Then you must have forgotten the name," she responded, with an air of the utmost *maiveté*. "But I'm afraid I am only interrupting business and detaining Messrs. Gaffney and Peppercorn with my frivolous discourse. Therefore I will not stay more than a minute longer; and that is for the purpose of saying that you, Mr. Gaffney, must really endeavour to procure me such horses as I require."

"Leave it to me, my dear," said the Duke; "and I will give Mr. Gaffney a memorandum of what you want."

"The very thing I myself was about to do!" exclaimed the Duchess; "and then I will take myself off."

Thus speaking, she proceeded to shift her position to the further extremity of the table, where there were writing materials; and having penned a few lines upon a slip of paper, she folded it up, and tossed it across the table to Gaffney, saying, "There! put that in your pocket, and look at it at your leisure."

"I won't lose sight of the matter, your Grace," replied Tim as he consigned the paper to his waistcoat pocket; and at the same time he darted a significant look at the Duchess—for he felt assured that there was some ulterior meaning veiled beneath the proceeding which she had just adopted.

She retired from the library; and the Duke now fancied that what he had conceived to be peculiar in her manner must have been after all nothing more than a mood of hilarious gaiety to which a special impulse was given by the mention of a name that had tickled her fancy.

"Her Grace really believes that you are horse-dealers," said the Duke, with a smile, as the door closed behind her.

"Oh, yes—her Grace believes it, my lord," replied Gaffney. "But here's the bank-notes," he continued. "We've managed to change a few of 'em—"

"How many have you there that you cannot change?" inquired the Duke.

"There's fimsies to the amount of fifteen hundred pound," responded Tim.

"Then I will tell you what I can do," said the Duke: "I will give you a cheque on my banker, and you can ask to have it all in gold."

"Well, I'd rather not, my lord," answered Tim, fidgeting with his hat. "Somehow or another I don't like bankers—they've a orkard way of asking chaps how they come by cheques for large amounts—"

"Then how *can* we manage it?" exclaimed

the Duke somewhat impatiently. "Ah, I see a means! I will write my name on the hack of every one of these hank-notes; and then no doubt you can pass them?"

Tim Gaffney signified his assent—the notes were duly endorsed—and the two fellows took their departure from Arleigh House.

The Duke then sought the Duchess; and he told her some portion of the incidents which had occurred at Southdale—but without stating how Ethel had been arrested for destroying the leaf from the parish register; and inasmuch as he suppressed that painful episode through a delicate regard for Ethel's character, it was not necessary for him to state how he formed the acquaintance of Messrs. Gaffney and Peppercorn. The Duchess was bewildered what to think of the visit of those persons to her husband: but not for an instant did she believe that they had come to make a deal with him in respect to horses. However, as he said nothing on the point, she had no pretence for introducing the subject; and moreover she knew that her curiosity would not be tried for any considerable length of time, inasmuch as she might be in a position to clear up the mystery from Tim Gaffney's own lips on the following night.

"And thus," said the Duke, after a pause, "everything is at an end between Ethel and me!"

"Do not think so," responded the Duchess. "Rest assured that she will communicate with you again! It is in the nature of woman to do so. But this is a subject you and I must not discuss."

CHAPTER XX.

MR. WARREN.

MR. WARREN, the stockbroker, returned from the country at about nine o'clock in the evening; and on reaching his splendidly furnished house at Highbury, he found his head clerk waiting to see him.

"Well, Mr. Phipps," said the stockbroker, throwing himself into a large easy chair in his dining-room, and motioning for his clerk to resume the seat from which he had respectfully risen; "what news in the City?"

"Here's a number of letters, sir."

"All right—put them down—I will look over them presently. What else?"

"The Duke of Arleigh called this morning, sir—at about ten o'clock," proceeded Mr. Phipps.

"His Grace waited until nearly two—"

"What did his Grace want?" inquired Warren.

"His Grace did not say, sir; but he appeared very anxious to see you—he looked weary and restless—he said he should be at the office punctually at ten to-morrow morning—"

"And you told his Grace that I should be sure to be there? Well, anything else?"

"Yes, sir," responded Phipps: "at about three o'clock that lady called—the same that the Duke brought to the office the other day in the cab—you remember the occasion, sir?—it was when he came rushing in first of all, positively enjoining that he was not to be addressed by his title—"

"Yes, yes," said Warren impatiently: "I know

whom you mean! Mrs. Trevor, as he called her—or Miss Fraser, as her name really is."

"You bought in five thousand pounds in that name, I believe, sir?" said Phipps.

"Well—perhaps—I dare say—I don't recollect. In a large business, Mr. Phipps, one does not remember little details. What did this lady want?"

"I do not know, sir. She inquired for you—she asked if you did not live at Highbury—and she said that if it were not against the rule of propriety and of business, she should like to call upon you here—"

"The deuce!" ejaculated Warren. "Why—what on earth—I mean—But what did you tell her?"

"I hope I have not done wrong, sir," answered Mr. Phipps; "but as she assured me that she had a very important reason for making such a request, and as she seemed careworn and distressed in mind, I said that I thought you might possibly have no objection to receive her either to-morrow morning at nine o'clock, before you came into the City, or in the evening at six, after your return."

"Quite right, Phipps—quite right," said Mr. Warren. "Anything else?"

"Nothing, sir, that I know of. Only Mr. Casey called to-day, and said he should look in again to-morrow—"

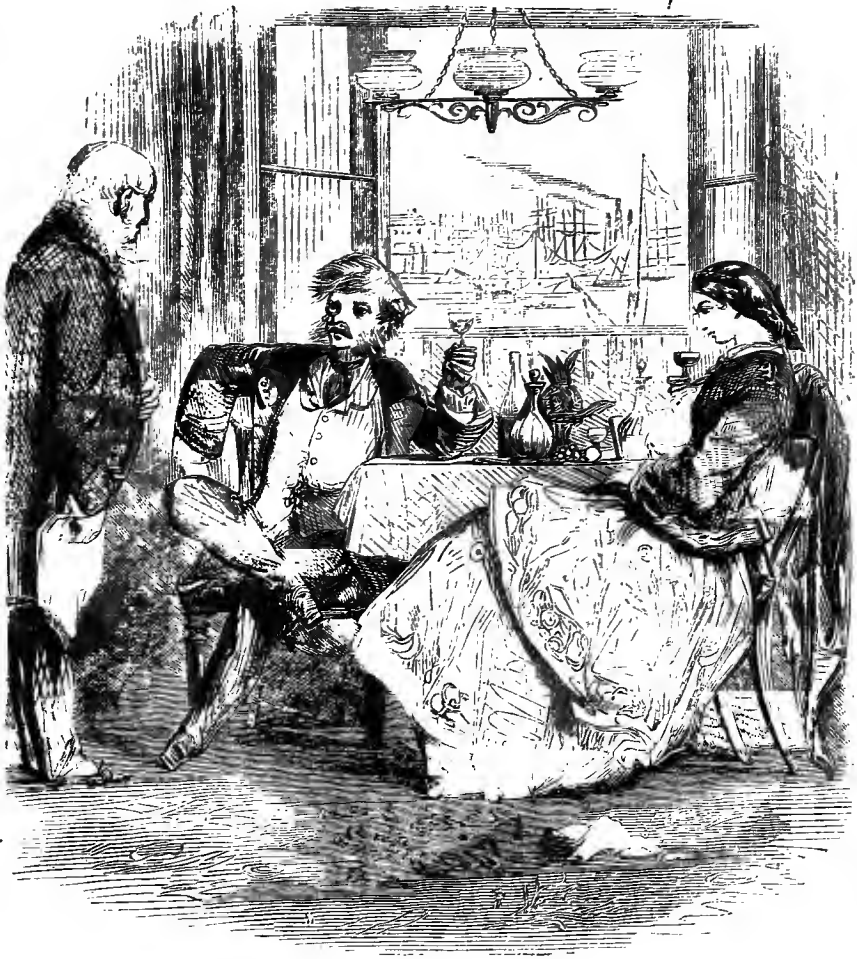
"Ah, well, well!" interjected Warren: "then it does not appear that I've been particularly missed? And now take a glass of wine, Phipps—and then good evening to you."

It has already been said that Mr. Warren was a tall, good-looking man, under thirty years of age. He dressed elegantly—he maintained a splendid house at Highbury and a shooting-box down in the country—he kept his mistress in a beautiful villa somewhere in the neighbourhood of Upper Holloway—he also kept hunters, racers, and a yacht—he gave magnificent entertainments, and was liked by everybody as a good-hearted, jovial, dashing kind of a fellow, as well a thorough man of business, of unquestionable integrity and undoubted wealth.

"Oh!" he muttered to himself, when Mr. Phipps had taken his departure,—"at nine o'clock to-morrow morning or at six in the evening?"—and then a singular expression swept across his countenance: but as it almost immediately vanished, he rang the bell and ordered the footman to send up supper at once, not forgetting a bottle of champagne.

The tray, laden with splendid plate, was soon brought in; but Mr. Warren did not appear to have any appetite when the viands were set before him. He however drank the champagne with avidity, and then proceeded to look over his letters, making a running commentary upon their contents as he successively opened them.

"Dr. Mordaunt—eh? Wants to know when he is to have the scrip of the Constantinople and Belgrade Railway. Ah, well! that will keep. Sir Moses Bellamy—Oh! about the twenty thousand—three per cents. The deuce! he is getting impatient! What's this! That bothering schoolmaster, Smithers, of Norfolk! What a tirade! Pooch, who could drag one-self through it?—and all about a heggary three thousand! Ah! what's this? Seymour's handwriting! By Jove! if he begins—But pshaw! it's only to let



me know of the yacht-dinner next Monday! Well, that's a comfort. What next? Old Casey? Why, he called, Phipps said. *Insists* on seeing me to-morrow! The devil he does? Ah! here is quite another *billet*. 'Lady Todmorden's compliments'—What is it? Ball, eh—on Thursday week! Ah, ha! her ladyship has got three portionless daughters to get off—and she thinks that Christopher Warren, stockbroker, would make an excellent match for one of them! What a world it is!—what wheels within wheels!—what a continued series of illustrations of the process of diamond cutting diamond! Ah! it is indeed a rum world!"

The reflection made Mr. Warren more and more thoughtful; and then he applied himself to a second bottle of champagne, the effect of which was eventually to put him into such excellent spirits that he started up, snapped his fingers, and

seemed to be in a position to bid defiance to the whole world.

Mr. Warren sat down again; and he now looked more deliberately over his letters than he had previously done. The strain in which two or three of them were worded, began to produce an effect which counterbalanced the exhilarating influence of champagne. The stockbroker felt himself growing moody and desponding once more: he also experienced a sensation of drowsiness—but he did not dare retire to bed immediately, for he knew that by the time he reached his chamber he should be broad awake again, and he did not exactly like to be left alone with his own thoughts. Presently he sank back in his arm-chair—his head drooped forward—and if he were not at once enveloped in the actual unconsciousness of slumber, he at all events sank into a state of dreamy repose.

He now fancied that the door slowly opened and some one looked in; but he could not distinguish the countenance of the individual. Then it appeared to the stockbroker that this person advanced with noiseless footsteps into the room, shutting the door behind him. Warren endeavoured to exercise the power of speech sufficiently to ask what the intruder wanted: but it seemed to him that he could not give utterance to a syllable. He felt as if he were in a trance, having a certain dim and vague consciousness of what was passing, but unable to make the slightest physical exertion. And now it seemed to the stockbroker that the intruder sat down opposite to him at the table; and resting his elbow thereon, he shaded his countenance with his hand in such a way that Warren could scarcely obtain a glimpse of it; and yet he had the intuitive knowledge that the stranger's eyes were fixed scrutinizingly upon him. A species of superstitious terror gradually stole into the mind of Christopher Warren; but by an effort he gasped out, "Who are you? Are you man or devil?"

And then it seemed to the stockbroker that a low mocking laugh sounded upon his ear, and that in the same sardonic accent, the intruder replied, "Yes—you are right. I am a Man-Devil."

The consternation of the stockbroker now appeared to be utterly overwhelming, and consciousness abandoned him. But it was not the unconsciousness of a swoon—or at least it seemed as if it were only from a very profound slumber that he presently awoke gradually and drowsily, scarcely knowing where he was or whether he were still dreaming. He found himself in his arm-chair; the lamp was still burning bright upon the table; and opposite to him sat a gentleman, who at once rising from his seat, said with a tone and manner which displayed as much careless ease and off-hand indifference as actual politeness, "I must apologize for intruding at this hour; but I was determined to wait your convenience—and you see that I have done so."

Mr. Warren rubbed his eyes—then stared at his visitor—and asked, "How long have you been here, sir?"

"Oh, not very long. In fact, your nap has been but a short one. I amused myself with the newspaper——"

"But your name, sir!" ejaculated Warren, recollecting a certain impression which had previously been made upon his mind, though he scarcely knew whether it were a dream or a reality.

"My name? Oh, I told you just now:—and it was a strange low mocking laugh which came forth from the intruder's lips.

Warren started up. He was about the last man in existence to entertain a superstitious fear; but he could not help feeling that the present proceeding was at least a strange one, and there was a certain vague uneasiness in his mind.

"You said your name, sir, was——"

"You asked me somewhat more impetuously than politely whether I were a man or a devil."

"Yes, sir—I was doubtless half-asleep—almost quite so; and if I mistake not, you replied——"

"Well, sir—what did I reply?" demanded the visitor; and his eyes appeared to twinkle with a demoniac mischievousness. "You asked me if I were a man or a devil——"

"And you said that you were a Man-Devil!"

exclaimed the stockbroker, now almost inclined to get into a rage as his superstitious feeling of uneasiness was rapidly passing off.

"Ah! did I pronounce it like that?" said the individual, with the utmost coolness; and again the low sardonic laugh came gliding forth from his lips.

"What do you mean, sir, by this jest, so ill-timed—almost impertinent?" demanded Warren, who, being now broad awake again, inwardly ridiculed the idea of having anything to do with more than a man in the person of this intruder.

"Jest indeed! It is you, sir, who seem to be making a jest of that which is sober seriousness. I call to see you—you ask me my name—I give it—and you accuse me of being impertinently jocose! Do you know, friend Warren?"—and he laid his hand familiarly upon the stockbroker's shoulder—"if I had not come prepared to be very good friends with you——"

"In one word, sir," exclaimed Warren, retreating so as to disengage himself from the hand which was laid upon his shoulder, "who are you? and what do you mean by this extraordinary conduct?"

It was with a sort of easy politeness, quite cool and off-hand, that the stranger answered, "I have already told you that my name is Mandeville; and as for my business, it shall be explained in due course."

"Mandeville?" echoed Warren, with an air of surprised inquiry.

"Why, yes—Mandeville. I must have said so just now—only you told me that I pronounced it Man-Devil, and I was too polite to contradict you."

"Ah! Mandeville! That is indeed a proper name—natural and intelligible," said Warren, beginning to be as much ashamed as amazed at himself for the ridiculous mistake which it seemed he had been making.

"Yes—here is my card. The name, as you may perceive, is a French one—and it is pronounced with a more fluid rapidity than that which you now bestowed upon it."

The stockbroker took the card; and he read the name and address of COUNT DE MANDEVILLE, *Rue de Provence, Paris*. This line was in the corner; but a mark with a pencil had been drawn through it; and the words, *Clarendon Hotel, Bond Street*, were substituted.

"I sincerely beg your pardon, Count," said Mr. Warren, confused and bewildered at the idea of the extraordinary reception which he had given the French nobleman: "but to tell you the truth, I have returned from a fatiguing journey—I drank a little too much champagne—sleep stole over me——"

"Enough, my dear sir," interrupted the Count; "no further excuse is necessary:—and he smiled with a half familiar, half patronising air.

The stockbroker bowed; and his eyes now fell upon his letters which lay upon the table.

"The deuce!" he thought to himself; "the Count may have read them while I slept!"—but a second glance reassured him; for he said to himself, "No—they have not been touched! That is just how I left them! At least, I would almost swear to it."

He now looked again upon his visitor. Count Mandeville was not above the middle height; and

his figure was not characterized by any remarkable degree of symmetry. He was slender—he carried himself well; and his shape was of the average standard. But yet there was something distinguished and imposing about the man. He was dressed with the most fashionable elegance; and there was an ease in his manner—a certain freedom of motion, of posture, and gesture, which gave him the appearance of one who felt so completely at his ease as to bespeak him a member of the *élite* of Parisian society. He was not particularly handsome: yet his was a countenance which would be pronounced something more than merely good-looking. It was one to which the beholder would turn to take another view. The grey eyes were vivid and variable in their expression: the brows, very dark, were thick, but well divided and high arched: the dark hair seemed to curl naturally: the glossy moustache terminated in points slightly curled: the whiskers were large, but admirably trimmed; and the Count wore that tuft of hair below the under lip which is denominated an *imperial*. He had a brilliant set of teeth: his nose was perfectly straight: his complexion pale, with the least tinge of sallowness. His voice was as variable in its tones as his eyes were in their expression; for he seemed to have the power of modulating it in no ordinary degree, so as to suit the sense and significance of whatsoever he might be saying at the time. It would be fluid and dulcet when he invested himself with that exquisite air of true foreign politeness which he could in a moment assume; or it might become sardonic and taunting—or coldly ironical—or impressive with its intense bitterness of accentuation. As for his age, the stockbroker judged it to be midway between thirty and forty—though it might well be a year or two more or less.

Such was the personage who had thus so singularly introduced himself to Mr. Warren at eleven o'clock at night; for this was the hour indicated by the time-piece on the mantel. It seemed as if the Count maintained silence for some two or three minutes, and affected to be taking a leisurely survey of the apartment, in order to allow Mr. Warren an opportunity to contemplate the appearance of his visitor.

"It seems, then," said the stockbroker with a polite bow, "that I have the honour of speaking to Count Mandeville?"

"Count Hippolyte Mandeville, at your service," was the reply.

"At my service?" said the stockbroker. "On the contrary, I should presume that it is I who must hold myself to be at your service, Count."

"We shall be of mutual service," rejoined Mandeville, with a look of mysterious significance.

"Be kind enough to explain yourself. But Ah!" added the stockbroker, "permit me to observe that you speak English with a remarkable fluency and accuracy."

"No wonder. I was educated in England—and I am as well acquainted with all your manners and customs, as I am with those of my own native country. But now to the point, Mr. Warren. I require your assistance in certain matters—and you require mine."

Warren started; and then ejaculated, "I require your's?"

"Yes, truly. A man who is in difficulties, always needs the assistance of a friend."

"Difficulties?" and then the stockbroker became pale as death, as his eyes again fell upon the letters which lay on the table.

"Yes—difficulties," repeated the Count. "You talk in your sleep, my dear Mr. Warren. Perhaps you did not know it before: but now that I tell you of it, you will be on your guard for the future. Never take a nap in the presence of another person, or in a room where you may chance to be intruded upon."

Warren gazed upon Mandeville with a half-frightened, half-stupefied look: he knew not what to make of his extraordinary visitor.

"Doubtless you went to sleep with the contents of those letters uppermost in your mind," continued the Count, with an air and tone of easy confidence; "and thus in your sleep you rendered me as well acquainted with your troubles and apprehensions as if I had perused the letters for myself."

Warren was almost inclined to vociferate forth in an enraged tone, "And you *did* read those letters while I slept!"—but he thought it better to restrain himself; and with a forced calmness he inquired, "To what is all this to lead, Count Mandeville?"

"Listen to me," was the response. "You stand on the verge of destruction—and I can save you. You are overwhelmed with difficulties—and I can extricate you. You dread the visits of certain clamorous individuals to-morrow at your office—and I can make them each and all grovel at your feet, imploring you to retain the sums the restitution of which they were first determined to enforce."

"Good heavens! who are you?" asked Warren, in utter bewilderment.

"Did you not take me for a Man-Devil?"—and the Count now laughed in that peculiar strain of sardonism which made one shudder to hear him.

"Oh, you are welcome to your jest," exclaimed Warren, "if you will only convince me—But, good God! what am I doing?" he interrupted himself, at the same time turning pale with dismay. "I have made admissions!—they are tantamount to confessions!—and you a complete stranger!"

"Stop! I will place you perfectly at your ease," interjected the Count. "I told you that our services are to be mutual. I have three distinct favours to demand at your hand, and in return for which I will perform all that I have promised."

"Name your demands," said the stockbroker eagerly; for he longed to enter more deeply into a business which promised such important results for himself.

"A lady bearing the name of Ethel Trevor, or Fraser, will call upon you to-morrow."

"How do you know this?"

"No matter. It is sufficient that I have stated the fact. Now understand me," proceeded the Count: "I have conceived for that woman one of those sudden passions which some people term love at first sight, and which perhaps do full well merit the name: and this passion must be gratified. You will help to hand over that beautiful creature into my possession."

"And what is your next demand?" asked the stockbroker.

"You will introduce me to Lady Todmorden's ball next Thursday week," responded Mandeville.

"Ah!"—and again the stockbroker glanced at his letters; for he was now more than ever convinced that the Count *had* looked at their contents while he slept. "But proceed. What is the third demand?"

"That you write me a letter in the course of to-morrow or next day," rejoined Mandeville, "to the effect that you have made the different investments with which I charged you; and you will mention, in a casual and natural manner, that the sum total is sixty or eighty thousand pounds—or you may even go higher if you think fit."

"I understand you, Count!" said Warren, now assuming an air of familiarity. "You wish to get into good society—and you desire to pass as a rich man."

"Let there be no disguise between us," said Mandeville coolly. "I am an adventurer—you are an insolvent. You shall help me to build up my fortunes—and I will save yours from total ruin. Is this a compact between us?"

"Show me that you have the power to do as much for me as you promise," replied Warren, "and rest assured that I shall not hesitate to what lengths I go on your behalf."

"Listen," pursued Mandeville, "while I furnish you with weapons whereby you may bring those whom you now fear into the position of wretched grovellers at your feet. Mention their names one by one. Or shall I do it for you? First, then, there is Doctor Mordaunt—"

"True!" ejaculated Warren; "a man who if he once suspect that I am playing him false—"

"You shall coolly avow it to-morrow," interjected Mandeville; "and I tell you that you shall see him at your feet! But prepare to hear a strange story—something which you have little suspected, and which perhaps had better remain altogether untold, were it not an indispensable means of helping you out of the predicament wherein you are placed."

Mandeville then proceeded to relate certain facts to the stockbroker, who grew greatly excited as he listened; and when the tale was finished, he started up, exclaiming, "But who in the name of heaven are you that you could have become possessed of a knowledge of such circumstances?"

"You know who I am," answered the Count. "I am the Man-Devil!"—and again he laughed with that mocking irony which seemed to be the veritable malice-mirth of a fiend. "But to be serious!—what if I had all these facts from the lips of one who was enabled to reveal them with the most fearful accuracy?"

"But the proof! the proof!" exclaimed Warren. "Give me the proof—and Mordaunt is indeed in my power!"

"Well, the proof," said Mandeville calmly; and with his characteristic easy deliberation of manner, he drew forth a pocket-book, turned over some papers, and selecting one, presented it to Warren, saying, "I received it from Matthew Calvert himself."

"And he is no more," said Warren: "the report of his death reached my ears a long time ago."

"He is no more," replied Mandeville. "But look! there is a proof which Doctor Mordaunt cannot controvert."

"By heaven, 'tis as you proclaim it!"—and an expression of joy seized upon the stockbroker's countenance: then he immediately added, "The villain!—who could have thought this? And now I have him in my power!"

"Yes—Mordaunt is in your power," rejoined Mandeville. "Whose name comes next? Sir Moses Bellamy. Listen!"

Mandeville entered into particulars concerning this individual. Then the name of Mr. Smithers, a schoolmaster at Norfolk, was mentioned; and concerning him likewise certain information was forthcoming. Then the name of Michael Casey was adduced; and Mandeville still proved himself able to make important revelations.

"Is there any one else?" he inquired when his narrative in respect to Michael Casey was finished.

"There is no one else, I think, who is likely to press me at this particular moment. Nevertheless," continued Warren, after a minute's reflection, "there is an individual, who if he happen to suspect anything, and were to turn round upon me, could in a moment work me the direst mischief—"

"You mean Seymour, the great railway contractor," interjected Mandeville: and then he in his turn meditated profoundly for some brief space. "Respecting this man," he presently went on to say, "I will tell you nothing—there are certain reasons—"

"Do not leave me at his mercy," exclaimed Warren, "after all you have done to save me from the power of the rest!"

"I do not mean to leave you at his mercy," replied Mandeville; "but at the same time I do not intend to draw away the veil of mystery as I have done in the other cases. Listen! If Mr. Seymour threatens or molests you, look him hard in the face—assume a sinister significance of expression—and say to him these words: '*There is a secret in your life which you little think is known to me, but which in an extraordinary manner has come into my possession, and for the establishment of which proofs would not be wanting. Beware how you drive me to desperation, and force me to retaliate against you!*'—These are the words which you are to speak. Mark their effect!"

There was a brief silence, which was broken by the stockbroker, who said, "Tell me, I beseech you, how came you to be aware of my difficulties? For you must understand that it is of vital importance for me to know in what quarters they are suspected: for I did not even think that my head clerk Phipps entertained the slightest notion—"

"Make yourself easy on this score," interrupted Mandeville: "it was from your own lips, I tell you, that I ere now learnt enough to set me thinking; and then I saw those letters lying on the table before you. I read them—Of course you know that I did. But now we understand each other—and it is sufficient. The compact exists—does it not?"

"It does," replied Warren. "And now what is your wish in reference to Ethel Fraser, or Trevor—whichever she calls herself?"

Count Hippolyte Mandeville explained his views and gave his instructions on this point—having done which he immediately took his departure; and when he was gone, it actually appeared to Warren to be a mystery whether the entire incident were not a dream.

CHAPTER XXI.

ONE—TWO.

MR. WARREN rose at an early hour in the morning; and he said to his footman, "A lady named Mrs. Trevor will call here at nine o'clock. Present my respectful compliments, and say that most important business—Indeed," added Mr. Warren, carelessly playing with his watch-chain, "nothing less than a summons from the Chancellor of the Exchequer to attend him at his official residence in Downing Street—compels me to leave home thus early; but that I shall be most happy to receive her at six o'clock this evening."

The stockbroker then walked up to Highbury Place, where he took a cab to convey him into the City; for it was too early to have out any of his own equipages; and besides, it was considered more business-like to proceed in a public vehicle, even though it were an omnibus, to one's office. On reaching his establishment, he repaired to his private room, where he was presently attended by his head clerk Mr. Phipps. This person was a middle-aged man, of sleek appearance—very respectful in his demeanour—who never said anything more than was necessary, and never seemed to know anything more than he ought to do. He was grave, yet urbane—with a look of placid business-like inscrutability; so that it was impossible to say to what extent he might be acquainted with his master's affairs, or whether indeed he suspected that there was anything wrong in them at all. Nevertheless, Mr. Warren knew that if Phipps had the slightest motive for instituting inquiries, he could scarcely fail to learn that there were some little things which were not exactly as correct as they ought to be; and therefore the question was whether such a motive had ever piqued the curiosity of the head clerk? This was the point which Mr. Warren was now anxious to clear up.

"Phipps," he said, while standing at his desk with his hat on and leisurely opening his letters, "did any one happen to call here yesterday besides the persons you mentioned to me last night? A—Count Mandeville, for instance?"

"No, sir. I don't know the name."

Warren looked very hard at his clerk over the edge of the letter which he affected to be scanning at the moment; but there was nothing in the meek bland respectfulness of Mr. Phipps' countenance to gainsay the response which he had given.

"Oh, well, I rather expected such a person. I think we shall do a considerable business with him. I am going to invest sixty or eighty thousand for him to-day—he is a man of great wealth—he was Chamberlain or something of that sort to Louis Philippe—I think he is staying at the Clarendon. So if he should call, you will of course treat him with all possible distinction."

Mr. Phipps bowed in assenting acknowledgment of the order which he had just received.

"By the bye," continued Warren, "did either of those persons who called yesterday, say anything more than you mentioned to me? I mean did they seem—"

"I do not think, sir, that I mentioned any one except the Duke of Arleigh, Mrs. Trevor, and Mr. Casey."

"Ah—no! But I saw by the letters which you left me that Mordaunt had called—and Bellamy—and Smithers—and Seymour—"

"They merely wrote their notes, sir, on finding that you were not at the office, and went away."

"Because you see, Phipps, I do not want it to be imagined," continued Warren, "that I run about on pleasure-excursions when I ought to be attending to business. What do people say—eh, Phipps?"

"They know, sir, that the business goes on as well—and I may say as prosperously, sir, when you are not here, as when you are here—though this is perhaps taking too much credit to myself—"

"Not at all, Phipps. I suppose they all do know it to be a very prosperous business—eh?"

"Oh, of course, sir. No one could doubt that," added the head clerk emphatically.

"Tis all right," thought Warren to himself; and then again addressing Mr. Phipps, he added, "By the bye, you have now been twenty years in the office—twelve in my father's time and eight in mine—and you must take another fifty pounds a-year to tack on to your salary. No thanks, Phipps! You deserve it."

The head clerk bowed very low, expressed his gratitude, and retired into the front office.

Very shortly afterwards the Duke of Arleigh was introduced; and when the usual greetings were exchanged—for they were on very friendly terms, the stockbroker being invited to his Grace's dinner-parties—the Duke said, in an anxious tone, "That lady—my mistress—will most likely call upon you about the settlement; and I wish to see her."

"That may be easily managed, my lord. I can make another appointment, and in the meanwhile give your Grace the requisite notice."

"But she will beg and beseech you to do nothing of the sort!"

"Ah, well, my lord," replied Warren, "your Grace's commands are paramount; and you can make it appear as if you dropped in quite by accident."

"That is precisely the way in which I desire the matter to be arranged. I rely upon you, Warren."

"You may, my lord," rejoined the stockbroker.

The Duke of Arleigh then took his departure; and Mr. Warren sat down to read the morning paper, as well as to reflect upon his singular interview with Count Mandeville on the preceding evening. At about eleven o'clock Doctor Mordaunt was introduced. This gentleman was about sixty years of age; and having for the greater portion of his life struggled hard against a variety of opposing influences—having endured much poverty and fought a hard battle amidst the *downs* of life in order to work his way up—he had risen to eminence and to fortune as a West End physician. He was a tall, thin, spare man

and if his voice had any suavity or his manner any urbanity, both were the result of a severe and continuous tutoring rather than the natural attributes of the individual himself.

"Mr. Warren," he at once said, "I have called at this hour at much inconvenience to myself, to receive my scrip in the Constantinople and Belgrade Railway; and if it be not forthcoming, to know the reason why. I have learnt, sir, that the other shareholders have received their scrip—"

"Oh, sir, if you adopt such a tone with me," interrupted Mr. Warren, at once taking the matter with a high hand, "I can very soon give you an answer."

"Then pray do, sir," responded the physician: "and let that answer be the production of my scrip, to the amount of six thousand pounds in the Turkish Railway."

"And what, sir, if I tell you that you must have the kindness to wait awhile, until—"

"I do not choose to wait, sir! I have danced attendance upon you until I am tired—you have put me off with all kinds of excuses—and I will either have my scrip; or, or—" and Dr. Mordaunt fumed and grew red in the face, preparatory to giving vent to the threats which however he did not exactly like to throw forth from his lips except as a last resource.

"Or what, sir?" asked the stockbroker sternly.

"Well, Mr. Warren, if you compel me to speak out, I must tell you candidly that I shall apply to the Lord Mayor."

"Very good, sir," said Warren, with the most unflinching coolness. "We will go to the Lord Mayor together;"—he added, putting on his hat and then beginning to draw on his gloves.

"What insolence is this?" exclaimed the physician. "Do you forget, sir, that you are a sworn broker of the City of London, and that I can obtain a warrant against you for malversation or embezzlement?"

"And have you forgotten, sir, that you are a member of the medical profession, and that I can procure a warrant against you—"

"A warrant against me?"—and Mordaunt was evidently staggered—smitten indeed with a sudden terror—so that he became white as a sheet.

"Mandeville has not deceived me!" thought Warren to himself; and he chuckled inwardly.—"You had better sit down a moment, doctor, while I tell you a tale of family misfortune, the real facts of which have only just come within my knowledge, or else I should have long ago taken the requisite steps to bring an offender to justice."

Mordaunt sank, gasping for breath, and ashy pale, upon a chair.

"Fifteen years ago," resumed Warren, "when I was a mere youth, my sister Jane, who was a few years older than myself, died somewhat suddenly. You, Doctor Mordaunt—then plain Mr. Mordaunt, a poor struggling surgeon—attended upon her. You made such a report of the nature of her illness and the cause of her death, as to preclude the possibility of suspicion in respect to the actual facts—"

"Mr. Warren, if you mean, sir, to asperse my character, I will not stop here—"

"Retain your seat, sir," interrupted the stockbroker: "you *must* and *shall* hear me!"—then,

as the physician again sank down upon the seat whence he was endeavouring to rise, Warren went on to say, "The facts of that case have only just come to my knowledge. My poor sister had yielded to the influence of a secret passion which she formed for a young clerk in my father's office—a mere boy of nineteen or twenty. His name was Matthew Calvert. She was in a way to become a mother—you were made the confidant of her shame—she placed fifty guineas in your hand—and in consideration of this bribe you undertook to destroy the evidence of her disgrace while it was yet unborn. She perished—"

"'Tis false, sir! false as hell!" exclaimed Mordaunt.

"'Tis true, sir!" responded Warren sternly. "The wretched boy, Matthew Calvert, who was afterwards transported for the forgery of my father's name—"

"What do you mean, sir?" cried the Doctor vehemently. "Matthew Calvert has long been dead! You will not dare bring forward some base hireling of your own to personate him?"

"No: I admit that he is dead. But—"

"This is preposterous, sir!" exclaimed Mordaunt vehemently. "It is a vile fiction which you have trumped up without the slightest shadow of a proof—"

"The proof? It is here!" cried Warren. "A letter, written by your own hand, Doctor Mordaunt—addressed to young Calvert immediately after my poor sister's death—conjuring him to keep the seal of silence on his lips—"

A deep groan, anguish-wrung from the breast of the miserable physician, attested but too evidently the stupendous truth of the painful narrative; and the stockbroker chuckled inwardly. Then a deep silence prevailed in that room; until at length Dr. Mordaunt, rising from his seat with an utter desolation of countenance, said in a deep hollow voice, "Give me that letter, Mr. Warren—and I will write you a receipt for the money which I placed in your hands."

The stockbroker opened a cupboard, in which wines, spirits, and cordials were kept; and pouring some brandy into a glass, he handed it to the physician, who seemed as if he were about to drop. No thirsty traveller on Sahara's vast arid wild, ever tossed off the pellucid draught of water more greedily than did the wretched Mordaunt pour that potent alcohol down his throat. Then, with a long sigh indicative of some kind of relief, he sat down at the desk and penned a receipt for the money which he had lodged in Mr. Warren's hands for the purchase of shares in the Constantinople and Belgrade Railway. The stockbroker then gave him the damning proof of his guilt of a by-gone year when under poverty's stern pressure he accepted the temptation held out; and Mordaunt, securing it in his pocket-book, took his departure without another word.

"One!" said Warren to himself, as he placed the receipt upon his file.

Another hour passed; and then Sir Moses Bellamy was introduced. This was a tall, portly, florid-complexioned man, about fifty years of age, and dressed with great nicety. He was immensely rich, and habitually dwelt in some provincial town, where he possessed large factories. He had received the title of Knighthood, through having in his capacity of Mayor, taken up some fulsome

corporation address to the Sovereign. He had risen from nothing; but he was by no means proud of being considered the architect of his own fortunes. On the contrary, he liked as little as possible to refer to the obscurity and the struggles of his earlier years. In his own neighbourhood he had the reputation of being a hard master; but he made a great show of philanthropy—while the John Bull openness of his looks tended to aid in the deception. The benevolence of his aspect covered and concealed the innate worthlessness of his heart, just as the smooth and polished veneer hides the inferior material upon which it is laid.

"My dear Warren," he began, shaking the stockbroker's hand with apparent effusion, "I am delighted to fall in with you! I particularly want to make a settlement of that twenty thousand on my daughter, who is going to be married, you know, to Sir Peregrine Peacock—a good enough match, you know, though situated as I am, I might perhaps have aspired higher. I shall regale all my factory people—huns and ginger beer *ad libitum*—no alcoholic liquor, Warren! But come, make haste, there's a dear good fellow! for I am in a hurry."

"But I am in no hurry, Sir Moses," answered Warren.

"How? what? You don't mean to say that there's any difficulty—"

"But I do. There's a very great difficulty. The truth is, Sir Moses," continued the stockbroker, with a coolness that was perfectly astonishing to the portly Knight, "my funds are all so locked up at this moment—"

"Your funds, sir?" exclaimed Bellamy, his face becoming of a most apoplectic redness. "They are *my* funds! I entrusted them to you—I told you to do a particular thing with them—In fact, I have suspected for two or three days past that there was something wrong; but for fear of being mistaken, I did not choose to make inquiries."

"I tell you, Sir Moses, you cannot have your money. Now don't bluster or make a noise in the office," continued Warren, hastily and threateningly; "for if you do you will only force me into a retaliation which will lead to the most painful exposure."

"Exposure?"—and Sir Moses looked half frightened and half doubting whether he heard aright.

"Yes—I mean exposure, Sir Moses:"—and then Warren, walking straight up to his client, said in a deep but perfectly audible whisper, "You would scarcely like it to be known that some years ago the *now* wealthy Sir Moses Bellamy, who holds his head so high, was a prisoner in Newgate for some low base felony!"

All the colour fled from the naturally ruficund countenance—the wretched man's under-jaw dropped—and he trembled violently.

"Again is Mandeville right!" thought Warren within himself: and ecstatic was his inward chuckling.

"Mr. Warren," said the abject Bellamy, so soon as he could recover the slightest power of utterance, "it is a terrible secret which you have got in your possession: but I see by the manner in which you are using it, that we may either ruin each other, or that there is an arrangement to be made."

"Whichever you like, Sir Moses: for when you entered the room, you found me a desperate man—although perhaps I did not immediately show it."

"But who told you of this hideous secret?"

"A person who will not mention it again," replied Warren. "Of this you may rest assured."

"What would you have me do? Do you want time for the payment of the money—it is a very large sum—"

"A mere trifle to you!—an enormous amount to me! Give me a receipt in full—and as God is my judge the secret shall never more pass my lips."

"It is a high price which I am to pay for the keeping of this secret," said Sir Moses with the tone and look of a man who was profoundly humiliated; "but I nevertheless assent."

He sat down at the desk; and with a trembling hand he penned the receipt. He then expressed an entreaty that the stockbroker would keep the secret inviolable; and he took his departure.

"Two!" exclaimed Mr. Warren, as he placed that receipt upon his file.

It was now one o'clock; and the stockbroker thought of taking some lunch. He felt elate and happy: he had already been relieved in the space of a few hours of an immense load of difficulty—and he had therefore every reason to calculate upon the efficacy of Count Mandeville's information and suggestions in the cases which remained to be settled.

"It is one o'clock, Phipps," he said to his head clerk, as he paused in the outer office; "and I think I shall just run down to Greenwich and get a snack at the Trafalgar. I shall be back by three. If anybody calls in the meantime, just say I'm gone—Where had you better say? Oh, up to Downing Street, to wait upon the Chancellor of the Exchequer, according to special summons."

Mr. Phipps ventured to smile faintly but very blandly, hewing at the same time; and Mr. Warren passed out of the office. Taking a cab, he proceeded to the London Bridge Station; and thence in a few minutes he was transported by the railway to Greenwich. He bent his steps to the Trafalgar Hotel, where he was conducted to a private room; and he ordered an exquisite repast to be speedily served up.

Now who does the reader suppose happened to be in the adjacent apartment at that world-renowned establishment for fish dinners and choice wines? None other than Mr. Sylvester Casey, who had brought down his mistress, the handsome Alice Denton, to regale her with a little banquet. It had certainly required a great deal of cajolery on the part of Alice to induce Sylvester to launch out into such an extravagance: but she had however succeeded; and there they were seated at a table placed close against the open window, dividing their attention between the good things on the dishes before them, and the pleasant view which the casement afforded. It was a bright and beautiful day; the steamers, crowded with passengers, were passing to and fro on the bosom of the Thames; and there were likewise several beautiful little vessels belonging to the Thames Yacht Club, cruising in that part of the river which takes a grand sweep round from Greenwich to Blackwall.

"How pleasant this is!" said Alice, when one course of fish had been disposed of and the waiter was about to bring in another.

"Well, it's pleasant enough," answered Sylvester—"but deuced expensive. Indeed I don't see the fun of your having ordered salmon cutlets in addition to eels and whitebait—"

"Nonsense, Sylvester!" said Miss Denton: "you know you promised me the regular fish dinner; and I was determined to have it all. So don't go and make yourself miserable, nor me either, by your meanness."

"Meanness? Come, that's rather too strong!" exclaimed Sylvester angrily. "Mean indeed! Why, look at the wine!"—and he pointed to a pint of sherry which he had ordered.

"I can't bear sherry—I never drink it," said Alice. "Oh, here is a waiter. Let us order—"

"Have some ale, dear," said her protector, entreatingly: then in order to show off before the waiter, he stuck his quizzing-glass in his eye, ran his fingers through his hair, and talking very loud, went on to say, "Not but that it is quite the same to me what you drink, my dear. Only, you know,"—here he kicked her under the table—"champagne always *does* disagree with you; and I know"—here he gave her another kick—"you can't bear Hock."

"Well, never mind about the champagne disagreeing with me," interrupted Alice, with a mischievous smile. "I will risk it for once."

"Nonsense!" muttered Sylvester in a savage undertone. "Waiter, a pot of—"

"Yes, waiter—a bottle of champagne:" and then Alice, laughing merrily, added, "You see, dear Sylvester, I am determined to make myself ill for once!"

"What the devil did you do this for?" demanded the young man the instant the door had closed behind the waiter. "Didn't you think the bill would be heavy enough as it was?"

"Oh, come," interrupted Alice gaily, "if you object to pay for the champagne, I am perfectly willing to do so out of my own purse."

"I was only in fun, Alice. How deuced sharp you are at taking one at one's word! At the same time I think the ale would have been better. But no matter, as the champagne is ordered—"

"Hush! here it comes," said Miss Denton: and in a few moments the report of the flying cork echoed through the apartment.

The countenance of the waiter beamed with satisfaction, for a waiter is always pleased with visitors who drink expensive wine.

"What were you telling me just now?" asked Alice after a pause, during which glasses of champagne were quaffed and fresh dishes were placed upon the table,—"*something about your father being in a very ill humour this morning?*"

"Why, yes—the governor was out of sorts," replied Sylvester; "and he pulled such a precious long face when I asked him for money, that one would really have thought that he was afraid of being made bankrupt. So you see, Alice, the more difficult it gets for me to bleed the old fellow, the more you ought to be obliged for what I do for you."

"Don't talk to me in this strain, Sylvester,—or else you will make me angry. Instead of doing much for me, you get more and more reluctant every time I speak to you on money-matters.

But we won't quarrel now, over these salmon cutlets and this excellent champagne! You were going to tell me why your father was so cross."

"Ah! the governor—who is never in the best of tempers at any time—was as contrarily as possible. But it was enough to make him though!—and I shouldn't like to be in the shoes of a certain stockbroker whom the governor means to tounce this afternoon."

"What! beat him—chastise him, with his fists or with a horsewhip?"

"Deuce a bit! The governor doesn't fight with those weapons. It will be a warrant from the Mansion House or a summons from the Bankruptcy Court, unless the stockbroker cashes up."

"Does he owe your father much?" inquired Miss Denton.

"About five thousand," replied Sylvester,—"*a great deal too much to lose. The governor suspects that there's something wrong in the affair; so he's determined to have his money back again; and if it isn't forthcoming, Mr. Warren—that's the name of the stockbroker—stands a devilish good chance of sleeping to-night in Newgate. The governor told me he should go to him precisely at three o'clock this afternoon; so at that hour I expect there will be a regular shindy.*"

"Well," said Mr. Warren to himself, in the next room, as he looked at his watch, "it is only a quarter to two; so I've got exactly an hour and a quarter before me—and *then* we shall see which will have most reason to look small, Mr. Michael Casey or myself."

The fact was that the window of the room where the stockbroker was lunching, was also open, and the table was placed against it: every syllable that Sylvester said, was therefore plainly audible to the individual whom it somewhat intimately concerned. It will perhaps be satisfactory to the reader to know that the discourse in question did not at all affect Mr. Warren's appetite; but that he did ample justice to the repast which he had ordered.

CHAPTER XXII.

THREE—FOUR—FIVE.

PRECISELY at three o'clock the stockbroker alighted from a cab at the door of his office,—on entering which he found Mr. Casey senior waiting for him.

"Ah," said Mr. Warren, with an easy air of indifference, half familiar, half cool,—"*I knew you were to be here at three; and so I hurried back on purpose to meet you. Walk into my private office.*"

"And pray, Mr. Warren," demanded the usurer, "how did you know that I meant to call here punctually at three? I did not say so in the note which I left yesterday."

"No—you simply said that you should insist upon seeing me some time to-day. But I knew you were coming at three. I knew likewise," continued Mr. Warren, deliberately drawing off his gloves and laying them across the brim of his hat,—"*I knew likewise that you had expressed the most friendly intentions towards me—*"



"I? what? eh?" ejaculated Casey, with mingled surprise and anger depicted upon his sallow and hard-lined countenance. "You are mocking me, Mr. Warren!"

"Not a bit of it. I was merely about to observe that you expressed the most friendly intentions, to the extent that you were quite prepared to apply to the Lord Mayor for a warrant against me; or else take out a summons in the Bankruptcy Court."

"Well, sir, and if I did thus express myself," said Casey, savagely, "I felt that I was justified. How you came to learn that I made use of such threats, I know not and scarcely care: but I shall assuredly put them into force—"

"What! threats to me?" ejaculated the stockbroker. "How dare you, sir—"

"How dare I? I will soon show you. Give
No. 13.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

me back my five thousand pounds—the money that you told me you would double for me—the sum which I advanced with reluctance and even with misgiving—I can't think how I was such a fool—"

"I tell you what it is, Mr. Pringle," interrupted the stockbroker; "if you use such terms—But what is the matter with you now?"

"You said—you said," gasped Casey; and he trembled visibly,—"you said some name—"

"Did I? Oh, perhaps in the hurry of discourse I addressed you by your proper name instead of your assumed one."

"My assumed one?" repeated Casey, eyeing the stockbroker with the most intense anxiety.

"Why, yes," exclaimed Warren, now affecting a certain degree of impatience. "Do you think I am ignorant of the fact that you are Rupert

Pringle who ran away from the neighbourhood of Southdale in Dorsetshire about five-and-twenty years ago?"

"Who told you this? who told you this?" asked Casey, full of a nervous agitation.

"That is my secret," replied Warren. "Suffice it for you to know that I am acquainted with everything that concerns you,—how you forged the name of Squire Ponsford—how you basely deserted his mistress, whom you seduced and brought up to London with you—how you at the same time fell in with a girl who had a little money, and whom you married—how you went out to New South Wales—"

"Well, what of all this?" demanded Casey; for by this name we shall continue to call him. "What have my private affairs got to do with you?"

"Oh, nothing," answered Warren, as if with a careless air,—“only it might probably make some little difference with regard to your respectability, and injure that delightful son of yours, as well as perhaps interfere with your daughter's prospects, if it were generally known that Mr. Michael Casey of Hatton Garden is identical with a certain Rupert Pringle who ran away from England on account of a felony five-and-twenty years ago."

"I see how it is—and I know what you mean," said Casey, the expression of whose countenance was now fearfully sinister with the pent up rage which was in his breast. "You intend to threaten me if I insist upon having back my money. I confess that my character is somewhat in your power; but your credit is likewise in my keeping. Let us mutually remain silent. Give me security for my money, and you may then keep it as long as you like."

"I have no security to give," replied Warren curtly.

"Then pay me a part down, and give me bills for the remainder."

"I have not a shilling to pay down."

Casey tapped his stick upon the floor with rage; and then almost gasping for utterance, he said, "Give me bills at short dates for the whole, and get some friend to back them."

"I have no friend whom I could ask," rejoined Warren; "and I never give bills."

"Then what the deuce do you propose?" demanded Casey, now perfectly aghast.

"I propose that you should give me a receipt in full for the money which I owe you; and in return I will forget that Mr. Casey bears likewise the name of Pringle."

There was some more hesitation on the usurer's part; but he was ultimately compelled to give in,—Warren the whole time maintaining a tone and air of calm determination. It was almost like parting with life itself when Casey sat down to pen the receipt; and as he hobbled on his infirm limbs out of the office, he muttered bitter maledictions between his teeth.

"Three!" mentally exclaimed Warren, as he added the receipt to his file.

It was close upon five o'clock; and the stock-broker was on the point of leaving his office, his elegant phaeton and pair having arrived to convey him home to Highbury,—when a short, thin, bustling individual, about forty years of age, came rushing in. His clothes were good, but his

toilet generally indicated an indifference amounting almost to neglect. His pockets were stuffed with papers—letters, prospectuses, &c.: he carried Bradshaw's "Railway Guide" about his person, so as ever to have it ready at hand for instantaneous reference; and a memorandum-book stuck out of one of his waistcoat pockets. He carried his gloves in his hand; and he had a habit of referring to his watch every two or three minutes. He was ever on the alert, and thought nothing of suddenly taking his seat in a train to go a journey of some hundreds of miles at only a few moments' notice. He was a great railway contractor: he lived well, kept his horses and his yacht—his town-house and his country-seat,—though he himself benefited but very little by all these costly sources of enjoyment, for he was generally immersed in business from morning till night.

"Ah, Seymour—is it you?" said the stock-broker, with an easy air of familiarity. "Just come in time to run home with me in the phaeton and dine at Highbury."

"Dine indeed, my dear fellow! Devil a bit of dinner shall I get to-day—unless it be a hurried chop somewhere at about nine o'clock—"

"So full of business—eh? I got your note last night—"

"I have been to Edinburgh since I wrote it yesterday at three o'clock. Only came back an hour ago!" and Mr. Seymour kept on looking at his watch as he thus spoke.

"Well, but how long did you have to stay in Edinburgh?"

"Three hours exactly. That was enough for my purpose. I am off to Bristol to-morrow morning by the nine o'clock train. I am utterly over head and ears in business! And now I am wasting my time by chatting here—"

"Do come home with me and snatch a bit of dinner."

"Couldn't for the world!" cried Seymour, again looking at his watch.

"The phaeton shall stand at the door to bring you back when you like—"

"It can't be done! I ought now to be at six different places at the same time!"—and again was the watch referred to.

"But you will kill yourself at this rate!"

"Not I, my dear fellow! By the bye, I shall snatch a couple of hours next Monday just to drop in at the yacht-dinner. Of course you will go? And now I'll tell you what I came about. Write me a check for three thousand; and bear in mind that I shall want twelve the day after to-morrow on my return from Bristol. I think fifteen thousand will just balance our account for that last hatch of shares I placed in your hands."

"The sum is exactly fifteen thousand," said Warren, referring to a book that lay upon his desk.

"I thought so. Come, write me the cheque—and cross it through Glyn's."

"It can't be done, my dear fellow."

"That's good!" ejaculated Seymour, with a laugh. "Because I can't dine with you, you won't write me the cheque. But joking apart, Warren—do make haste, my dear fellow—I'm really in a deuce of a hurry!" and he again looked at his watch.

"Don't be startled, Seymour—I have got

something to tell you—I know you'll be surprised—but it's no use mincing the matter—and therefore I tell you candidly," continued Warren, with the utmost coolness imaginable, "that so far from being able to pay fifteen thousand pounds, I question whether I could at this moment command as many shillings."

"Good God, Warren! you don't mean it?" exclaimed Seymour, who looked so amazed that it seemed as if he might be knocked down by a straw. "You insolvent? Pshaw, man! it is a joke!"

"A very serious joke, then—and one that is only too true," rejoined Warren.

"If I take you at your word," cried Seymour, his whole manner now suddenly changing from the friendliest familiarity to the sternest implacability, "I should be compelled to look upon you as a scoundrel and to expose you as a fraudulent insolvent."

"Now listen, Mr. Seymour," said the stockbroker, assuming a very determined air, and at the same time throwing a certain mysterious knowingness into his looks; "this is harsh language which you are using towards me, and I desire that you will not dare venture to repeat it. Perhaps you fancy that you can address me thus with impunity? But let me tell you that there is a certain secret in your life—a secret which you little imagine to be known to me, but which nevertheless has by some extraordinary means come to my knowledge—Ah! you know to what I allude!"—and Warren thus interrupted himself because he perceived that Seymour turned very pale.

"Enough, enough!" said this individual, in a low broken voice: and then he turned towards the window, where he stood as still as a statue for more than a minute.

"By heaven, Mandeville is again right!" thought the stockbroker to himself: and again his inward chuckling was characterized by an ineffable rapture.

"How you could have known this secret, Warren," said the railway contractor, now slowly turning away from the window, "passes my comprehension. A secret which methought was buried in the very tomb itself!"

"Ask me not to explain how it reached my knowledge," interrupted the stockbroker. "Let it be sufficient for you to know that never until this occasion have my lips breathed a syllable in allusion to it; and it rests with you to determine whether it shall ever again issue from them."

Seymour reflected with evident painfulness for a few moments; and then he said, "You now comprehend wherefore I make my life an incessant hurry and agitation—why I plunge headlong into the vortex of business—never finding that I have too much to do, but ever dreading lest I should not have sufficient! It is to escape from thought."

He paused: and Warren thought within himself, "What in the name of heaven can this secret be?"

"I will say no more upon the subject," resumed Mr. Seymour suddenly. "Alas! I do feel that I who have been so guilty, should not have addressed such harsh terms to you! I pity you, Warren. Keep the money—I forgive you the debt. Ah! and if you have any pity for me,

I beseech and implore that you will keep my secret!"

"Yes—I will keep it. But what guarantee have I that you may not some day leave the country, and setting the idea of exposure at defiance, write to me and demand the payment of this sum? Or you may die, and your executors—"

"Enough, enough!" exclaimed Seymour impatiently: and then placing himself at the desk, he penned a few rapid lines on a slip of paper. "There!"—and starting up abruptly from the seat, he rushed forth from the office.

"Four!" said the stockbroker with a thrill of delight as he placed the receipt upon his file.

Mr. Phipps now entered to inquire whether there were any farther instructions which his master might have to give?

"No," said Mr. Warren carelessly. "I think that you can now go, Phipps: I suppose the other clerks have already taken their departure? By the bye, there will be some important entries to make in the books to-morrow. Mordaunt—Bellamy—Casey—and Seymour, have all four received checks for their money; and so, you see, I have paid away a great many thousands to-day."

Phipps simply bowed, with an air as if he thought the proceeding quite natural and straightforward enough; and as he left the inner office, Warren said to himself, "I was perfectly right: the fellow did not entertain the slightest suspicion of my embarrassments. Now there is only that pedagogue Smithers who is pressing me. I almost wish he had come!"

The door opened; and Phipps, reappearing, said, "If you please, sir, there is the gentleman from Norfolk. He hopes that you will see him for a few moments."

"Oh, to be sure! Let him be admitted."

Mr. Smithers was accordingly introduced. He was a short, stout, elderly man, with a red and pimpled face; and he wore green spectacles. He was dressed in black, with a white cravat, and evidently strove to assume a clerical air.

"I ought to apologise, Mr. Warren, for calling after business-hours," he began in a dictatorial voice, as if he were addressing one of his pupils: "but I feel that I need not do so after having vainly danced attendance here all day yesterday—and I may add, without deviation from the truth, after having fruitlessly applied a hundred times during the past twelvemonth for the legacy which you received on my behalf. I wrote you a letter yesterday—"

"Which I have not read, Mr. Smithers," interrupted Warren, coolly.

"Not read it, sir? But no matter! Doubtless you are now prepared to pay me the legacy of three thousand three hundred pounds, in good and lawful money of this realm, according to the will of the testator, my late beloved sister, Tabitha Smithers—"

"You need not recite the particulars," interrupted Warren. "I have no doubt you took the trouble to indite them all in your letter of yesterday."

"Yes, sir—in a plain running hand, with all the i's dotted, and the upstrokes properly defined, so that you should not fail to comprehend—"

"Just as if I, being your deceased sister's executor, did not comprehend the business even

better than you! Do you not know, Mr. Smithers, that executors are allowed a clear twelvemonth for probate and administration of a will, and so forth?"

"And fourteen good calendar months have now elapsed, Mr. Warren, since the demise of my beloved sister, at the age of sixty-eight, leaving behind her a large circle of friends to lament the irreparable loss——"

"All that may doubtless be read upon the tombstone," interrupted Warren. "But let us come to the point. Suppose I were to tell you, sir, that I am not prepared to pay you this amount——"

"Then, sir——and the pimply face became very red, while the small eyes gleamed through the green glasses,—"I should be compelled to inform you that I am determined to place the matter in the hands of my solicitors, Wrench, Wracken, and Thumbscrew, of Thavies' Inn."

Mr. Warren laughed; and then the schoolmaster also laughed, his humour suddenly changing, for he thought that the stockbroker was joking—and he said so.

"You are a good fellow, Smithers, after all!" exclaimed Warren, with a patronizing air. "By the bye, what are your terms?"

"Ah! he has got me a pupil!" thought Smithers.

"My terms, my dear sir," he proceeded, "are forty guineas for youths under twelve—and fifty above that age. French, Drawing, and Dancing extra. A silver spoon and six towels indispensable. Quarter's noticed required on the removal of a lad. Cash payments quarterly. On other terms Sampson Smithers respectfully declines doing business."

"Very good and very proper. How many pupils have you, Mr. Smithers?"

"Fifty-three, my dear sir. Ah, I forgot the new boy from Nackington in Kent. So with the Nackington boy, we are fifty-four. My butcher has a standing order for three legs of mutton every day——"

"And therefore, with those high terms and all the extras, and with that number of pupils, you make a good thing of it, Mr. Smithers—eh?"

"Well, I don't think I ought to complain, my dear sir: and if you be going to recommend me a young gentleman—or two—or even three——"

"I shall bear you in mind. But at the same time," continued Mr. Warren, now looking very serious, "it would be a great pity if this fine school of your's were suddenly to be broken up——"

"Broken up, sir?" exclaimed the pedagogue, half in indignation, and half in consternation. "I really am at a loss——"

"Oh, I can soon satisfy you as to my meaning," interrupted the stockbroker. "There is a little secret which happens to be known to me——"

"A—a secret, sir?" and Mr. Smithers evidently grew uneasy and agitated.

"Mandeville is again right!" was the joyous reflection which swept through Warren's brain.

"Yes, Mr. Smithers—a secret. In plain terms," continued the stockbroker, now speaking with great abruptness, "what would become of your establishment if it were known that some fourteen or fifteen years ago you were a felon on board a hulk at Woolwich, where you acted as schoolmaster?"

It was a sound between a moan of anguish and a yell of despair which burst from the lips of the wretched Smithers as these words smote his ears; while Warren surveyed him with the air of one who knew that he was right in reference to the fact so overwhelmingly enunciated. Then Smithers began to whimper; and he said, "For God's sake, do not expose me, sir! Do not ruin me! I have never done you any harm—I never will! Keep the money—do what you like with it—pay me the interest—or don't pay me at all, just as you think fit——"

"Well, the truth is, I have scarcely a shilling to pay it with," interrupted Warren. "I am almost a ruined man; but I may recover myself if I can only maintain my credit. No one knows this secret but yourself; and therefore if it transpires, I shall immediately understand that it is you who have maliciously whispered the evil report concerning me. Keep my secret, I say—and I will keep your's. Ah, by the bye, just give me a little receipt for form's sake—and then our business will be settled."

The loss was a heavy one to the schoolmaster; but it was preferable to the exposure of his antecedents and the breaking up of his establishment. In this philosophical light he saw it; and he hastened to give the receipt: but his hand trembled somewhat—and we are not quite sure that he was very careful in dotting his i's or clearly defining his upstrokes.

"Five!" said the triumphant stockbroker, as he placed the receipt upon his file, when Mr. Smithers had taken his departure.

In another minute Mr. Warren leapt into his phaeton, and drove away with a light heart towards Highbury. It was close upon six o'clock when he reached his house; and the footman who opened the door, said, "If you please, sir, Mrs. Trevor is waiting."

Warren at once proceeded to the parlour to which the unfortunate Ethel had been shown; and he bowed to her with the utmost courtesy, expressing his regret that he was unable to see her in the morning, but assuring her that he was now at perfect leisure to attend to her.

"Perhaps I need scarcely ask, sir," said the afflicted young lady, "whether you know who it was——"

"I can anticipate your meaning, madam," said the stockbroker. "It was the Duke of Ardeleigh who presented you with that sum of five thousand pounds, concerning which you have doubtless called."

"Circumstances have occurred, Mr. Warren," continued Ethel, "which have led to our separation. You will spare me the recital of them. Let it be sufficient for me to state that everything is at an end between——between!"—she faltered and sobbed—then gathering courage, she added, "between his Grace and myself. Never again can I see him—and I could wish to be spared the necessity of ever having to communicate with him. To be candid with you, Mr. Warren, it was because I feared that he might suspect my intention of calling at your office, and that he would be there for the purpose of meeting me,—it was for this reason, I say, that I took the liberty of seeking you at your private residence."

"I am enabled to inform you, Mrs. Trevor——"

"Yes—I retain that name," she observed, in a scarcely audible tone, "because it is the one which my beloved child bears; and when he grows up, I must not be compelled to blush in his presence! I will tell him that his father is dead—But pardon me, Mr. Warren," she added, suddenly recollecting herself; "I have no right to obtrude my secret griefs upon you—"

"Rest assured, my dear madam, that I will befriend you if I can. What can I do for you?"

"I am so ignorant of all financial matters," replied Ethel, "that I know not upon what amount of income I may rely—"

"Ah, I understand!" interjected Warren. "You require detailed explanations? Your five thousand pounds will yield you in the three per cents, in round numbers, a hundred and fifty pounds a-year."

"I can live well—Oh, *well* upon that income!" she exclaimed, almost with joy.

"It will be paid half-yearly; and if you wish it, I can receive the amount for you and regularly transmit it to whatsoever address you may indicate. I am a man of honour, Mrs. Trevor,—I understand your position—and I pledge you my word that the Duke of Ardleigh shall never know from me where you may choose to fix your abode."

The tears trickled down Ethel's cheeks, as in the broken voice of gratitude's emotion she murmured, "You are indeed a kind friend to me! It is heaven who has sent you!"

"Never hesitate, my dear madam, to make use of me in any way wherein I can serve you. Where do you think of establishing your residence?"

"I do not know for the present—I will write to you in a few days—"

"Ah, by the bye," said Warren, "as I am to receive your dividends for you, there will be certain little authorities that you must give me. Let me see! I wonder whether I may happen to have any of the necessary forms at hand? Ah, to be sure!" he added, drawing forth some papers from his pocket. "Do you chance to have the Bank receipt which I gave you the other day?"

"Yes—it is here:" and Ethel produced it.

"Well, I must keep this. See! we will pin it on to the corner of one of these documents which you are going to sign."

Mr. Warren drew his chair to the table—hastily filled up a couple of printed forms—and handing Ethel the pen, said, "Be pleased to place your signature here."

There was so much fraternal kindness, mingled with the most courteous respect, on the part of the stockbroker, that the young lady was inspired with the fullest confidence in his good intentions. She therefore unhesitatingly signed both documents without pausing to glance at their contents; and rising from her seat, she again expressed her fervid gratitude for Mr. Warren's attentions. He escorted her as far as the front door, where they shook hands and parted, the young lady mentally invoking blessings on the head of the friend whom heaven had sent her.

Count Mandeville was in the stockbroker's dining-room, watching at the window for Ethel's departure. So soon as she had got fifty yards from the house, he issued forth—having previously exchanged a few hasty words with

Warren; and he followed upon the young lady's track. In a few minutes she reached High-bury Place; and there she took her seat in a cab, giving some instructions to the driver.

"Keep that cab in view!" said Mandeville, as he stepped into another vehicle, the driver of which he thus addressed: "do not on any account lose sight of it—and when it stops, pull up at a little distance, so that it may not be thought we have been pursuing it."

"All right, sir!"—and the cabman touched his hat, at the same giving a knowing leer.

The cab which contained Ethel, continued its way for about half-an-hour—at the expiration of which interval it stopped at a house in one of the new neighbourhoods springing up in the vicinage of Camden Town. There the young lady alighted; and Count Mandeville also descended from his cab at a little distance where it had halted.

On reaching the lodging which she had temporarily taken, Ethel's first care was to assure herself that her beloved boy was safe and well; for her mind had been so attenuated by recent occurrences that she was rendered nervous and mistrustful in reference to everything. Scarcely had she embraced the little Alfred and put off her bonnet and scarf, when a double knock at the front door resounded through the house; and in a few moments Ethel was informed that a gentleman desired to speak with her on very particular business. At this announcement a deadly pallor seized upon her, for she thought it must be the Duke of Ardleigh who had traced her thither: but she was soon relieved from this sudden apprehension, when the servant of the house presented the gentleman's card, and Ethel read on it a name which was utterly unknown to her. She fancied there must be some mistake; and she was about to send a message to this effect, when it occurred to her that such a proceeding might appear rude and uncourteous and it would only occupy her a moment to see the gentleman in person.

She descended to the parlour into which Count Mandeville had been shown; and she began by saying, "I think sir there must be some error—"

"None, madam, I can assure you," replied the Count, making the most polite bow. "You are Mrs. Trevor—and it was for you that I inquired."

The young lady looked astonished; and Mandeville placed a chair for her, at the same time making a gesture that she should be seated, just if he were doing the honours of his own residence instead of her's, and all with such a well-bred ease that it was impossible to deem him guilty of forwardness or presumption.

"May I ask, sir," inquired Ethel, "where you knew me? and how?"—but her voice faltered, for her own question seemed to her to be an allusion to past times and different circumstances.

"No matter where nor how I have known you," replied Mandeville. "If you had continued in prosperity I might probably have never come forward to make myself known to you: but now that misfortunes have overtaken you, I have lost no time in presenting myself as your friend.—I am here!"

Ethel was naturally bewildered by this strange

speech: indeed for a minute or two she was so confounded that she could not give utterance to another syllable. At length she said, "But who told you, sir, that I had experienced misfortunes? and of what nature do you suppose them to be?"

"Why should you wish me to recapitulate those facts which are already so painfully impressed on your memory? No—I will not do it! Suffice it that I mention one name—that of the Duke of Arleigh, to prove to you that I am conversant with everything."

Ethel blushed: then she became very pale—her lips quivered—and the tears were about to start forth from her eyes, when conquering her emotions, she said, "Is it possible that the Duke of Arleigh himself has sent you to me?"

"By heaven, no!" ejaculated Mandeville. "I obey the bidding of no man—I follow only my own inclinations. If any one were to ask me to do a particular thing, it is the very reason why I would go and do the contrary. I am a strange person—a sort of a philosopher after my own fashion, deploring the amount of evil there is in the world, and endeavouring to do some little good as a counteractive. But enough of egotism! Let us talk of your own affairs."

"I am grateful to you, Count de Mandeville," said Ethel, "for the interest—the *extraordinary interest*," she could not help saying, "which you take in my behalf; but there is really nothing wherein I could employ your friendly services."

"You are mistaken, Mrs. Trevor," replied Mandeville with an air of confidence. "There is not a lady in all London who stands more in need of true disinterested friendship than yourself."

Ethel was startled by this declaration, which was made with so much confidence, and with the keen grey eyes of the Count fixed steadily upon her. What on earth could he mean? There was about him a certain air of mystery which failed not to have its effect upon the already attenuated mind of the young lady. Indeed she felt almost frightened; and as she now sank upon the chair which he had placed for her accommodation, she faltered out, "Perhaps there are yet other calamities in store for me, and you may be acquainted with them?"

"You have commenced a severe struggle with the world, Mrs. Trevor," interjected Mandeville, "and you require the hand of friendship to sustain you. You have your son to rear—and you have not a shilling which you can call your own."

"You are mistaken, sir! you are mistaken!" exclaimed Ethel. "I have a handsome sum of money in the Bank of England."

"You have not a farthing, madam, in the Bank of England."

Ethel started: the colour again mantled on her cheeks—and she felt indignant at the curt positive contradiction she had experienced.

"I repeat my words, madam," Mandeville added: "you have not a shilling in the Funds."

"Oh, sir, this is too much!" cried Ethel. "I cannot think that you have come to insult me—"

"Heaven forbid, my poor young lady! I have come to help you just as a brother might hasten to the aid of a sister."

"But you are indeed wrong!" said Ethel mildly.

"I am indeed right," interrupted Mandeville; "and it grieves me to repeat the assertion. You think that I am ignorant of your affairs? I know them full well. The Duke of Arleigh gave you a settlement the other day, of five thousand pounds—for which amount Mr. Warren the stockbroker holds your receipts."

"What mean you?" and a vague terror was now agitating in Ethel's mind.

"I mean, my dear madam, that Warren holds your receipts; and whether you have had the money or not, it does not signify—"

"No, no! do not tell me this!" cried Ethel, as she recollected the documents which she had signed without reading them. "Would you have me believe that I have been most cruelly deceived and robbed?"

"If we must use harsh language," said Mandeville, "those are the very terms. You have been deceived and robbed."

Ethel looked aghast; and then suddenly covering her face with her hands, she moaned and murmured, "Oh, my child! my child!"

"This, you see, is the way of the world," resumed Mandeville, with an accent which seemed to be replete with cynical bitterness. "A villain robs you under the semblance of friendship, and you believe him to be sincere. I come to serve you with a feeling of real friendship; and you mistrust me! But let that pass. You have been plundered, Mrs. Trevor—"

"I will go to him!" cried Ethel passionately. "I will demand my money! I will tell him that it is my child's bread which he is taking from me!"

"And he will laugh in your face. No!—he will shut the door in your face; and he will bid his lacqueys give you into custody if you dare create a disturbance. Think you that he is a villain without surrounding himself by villanous defences? There are your receipts—and that is sufficient for him."

"Oh, but the law will not suffer me to be thus robbed! Justice may be appealed to!"

"Yes—and in the presence of that same justice there will be a complete exposure of your late connexion with the Duke."

"True! true!"—and the wretched Ethel sank back in her chair like one annihilated. "Ah!" she suddenly ejaculated; "the Duke is rich—the amount to him will be nothing! For his child's sake I must make an appeal to him! Alas, yes—despite all my vows to the contrary!"

"The Duke of Arleigh left England this afternoon," said Mandeville, "for a three years' tour upon the Continent. No letters can reach him except through his wife."

Ethel groaned; and then for a few minutes she sobbed violently. Mandeville spoke words of comfort, and with an air of so much delicacy and true friendliness that the poor young lady could not for an instant doubt his sincerity.

"And after all," she abruptly exclaimed, as she wiped away her tears, "it is better that he should have gone ahead!—yes, far better that I should not have the power to apply to him! Oh, now I understand the duty which I have to fulfil! I must work to earn bread for my beloved boy! God has suffered me to be sorely afflicted—but he will not abandon me altogether!"

"God has not abandoned you," answered the

Count, in a tone which struck Ethel as being profoundly solemn. "Am not I here to serve you?"

"Oh, but a stranger!—one whom to my knowledge I never saw before!"

"No matter," interrupted Mandeville. "You shall judge of me by my actions. I told you just now that I am a strange being—capricious and wayward—"

"Count de Mandeville," said Ethel, speaking mildly yet firmly, "I proffer you my best thanks for your kind proposals; but I cannot accept them. There are no services which under existing circumstances I could with propriety accept at the hands of a stranger."

"It is false delicacy, madam," said the Count, rising from his seat and taking up his hat: "but the admirable modesty of your conduct only renders me all the more anxious to serve you. At the same time I have my own little pride—and I will not press my good intentions where they are unacceptable. Madam, I wish you good evening."

"You are offended with me!" cried Ethel, hurt by his manner, for she suddenly dreaded lest her own conduct had savoured of ingratitude. "I would not have you depart in anger! It is only too clear that you came to serve me with the kindest and best intentions—"

"And perhaps that I might repay a certain debt owing by my father towards your father."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Ethel. "Did your father know mine?"

"Yes—certainly. Your father was—"

"Captain Fraser," interjected Ethel, eagerly.

"I was just going to say it. Captain Fraser, of—"

"Of Southdale."

"Of Southdale, in Dorsetshire," proceeded Mandeville, just as if he had been going to give utterance to the names without the slightest prompting from her lips.

"But it was before *your* father settled at Southdale that *my* father knew him; for at that time my father was a refugee in England, and he received the utmost kindness from your sire. I know that there was a sum of money—a couple of hundred pounds—which my father borrowed from your's. I found the memorandum after my father's death."

"How strange!" murmured Ethel, now trembling with a deep inward emotion, for she felt as if she had fallen in with some old friend. "But do tell me—how did you find out—"

"Ask me no questions now," interrupted Mandeville: "but tell me at once, Mrs. Trevor—will you not at least permit me to acquit myself towards you of the debt which my father owed to your's?"

The terms on which she stood with Count Mandeville now appeared to be very different indeed from what they were a few minutes back. Moreover Ethel thought of her child, and of the immense use which such a sum would be to her. It was also a sum which under existing circumstances she might receive without the slightest deviation from the path of delicacy and propriety.

"Your conduct, sir, is as honourable as it is kind and generous," she answered; "and I must not refuse that which heaven itself seems to have sent me."

"At noon to-morrow I will be here," answered

Mandeville; and then with a most courteous salutation, and with only a moment's pressure of the fair hand which was gratefully extended to him, he took his departure.

"She is mine!" he said to himself, as he entered the cab which was waiting for him at a little distance.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PAMELA.

We must now return to the Firs, in the neighbourhood of Southdale. And first of all, reverting to the stealthy visit of Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn to the mansion, we should observe that Squire Ponsford took very good care not to proclaim what had happened to him during that night. The only indication of the burglarious entry that could attract notice, was the semicircular hole which had been cut in one of the panes of glass in the library window. Mr. Ponsford did not want it to be suspected that anything of such an unusual character had taken place; and therefore he smashed the pane, attributing it to accident and ordering a new one to be put in.

But how was it that Stephen Ashborne, the new bailiff, was up at that hour of the night, and at hand to seize hold upon Tim Gaffney when the fellow penetrated into the library to procure the documents from the desk? We will explain the point. It was on that same evening that Stephen Ashborne had been engaged by Mr. Ponsford, who had told him he might have a bed at the house for that night, as the bailiff's cottage was not in readiness to receive him. Stephen Ashborne went to the servants' hall, where he announced the fact of his having obtained the vacant situation: he then intimated that he was going to sleep at the Firs for that night, but that he must proceed into the village to fetch up his trunk. The butler gave him the key of the back door, observing that as they were all early people at the Firs, they might be in bed when he should come back, and moreover that he need not hurry himself while he had that key in his possession. Having discussed a jug of ale with the good-natured butler, Stephen Ashborne returned into the village; and finding the public-house parlour filled with company, he sat down amongst the individuals present for the purpose of gleaning whatsoever he might pick up relative to the character of Squire Ponsford. The company sat up till a much later hour than usual; for the incidents of the preceding evening, in respect to Mrs. Trevor, continued to furnish ample food for conversation. Thus it was not till past midnight that Stephen Ashborne, with his trunk upon his shoulder, reached the Firs; and having let himself in with the utmost caution, he was about to creep up to the chamber which had been allotted to him, when his ear caught some sounds which at once placed him on the track of Mr. Gaffney. The reader knows what followed: Stephen Ashborne obtained possession of the documents which Gaffney sought; and Squire Ponsford remained in ignorance that they had thus fallen into the hands of his bailiff.

On the following day Stephen Ashborne took possession of the bailiff's cottage, and at once

entered upon his duties. Those with whom he was immediately brought in contact, were prepossessed in his favour on the spot, and subsequently prospected amongst themselves that they should get on very well with the new bailiff.

It was on the third day after Stephen Ashborne's introduction into his new office, that an incident occurred which we must proceed to relate. But we should preface it, by observing that the beautiful Pamela Ponsford was very fond of equestrian exercise; and when the weather was fine, she either rode out with her father amidst the most pleasant scenery of the neighbourhood, or else she would canter about the park by herself. When indulging in this recreation, she was wont to dispense with the attendance of a groom, and as she was an excellent rider, she neither entertained any apprehension on her own account, nor was any fear felt by her father on her behalf.

We have already said how exquisitely beautiful she was alike in face and in form; and we have described her figure as being short and slight, with an aerial fairy-like appearance. Indescribably captivating did she seem when mounted upon her favourite steed; and then when she was careering through the park, fancying herself to be unobserved, the bashfulness of the timid and retiring maiden was absorbed as it were in the exhilaration of spirits experienced by the equestrian heroine.

It was about noon on the third day after Stephen Ashborne's engagement at the Firs, that as the bailiff was proceeding through a distant part of the grounds, he suddenly beheld Miss Ponsford borne along upon her steed at a pace which at once convinced him that she had not purposely urged the animal into it. In short, he saw enough at a single glance to convince him that the horse was running away with her, for it was speeding on with a frightful rapidity. Equally apparent was it that the young lady had not yet lost her presence of mind—and that she not merely retained her seat with an admirable steadfastness, but that she also studied to guide the animal in such a manner as to save herself from being hurt by the projecting branches of trees. The spectacle would really have been a beautiful if it were not a painful—almost frightful one; for there was something elegant and graceful to a degree in the posture of the lovely maiden; and now, as her plumed hat flew away, her long light chestnut hair, becoming all disordered, floated upon the current of air which her wild careering progress made.

It must not however be supposed that Stephen Ashborne lingered to regale himself with the spectacle of the charming creature's peril. No sooner did he perceive it than he sprang forward:—with the keenness of a hawk's eye he embraced at a glance all the features of the place; and he dashed amidst the trees at a point where he was enabled to make a short cut, for the animal itself was careering on in a half-circuit, Pamela being enabled to guide though not to stop him. But vain was the bailiff's attempt to intercept the steed, which literally seemed to fly or to skim like a bird along the ground; and as Pamela was borne past him, like a leaf upon a hurricane, he saw that the expression of her countenance indicated the most heroic presence of mind. Alas, it

availed her not!—for in a few moments the horse stumbled over a broken bough of a tree; and in the twinkling of an eye Miss Ponsford was hurled over his head to a distance of several yards, where she remained senseless.

Stephen Ashborne was immediately on the spot, and in another moment Pamela was in his arms. She was not injured on the face:—this he perceived at a glance: but she was apparently in a lifeless condition. He approached his countenance to hers to ascertain if any breath came from her lips: but there was none. A flush suddenly past over *his* cheeks; and the next instant he fastened his lips to those of the insensible girl.

And insensible she still continued,—lying inanimate in his arms, like a beautiful statue! Yes—Oh! how beautiful!—and having withdrawn his lips from the mouth whose sweets he had been drinking in, Stephen contemplated the fair creature with a deep admiring earnestness.

"Oh! how beautiful!" was the thought which kept passing through his mind: and then he gave a profound sigh and shook his head strangely, as if to vanish some evil idea or design which had arisen in his imagination. "Oh! how beautiful!"—and again he contemplated that fair pale face with an intentness wherein a melancholy expression gradually blended itself.

All in a moment the flush again swept over his countenance, and there was an equally abrupt flaming of the eyes—a fierce flashing of those handsome dark orbs; and he muttered, "Oh! what a vengeance! what a vengeance! No—'twere villany the most hideous! But—Ah! my oath!—my mother's last words!—her blessing or her curse! God help me!"—and he averted his looks from the countenance of the inanimate girl whose motionless form still reclined in his arms.

There was then a strong wrestling between the good and the evil genii who presided over the destinies of that young man. And he felt all the influences of the struggle,—for his chest was heaving with a deep agitation—he was breathing quickly—the colour was coming and going in rapid transitions upon his countenance. Pamela now moved slightly; and a sound—very faint—scarcely audible—not quite a moan, but resembling a sigh—wavered upon her lips. The next moment Stephen Ashborne's lips were again pressed to that mouth to which the vermilion hue was slowly returning; and with an almost frantic violence he strained her to his breast.

"Vengeance!—my mother!"—and with these words hurriedly and fiercely muttered, he lifted the maiden in his arms, and ran with her towards his own cottage.

Careful to keep amongst the trees, and ever and anon sweeping his looks around to assure himself that no one beheld what was passing, Stephen Ashborne pursued his rapid way. Pamela still showed some slight indications of returning consciousness,—but these were very faint, though there was not the least reason for any serious apprehension on her account. In the looks of him who bore her there was a sinister gleaming.

The cottage was reached. Stephen had not as yet hired any servant or housekeeper to conduct his domestic affairs; and thus there was no one to observe his present proceedings. He opened the door, and carried his fair burden into the neat little habitation.



Half-an-hour afterwards Stephen Ashborne came forth alone from the cottage: there was a mingled wildness and anguish in his looks, and he seemed to be suffering from a terrible inward agitation as he flung his glances around. But all in a moment his entire demeanour changed, as he caught sight of Mr. Ponsford at a little distance. The Squire was on foot; and he was accompanied by a favourite dog—for he was accustomed thus to ramble about his estate. Yes—Stephen Ashborne's demeanour changed all in an instant; and the anguish which had previously appeared in the expression of his countenance, gave place to a smile of fierce triumph. But then he composed his features, as Mr. Ponsford advanced towards him.

"You are beginning to get into a regular routine with your duties, Mr. Ashborne," said the Squire, with the mingled patronising condescension and

dignity of a superior who thought fit to unbend a little.

"We are well met, Mr. Ponsford," said Stephen, with a jerking abruptness, and taking no heed of the remark which had just been addressed to him. "I was thinking of you at the very moment when you appeared in sight."

The Squire gazed upon Ashborne with astonishment; for he spoke with a degree of independence and familiarity which the other could by no means understand.

"Yes—I was thinking of you at the moment," continued Ashborne. "When I entered your service the other day, I knew that the time must sooner or later come when I should desire such a meeting as this: but little could I foresee that it would arrive so speedily. Yet the sooner such things as these are done the better!"

"Mr. Ashborne!" exclaimed the Squire, who

now began to think that his bailiff's brain was turned. "This language, sir, so strange—this manner on your part so little respectful—"

"Do you know who I am, Mr. Ponsford?" exclaimed Stephen, abruptly stopping short: "can you conjecture? Is there anything in my looks which reminds you of one who years ago suffered cruelly—"

"What do you mean? who are you?" inquired Ponsford, whose aspect began to grow troubled as he surveyed the countenance of Stephen Ashborne. "Yes!—there is something in that look—those large blue eyes!—But surely, surely, you are not—"

"I will prove to you who I am!" interrupted Ashborne: "I will tell you a tale to which you shall listen!—a tale of bitter suffering and persecution—a history wherein a woman was the sufferer, and you, Mr. Ponsford, were the persecutor!"

The Squire seemed amazed and staggered for a few moments; and then recovering his self-possession, he said, "There is no tale that you can tell me, Mr. Ashborne, to which I need listen: and as for the species of accusation you have dared to make against me—"

"Dared, sir? I dare tell the truth! This truth is that you are a villain—and your guilt is about to experience a terrible punishment!"

"What! would you murder me?" exclaimed Ponsford, flinging a momentary glance of affright at his bailiff: and then again recovering his self-possession, he said, "Come here, Pompey! come here, good fellow!"—and the fierce bull-mastiff was at once by his side.

Stephen Ashborne smiled contemptuously, and said, "I do not seek your life. On the contrary, it is my wish that you should live long—Oh! very long, to appreciate my vengeance in all its keenest intensity!"

"Your vengeance?"—and now the Squire flung a glance of defiance at Ashborne; for the dog was at his side, and feeling himself safe against personal violence, there was nothing else that he thought he need apprehend on the part of his bailiff.

"We are wasting a great deal of time," said Ashborne; "and that is a pity. I told you just now that when a vengeance is to be wreaked, it were better that it should be accomplished off-hand."

"Mr. Ashborne, I have listened with more patience than any other man in England would bestow—"

"And you will listen a little longer," was the bailiff's cool reply.

"This insolence, sir! this unpardonable impertinence!" ejaculated the Squire, becoming red in the face.

"Believe me, you have got something terrible to hear!" interrupted the young man, with a look and tone so impressive that Mr. Ponsford was staggered, half frightened and bewildered. "But first I must make you listen to the recital of your own misdeeds, in order that I may prove to you how thoroughly I know you, and how completely justified I am in availing myself of the opportunity to wreak the most terrible vengeance upon your head."

The Squire was now very pale: he knew not what to think; and yet he endeavoured to prevent himself from seeming to be afraid.

"Many long years have elapsed," proceeded Stephen Ashborne, "since the beautiful Adelaide Clarke attracted your notice. You know where she dwelt—in the pretty little farm-house on the other side of yonder hill—and she was the pride and solace of her widowed mother. And you wooed her; but she listened not to your suit, because it was not an honourable one. Nay, do not interrupt me! You know that I am speaking the truth—and there are many other facts which have yet to flow from my lips, and to which you shall listen. Well then, you, John Ponsford, not being enabled to seduce the beautiful Adelaide Clarke from the path of virtue—finding your dazzling overtures to be vain, and that her principles were proof against all the golden temptations which you held out,—you, John Ponsford, played the part of a treacherous villain—you waylaid her—and by violence you deprived her of her honour!"

Stephen Ashborne paused; and his blue eyes literally flamed with living fires as he fixed their fierce regards upon Mr. Ponsford, who stood before him pale as death, not daring to deny the accusation which was thus levelled against him.

"I am not going to dwell at unnecessary length upon any details," resumed Stephen: "but let me proceed to remind you how the poor widowed mother's heart was broken by the disgrace which you brought upon her beloved daughter—and how poverty then compelled the hapless Adelaide to continue in that pathway of dishonour in which your stupendous turpitude had placed her. Yes!—she then became your mistress; and you triumphed fully in your successful iniquity!"

"I loved her!—heaven knows that I loved her!" murmured, or rather moaned the unhappy man, now clasping his hands together as the tide of recollection swept in upon his mind with an almost overwhelming force.

"Loved her?" exclaimed Ashborne scornfully: "loved her?" he repeated, with a terrible increase of bitterness in his accents: "you never loved her! you never could have loved her! The assertion is outrageous! What? to trample under foot the being whom you say you loved!—to tear her down from the pedestal of her purity into the vortex of degradation and disgrace! Oh, talk not to me of love in association with such foul iniquity! But then think of all that happened afterwards, and of which I am about to speak!"

"Enough, Mr. Ashborne!" interrupted the Squire. "We two can no longer remain together—"

"I tell you, sir," replied the bailiff, with a strange and sinister significance of voice and look, "that you ought to be inspired by a terrible and awful curiosity to learn what is to be the end of all that I am now telling you."

The Squire was riveted to the spot by these words so darkly ominous, so terribly mysterious; and it was with a sense of poignant agony that he mentally asked himself, "In what manner could he wreak such a dread vengeance? how can he deal a blow that shall overwhelm me?"

"When you dishonoured Adelaide Clarke," proceeded Stephen Ashborne, "you made her infamous in her own estimation—you destroyed all that excellence of principle which had previously rendered her virtuous. She had lost her good name—and she grew reckless, careless, indifferent

or the proprieties of life: the first false step having been taken by compulsion, she scrupled not to take the second when her inclination prompted. It was your damnable iniquity which had blunted her conscience—your tremendous crime which threw its dark shadow over her soul. She listened to the tender language which Rupert Pringle breathed in her ears; and while still peunioned from your purse, she received him to her arms as a paramour. Oh! you can well understand how it revolts against my soul to be compelled to mention these facts! how it makes my blood run cold in my veins and my flesh creep upon my bones! But still I feel the necessity of proving to you that I know everything."

"And it is of your own mother that you are thus speaking," said the Squire reproachfully. "You at least ought to be anxious to avoid such a topic! Come—let it cease—and stifle this bitter ill-will which you seem to cherish towards me! You cannot have yet done ought to revenge yourself against me? you are only contemplating a vengeance? Tell me, is it not so?"

"Listen," said Stephen impatiently. "You compelled Rupert Pringle to fly from this neighbourhood, and Adelaide Clarke accompanied him. They went to London, and for some months dwelt together in the utmost seclusion, for they dreaded lest they should be followed by your horrible vengeance. At length Rupert Pringle deserted Adelaide Clarke, suddenly married another woman, and fled with her, no one knew whither. Some months afterwards I was born; and a mercy would it have been for me if heaven had decreed I should perish at my birth: for then—for then—But no matter! It has been ordained otherwise, and my destiny must be fulfilled!"

He paused for a moment, while an expression of unutterable sadness appeared upon his countenance; and then he continued in the following manner:—

"Deserted by the man whom she had loved—with an infant at her breast—having no friend or relation in the world—and with all her own little means completely exhausted, my mother scarcely dared look her position in the face; for it seemed as if before her stood a gaunt spectre pointing towards self-destruction as the only means of relief. But she had not the courage to die!—or at least she could have made up her mind to suicide; but she must have taken me with her, and that would have been murder—a crime from which her soul recoiled. All this she has told me. Well, she determined to live on. By the kindness of some neighbour, she obtained needlework; and by dint of continuous toil she earned a pittance which sufficed for her support. At length, when I was upwards of a year old, and no longer drawing my own nourishment from her maternal bosom, my poor mother determined to make larger efforts on my behalf. She applied for the situation of a nursery-governess—"

"Why these recapitulations?" asked the Squire, in a voice which seemed to implore Ashborne to cut his narrative short.

"Because I tell you again and again," he responded fiercely, "that I must prove to you how I know everything! Well then, as I was saying, my poor mother obtained the situation of a nursery-governess, at the same time making a requisite provision for me with a poor but honest

family. My existence was as a matter of course to be kept unknown at the establishment which my poor mother entered; and for six months she led a happy and contented life—her secret was unsuspected—she again felt the value of a good repute—she once more appreciated the benefit of honest principles. She was loved and respected by the family which she had thus entered. But all of a sudden her position was changed—her hopes were blighted—and you, John Ponsford, were the vindictive fiend who brought so much desolation upon her soul! You called at that house—you saw her—you were not generous enough to pass her by as if unrecognised! No!—but you revenged yourself upon the unfortunate being for having abandoned you for the sake of your rival Rupert Pringle! And so you proclaimed that she was a mother without being a wife—she was disgraced and expelled almost with execration from the bosom of that family. It was you who did this!—you who having first dragged her down into the vortex of dishonour, afterwards made it her reproach!—you who having rendered her criminal, would not, even for her soul's sake, permit her to enjoy the benefits of reformation and atonement!"

There was another pause, during which the regards of Stephen Ashborne were riveted with a sinister fierceness upon that man who stood pale, trembling, and full of anxiety before him. Yes—and not only full of anxiety, but likewise under the influence of that awful curiosity to which Ashborne had himself ere now alluded.

"Then followed a period of deep wretchedness for my mother," he presently resumed. "She has explained to me all she felt—she has told me all her painful struggles—and it has even seemed to me that the bitterness of the tears which she must have shed over me, has infused itself into the tears which I have shed when thinking of all her wrongs! For with what unrelenting malevolence did you pursue her! Need I tell you that after awhile, when recovering from the fearful shock which your vindictiveness occasioned her, she procured another situation? Passing as a widow, she became a companion to an elderly and highly respectable lady. Time went on:—again did she think that there might yet be happiness for her in this world—and again was she disappointed! Yes—for her evil genius still, you were the fiend prepared sooner or later to step in and blight all her prospects! You did it—and again through you, was she expelled ignominiously from a comfortable home. Oh, my poor mother! She has told me how she thought her heart must have broken then—or that she must have perished as a distracted suicide! And it was through you—yes, through you, John Ponsford, that she endured those worlds of mental agony! Do you remember that some while after that second demonstration of your fiend-like malevolence, my poor mother met you—and she implored and entreated that you would for the future leave her unmolested? And what was your answer? Oh, cowardly wretch that you are! monster of iniquity that you must have been, to trample so recklessly upon the unfortunate being who almost grovelled at your feet!—you hurled the name of Rupert Pringle at her, and you vowed your vengeance should be eternal!"

Squire Ponsford bent down his eyes: he could

not meet the looks of the young man who was thus flinging at him all the foulest incidents of the dark dismal past, as if he were pelting him with mud, every slimy morsel of which however inflicted the pain of a sharp flintstone.

"Terrified at you," resumed Ashborne, "my unfortunate mother fled with me to France; and there she hoped to find herself beyond the reach of your venomous spite. Still representing herself as a widow, she procured another situation of respectability. You passed through the town—you saw her—you watched her—and again you dealt the blow which was as fatal as it was cowardly. Then for six months she was the inmate of a hospital—and I was also indebted to French charity for my support. After a time she returned with me to England; and it then appeared as if fortune had become tired of persecuting her—or as if Satan himself hesitated to place fresh weapons in your hand to be used against her. She became the housekeeper to an old paralysed gentleman: she was enabled to send me to school—she reared me tenderly—and it is with the most melting feelings I now think of my poor mother's image. But it is also with a fierce fire raging in my soul that I look upon all her wrongs! My narrative is nearly ended. It takes a leap over years, with the incidents of which you have no concern; for no devilish inspiration guided you to the spot where my poor mother, having at last retired upon a small competency, spent the latter portion of her existence in comparative tranquillity. But her mind was not altogether at ease; your conduct had left a strong impression on it: she looked upon you as the author of all the miseries she had known in life. Six months ago she lay upon her deathbed; and when she felt her dissolution approaching, she revealed her entire history to me. I never knew it till then: I had been brought up in complete ignorance of it! But at length, as I have told you, I knew all! My mother died—and I swore to avenge her. Yes—I knelt by the side of her corpse, and I took two oaths. The first was that I would mourn her loss for six months, during which my soul should abandon itself only to the sacredness of its grief without suffering a vindictive thought to interpose: but the second oath was to the effect that so soon as the period of mourning should be ended, I would devote myself to revenge. Yes—I swore that all my mother's wrongs should be brought home to you in their most poignant intensity—that every tear you at any time made her shed, should be compensated for by a torrent from your eyes—that every painful feeling you made her experience, should be atoned for by placing your own heart and soul upon the rack! And fortune seemed to favour my design so soon as the period arrived when I sought to carry it into execution. I saw your advertisement for a bailiff: it met my eyes on the very day that the six months' mourning for the loss of my mother expired. I merited good credentials at the hands of my late master Sir Norton Bridgeman; and he gave them. I applied for your situation—and obtained it. That very same night became an important one for me!"

"What mean you?" demanded the Squire, with a look of anxiety and bewilderment: for the blue eyes again flamed upon him.

"I mean that the documents which place my

father in your power, fell that night into my hands."

"What! was it *you* who instigated those villains," cried Ponsford, with increasing perplexity and amazement, "to—"

"Not I. But no matter! The deeds fell into my hands—and I have them now. You cannot suppose that I entertain any extraordinary degree of either respect or love for my father who abandoned my mother so cruelly: but at the same time I must not forget that he is the author of my being; and therefore I was well enough pleased to be enabled to rescue him from your power. And then too, whatsoever tends to produce vexation or annoyance unto yourself, is a contribution to the sum of the vengeance that I have to wreak upon you. But Oh! that vengeance—it is already complete!" exclaimed the young man, with a sudden sinister flashing and glaring of his blue eyes. "No fiend could wish it to be more horrible than it is!"

"Good God! what mean you?" said the Squire, terribly frightened.

"You ravished Adelaide Clarke—you destroyed her honour—She was my mother—"

"Heavens!" ejaculated Ponsford; "there is my daughter's horse—riderless—yonder!—with the saddle and bridle on! Some accident may have occurred!"

"It *did* occur. Your daughter—"

"Oh, my God! what of her? Do you mean that she is killed?" cried Ponsford, in an agony of wild terror: "is it by showing me her mangled corpse that you will wreak your vengeance on me."

"She is not dead—she lives," replied Ashborne.

"Oh, yes! she lives—"

"Where is she? Good God! what does this mean? Your looks frighten me!"

"Wretched man! I told you that my mother should be revenged—"

"But my daughter! my daughter! Oh, my child! what have you done with my child? Tell me, tell me! keep me not in this hideous suspense!"

"You ravished Adelaide Clarke, I repeat—"

"But my child! Where is my daughter?"—and the unhappy father, harrowed by the most horrible ideas, literally wrung his hands in suspense, almost in despair. "My child, I say!"

"Your child? Oh, miserable man!" exclaimed Ashborne, in a voice which seemed to pierce like searing lightning into Ponsford's brain: "now all your damnable iniquity is coming home unto you! Your daughter—she is there! Yes—yonder! go seek her—and think of the ravished, polluted, and dishonoured Adelaide Clarke when you behold your ruined Pamela grovelling at your feet!"

Such a cry of mortal agony—such a fearful, awful yell as that which burst from the lips of the maddened father, never before smote human ears. And it was still yelling and moaning, and with wildest and mournfullest cries, that he bounded towards the cottage; while Stephen Ashborne, darting away to a little distance, threw himself upon the grass; and burying his face in the long herbage, he endeavoured to stifle the sobs of mingled anguish and remorse, of despair and of self-abhorrence, which were rending his very soul.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WATER TANK.

RETURN we now to Thornbury Park, the Duks of Arleigh's beautiful country-seat situated in Buckinghamshire.

It was between nine and ten o'clock in the evening; and the Duchess was seated alone in a small but elegantly furnished apartment, her look indicating a certain degree of anxiety and suspense as if she were waiting for somebody. She was in an evening toilet; and as usual, she looked strikingly beautiful—while if an observer had been present, he would have been even more than ordinarily interested in her appearance from the circumstance that the colour was coming and going in quick transitions upon her cheeks. A lamp burnt upon the table: the casement was open—but the Venetian blinds were closed; and the atmosphere of the month of May, warm without sultriness, was perfumed by the flowers which filled several China ornaments scattered about the apartment.

Presently the discreet lady's-maid Lavinia made her appearance; and without saying a word, she ushered in two persons,—retiring immediately afterwards, and closing the door behind her. These individuals were none other than Mr. Timothy Gaffney and Mr. John Peppercorn. They were dressed as when we last described them, in a sporting style; and they had about them an air of vulgar rakishness,—a sort of horse-chanting ease and thimble-rig assurance—so that though they might seem to be upon the Turf, it would be questionable whether they occupied any position higher than that of jackals and hangers-on to the leading blacklegs of that delectable sphere. Notwithstanding that they were both possessed of no ordinary degree of impudence for any occasion, yet their hardihood was now at its very height, from the fact of finding that their services could be utilized by no less a person than the brilliant Duchess of Arleigh. Jack Peppercorn took off his hat from an intuitive feeling of respect towards the fair sex; but Tim Gaffney kept his beaver upon his head, where it rested airily over one ear; and he bestowed upon her Grace a nod of impudent familiarity, as much as to remind her that they were old acquaintances. Then, with the bone-handle of his stick up to his lips, he looked around him; and winking knowingly at his companion, said, "Yon and me, Jack, are in luck's way—yesterday in a splendid room at Arleigh House—this evening in this slap-up place at Thornbury Park."

"Yon shut up, Tim, and let the lady talk," replied Mr. Peppercorn. "She didn't tell us to come here to discourse her—did you, ma'am? I mean your Grace?"

The Duchess drew herself up with the utmost dignity for a few moments on perceiving that Gaffney kept his hat on his head: but suddenly feeling her fancy tickled by the presumptuous appearance of the individual, and recollecting how ludicrously she had foiled him in reference to the letter to her bankers, she burst out into a merry laugh.

Gaffney laughed likewise; and Jack Peppercorn followed, but in a somewhat humbler key; and

then the latter gave his friend a dig in the ribs, at the same time whispering to him to unbounet.

"So yon understood the note which I tossed across the library table to you yesterday?" said the Duchess.

"Well, my lady," answered Gaffney, taking off his hat, "if we couldn't understand the sweetest bit of writing that ever fell into our hands, we should be the biggest muffs in all England."

"And now begin by telling me," continued the Duchess, "how on earth you came to know the Duke, and what you were really doing with him yesterday at Arleigh House?"

"If so be your Grace don't mean to tell his lordship again, and so get us into a scrape—because there's no telling how his lordship may some day or another have business for us—"

"Just in the same way that I do not wish his Grace to know anything of my proceedings," interrupted the Duchess, "I do not mean to display any knowledge of his. It is mere curiosity which I now propose to gratify; and I will afterwards explain why I bade you come hither on the present occasion."

Convinced that this assurance was genuine, Tim Gaffney proceeded to relate all the adventures in which he and his companion had been concerned at Southdale, so far as they regarded the Duke and Ethel; and thus the Duchess learnt those particulars which her husband had hitherto veiled from her.

"And now, my lady," added Tim Gaffney, "I should have asked in return how the deuce it was you managed to escape from the mill down in Kent yonder, only our friend Bax came up to London to-day, and he told us all about it. Well, I can't help admiring your Grace, although you did take me in most ducedly. But it was uncommon clever—uncommon!" and Mr. Gaffney shook his head slowly in wondering admiration of the brilliant lady in whose presence he stood.

"And yesterday's business, too, was rayther good, I think," said Jack Peppercorn, with a low chuckling laugh.

"To be sure!" exclaimed Tim. "Ouly fancy, Jack, you and me highly respectable horse-dealers! And Mr. Bax, another of the same kidney! And the best of it was the Duke took it all for gospel and thought there was no gammon in it!"

The Duchess laughed, and then said, "Perhaps, Mr. Gaffney, you bear me a little ill-will on account of the affair at the banker's; but if I now offer you that very same sum of five hundred guineas for a certain service which I require at your hands—"

"Why, we shall say that you're the best and kindest as well as the handsomest lady that ever was," answered Tim Gaffney.

"Then it is a bargain," said the Duchess. "Here is the money—it is all in gold;" and she displayed it in a silk bag as she spoke. "Perform the duty first—and afterwards you may return to the little private door where you just now met my maid, and she will place this bag in your hands."

"Agreed," said Gaffney. "We will take your Grace's word for it. And now what's the business?"

"By making a little circuit of the grounds, so as to keep away from the house, after you issue

forth presently by the private staircase," proceeded the Duchess, "you will reach an avenue where there are statues. Between ten and eleven o'clock a gentleman will come to walk there. You cannot mistake him. He has light hair and a moustache: he is about six or seven and twenty years of age. You are to seize upon him— But, by the bye, can you conceal your countenances?"

"Look here, my lady," said Tim, producing his black mask—an example which was immediately followed by his friend Peppercorn.

"Good," said the Duchess. "You are to seize upon that gentleman—you will prevent him from crying out, even if he should be so inclined; and though he is strong, he will scarcely be enabled to offer any serious resistance to your united force. Carry him down to the end of the avenue, and fling him into the tank which you will see at the bottom of the steps. Stop! I do not mean that you are to do him an injury—and for heaven's sake do not suppose that I have the slightest design upon his life! In fact, why should I not tell you the truth? He is an impertinent coxcomb—who is persecuting me with his addresses: but I hate and detest him—and I wish him to be taught a lesson which he will not very speedily forget."

"I twig, my lady," said Tim; "and if I was married, it's just the sort of sperrit I should like to see Mrs. Gaffney show. Any further orders, ma'am?"

"I have something more to say," pursued the Duchess; "and this relates rather to the tact with which you are to manage the proceeding. I do not want the gentleman to suppose that it is done by my bidding, or that I am a party to it. Can you not pretend that you have some designs upon the house—that he is interfering with them by his presence—and that you therefore adopt this summary means of teaching him not to meddle with gentlemen of your decided character?"

"Leave all that to us, my lady," replied Tim Gaffney; "and if we don't do the job in a style to please your Grace, then don't never think of employing us no more."

"I rely upon you," rejoined the Duchess.

She opened the door—peeped out—and perceiving that all was clear on the private landing, she bade the two men hastily descend the staircase. This they did, Lavinia being at the bottom in readiness to open the door for them.

A little later a phaeton and pair stopped in a secluded lane which skirted one side of the park; and Sir Abel Kingston alighting, assisted Mr. Casey senior to descend from the seat which he had occupied next to him. A domestic remained in charge of the equipage, while the Baronet and the usurer proceeded a little further along the lane. There, at a convenient spot, Sir Abel leapt over the palings, and assisted Mr. Casey to follow him.

"Now I tell you what it is," said the usurer with a more than usual hardness and coldness of voice; "this is the last time I suffer myself to be put out of my way, or to be put off in any shape or fashion. If I don't see that everything is right and straightforward to-night—"

"But it will be so!" ejaculated the Baronet. "Believe me, it will! I have got the appointment—most likely I shall remain here altogether

to-night—a happy man, Mr. Casey! a very happy man!"

"Well, I hope for your sake as well as mine," interjected the usurer, "that it will be so. I told you just now I had a serious loss to-day—no less than five thousand—never mind in what quarter—and I'm pressed for money."

"Come, come—that's rather too good, friend Casey," said the Baronet. "But I can assure you that you will presently see on what an admirable footing I now stand with the young Duchess. Success and triumph are within my reach. It is an appointment of the tenderest nature—I shall not see you again to-night, Casey—so you will have to return in my phaeton, according to our previous agreement. She adores me, Casey!"

"Well, then, the sooner you get some money out of her the better; for I tell you very plainly that if you don't settle my claim in the course of a few days, I shall be compelled to take disagreeable proceedings. People don't mince matters with me," he added, his soul being full of bitterness at the recollection of the treatment he had experienced at the hands of Mr. Warren in the afternoon of this very same day.

"Well, you need not go on threatening, friend Casey," rejoined the Baronet; "for it will be all right presently. You shall see the beauteous creature folded in my arms; and unless any untoward circumstance shall have transpired in the interval, you will see me lead her away towards the mansion, where she will bless me with the tenderest favours that a loving woman can possibly bestow. But here we are in the neighbourhood of the avenue. And now hide yourself amidst the evergreens, as you did on the former occasion—and hush! not a movement when once you are in your hiding-place! You must not so much as make a leaf rustle—or I shall be lost!"

The usurer muttered something as he stationed himself in the spot indicated by the Baronet; and then the unprincipled Sir Abel passed out into the avenue, along which he flung a rapid glance. The moon was shining brightly: all was still—and no Duchess was to be seen.

"It is early yet," thought Sir Abel, looking at his watch; "it is only just half-past ten o'clock, and she said between ten and eleven. She will certainly come! she could not possibly disappoint me!—for by heaven, this is, so to speak, the crisis of my fate!"

He walked along to a little distance, every now and then casting a look towards the mansion; but still the Duchess did not make her appearance. Again he looked at his watch; and he was just on the point of returning to retrace his steps, when there was a rustling amongst the trees, and in the twinkling of an eye he was pounced upon by a couple of men with black masks upon their faces.

"Villains!" ejaculated Sir Abel Kingston, making a desperate effort to release himself.

"Hold your tongue!" responded Gaffney, in a disguised voice. "We'll teach you what it is to be on the look-out to spoil the work of gentlemen in the house-breaking line!"

Mr. Casey, concealed amidst the evergreens, heard the sounds of scuffling and also of voices speaking at a short distance: he peeped forth, and beheld the Baronet in the grasp of the two men

who had pounced upon him. He was astonished and affrighted, not knowing whether it might not immediately become his turn to fall into the hands of ill-disposed fellows lurking about. In a very few moments he heard a tremendous splash in the water at the bottom of the avenue; and ejaculating to himself, "It is a trick on the part of the Duchess," he began to beat a retreat as rapidly as his infirm limbs would permit.

In a few minutes he reached the fence, over which he clambered by the help of the servant who remained in charge of the phaeton, and who inquired whether they were to stop for his master?

"Yes—no—well—a few minutes perhaps—I really can't say," faltered out the usurer, who was utterly bewildered and enraged at what had happened.

"You know, sir," said the coachman, "Sir Abel's orders were that if he did not return with you, I was not to wait for him, but that I was to drive you away as quick as possible."

"Well then, do just as you think fit," answered the usurer, climbing up into the vehicle; and then he muttered to himself, "They could scarcely have drowned him?—it was no doubt intended only to give him a good ducking for his impudence and presumption? at all events I may as well get away from the premises as soon as possible. I wish I had never come here at all."

And as the equipage drove away, Mr. Casey thought to himself, "It is all up with the Baronet now. Perhaps the Duke has found out the intended intrigue? At all events he can have no further hope in that quarter; and now I must get my money in the best way that I can—or else I'll punish him—by heaven I'll punish him!"

Matters had not however progressed precisely as Mr. Casey supposed, or as the reader himself has doubtless been imagining. Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn hurried Sir Abel Kingston along towards the tank at the bottom of the steps; but there the Baronet exerting all his power, made one more tremendous effort to release himself from the fellows who had him in their grasp—and he succeeded. Then quick as lightning the tables were turned; and still inspired with a strength which even astonished himself, Sir Abel Kingston hurled Gaffney and Peppercorn forward with a violence which sent them headlong into the middle of the ornamental water. It was the work of an instant; and such was the simultaneousness of the double blow which was thus struck, that the sound seemed exactly as if only one body had been hurled into the tank.

It was at this moment that the usurer Casey darted away from his place of concealment, in the manner already described. Tim Gaffney had dropped his stick upon the marble steps in the swift brief final struggle wherein Sir Abel got the better of his opponents: the Baronet now picked up that stick as the readiest means of defence which presented itself in case of being again attacked by the two men; but he found that instead of having a light dandy cane in his hand, it was in reality a loaded life-preserver; and thus he was suddenly furnished with a really formidable weapon. Indeed he had much reason to be thankful that Tim Gaffney had not an opportunity of using it; for if one good blow were dealt therewith upon a human skull, it would scarcely be necessary to inflict a second.

"Now, villains," exclaimed Sir Abel, flourishing the life-preserver, "dare to approach me and I will show you no mercy!"

"The game's up, Jack!" said Tim Gaffney, in a sulky manner to his companion, as they both rose out of the water, drenched and dripping all over. "If there's a disturbance and we're caught, no one would ever believe our tale, and the Duchess would swear it's all a lie. We'd better hook it at once."

These observations did not reach the ear of Sir Abel Kingston, for the two fellows were floundering through the water towards the bank on the side which was opposite to where they had been thrown in. Jack Peppercorn completely agreed with the prudential course suggested by his comrade; and away therefore they sped through the grounds, giving vent to bitter imprecations on their ill luck, as they called it, and laying upon each other the fault of their discomfiture.

But let us return to Sir Abel Kingston. The instant he found that he was master of the field and that the enemy were flying precipitately, he turned upon his heel; and springing up the steps, looked all along the avenue to see if the young Duchess were approaching. But he beheld no one; and with the deep concentrated emphasis of rage, he muttered to himself, "By heaven, if I thought that she had played me this trick, I should be mad with fury! Ah, Casey! I had forgotten him!"

Sir Abel Kingston sped towards the spot where he had left the usurer, in order to explain how he had come off victorious; but Mr. Casey was no longer there. The Baronet called first in a low voice—then in a little louder tone—but there was still no answer; and then Kingston penetrated amidst the evergreens. Casey was not to be found.

"Well, no matter," thought Sir Abel to himself. "I must see the Duchess immediately. If she will not come to me I will go to her. But that she comes not, is almost a proof that she played me this trick. By heaven! if I were convinced of it—Ah! to be made a fool of by a woman!—But we shall see."

He now advanced towards the mansion: he had no fear of meeting the Duke of Arleigh, for he knew that his Grace was in London: he had seen him only a few minutes before he himself had started from the metropolis. But it was now eleven o'clock; and would he not be compromising the Duchess by calling at that late hour? And supposing that she had not played him a trick, but that the men were really burglars intending to break into the place, was it not quite possible that some unforeseen circumstance had prevented her Grace from coming out to keep the appointment?

Such were the reflections which swept rapidly through the mind of Sir Abel Kingston; and he began to think whether he had not better strive to seek an interview with the Duchess by some method that should not stand a chance of compromising her to the knowledge of the entire household. What if by any means he could manage to fall in with one of her handmaidens and send a message to her Grace? Yes—this would be the better plan, thought Kingston. He accordingly passed along towards the side of the premises, with the intention of proceeding round the rear of

the building,—when a door opened, and a female voice said in a low quick tone, “Is it you?”

“Yes—it’s me,” answered Kingston, speaking also in a whisper and disguising his voice: and we should add that this private door was so shaded by two large trees as to envelope the spot in the completest darkness.

“Well, step in a moment,” said the female voice, “and I will give you the money.”

“All right!” rejoined the Baronet, still in a whisper.

“Where’s your friend?”

“Oh, just outside here. He’ll wait.”

The female, now retreating two or three paces, opened an inner green baize door, and the light of a lamp burning in a vestibule, at once revealed the two persons to each other. Sir Abel immediately recognised Lavinia, the principal lady’s-maid of the young Duchess; while the abigail started with mingled amazement and affright on beholding the Baronet.

“Where is your mistress?” he demanded, in a stern tone.

Lavinia, who knew for what purpose the men had been hired, perceived at a glance that the Baronet’s clothes were quite dry; and she therefore at once comprehended that he must have by some means escaped the intended humiliation and chastisement. She was bewildered how to act and what answers to give in reference to her mistress.

“Tell me, young woman,” said the Baronet, with even fierceness in his looks,—“tell me where I can find the Duchess? I am determined to see her; and as you evidently know something of her proceedings, you may also be enabled to judge whether it be worth while to save her from being compromised by my presence here. For if you do not bring us together at once, I shall go and institute a search in every room throughout the premises.”

“Will you remain here a little while, Sir Abel,” said Lavinia, glancing towards the staircase; “and I will go and see—”

“Oh, then, your mistress is somewhere in *this* part of the building?”—and he also glanced up at the staircase. “You have given me a hint how to commence my search. Lead the way at once—or you will be the cause of disturbance, and scandal, and exposure.”

Lavinia raised her hand in a bewildered manner to her brow; but the next moment she reflected that she had better comply with the mandate so imperiously given; and she accordingly led the way up the staircase. Opening a door on the landing above, she was on the point of announcing Sir Abel Kingston, when he pushed her aside, and abruptly entering the apartment, closed the door in the abigail’s face. The young Duchess started up from the chair in which she was seated; and the affrighted discomposure of her countenance furnished corroborative evidence to establish in his mind the conviction that she was the authoress of a trick to mortify and humiliate him. Crossing his arms over his chest, he confronted her, saying in a voice that was hoarse with rage, “You quail before me, Mary?”

“And why should I quail before you?” she asked, at once regaining some portion of her lost self-possession. “Because I would not keep the appointment I gave you—my mother-in-law being

so ill—and Mrs. Quinlan”—thus alluding to the female keeper of the insane dowager—“beseeching me to remain and use my influence—”

“All this is false, Mary,” interrupted Kingston. “I know everything. You hired two ruffians—”

“Ah!” murmured the Duchess, turning very pale; for she thought to herself, “They have betrayed me—or else how could he have come to the private door? how have known that Lavinia was waiting there?”

“Yes—I know all,” he continued. “I baffled and defeated the two ruffians—I hurled them into the water. You see, Mary, how completely the tables have turned: and instead of sneaking away in a condition of miserable discomfiture, I appear before you as the hero of a victory—if indeed it were not a wretched mockery thus to speak of such a trumpety business.”

The Duchess sank down upon the seat whence she had risen; and for a few moments she reflected profoundly: then suddenly starting up again, she looked the Baronet full in the face, saying, “You must hate me very much after the discovery of my conduct?”

“It certainly was not calculated to inspire much affection. But still, Mary, if you will suffer me to seal my assurance of forgiveness on those haughteous lips of your’s—”

“One word!” she interrupted him. “You do not love me, Abel—you cannot possibly love me? You must be bitterly vindictive against me? Besides, you know that my own sentiments towards yourself are altered—that I repent the species of encouragement which I recently gave you—and that I deplore the weakness of my conduct in suffering you to perceive at that time that you had made any impression upon my heart.”

“And to what is all this to lead?” demanded the Baronet, with a renewed air of sternness.

“I was going on to observe that inasmuch as you cannot possibly love me, and as you know that I am fast recovering from the infatuation which for awhile I experienced towards yourself, you cannot now—What shall I say?—you cannot now—Well then, in plain terms, you cannot court my favours. You have some other motive in pursuing—aye, I will even say in persecuting me. Let there be frankness and candour between us. What is that motive? You cannot be weak enough to covet the mere *eclat* of being pointed out as the lover of the Duchess of Arleigh? No: because as an honourable man you would hold yourself bound to keep the amour secret. Well then, again I ask what may be your motive? Permit me to guess. You wish to obtain a hold upon me for certain reasons—Ah!” she abruptly ejaculated, “why do you not appeal to my friendship instead of using the means of intimidation and coercion?”

“Since you have undertaken the part of guessing and conjecturing,” said Kingston, “I must leave you to pursue the same course. Go on—and when you have finished I will answer you.”

“Let me suppose, then,” continued the Duchess, “that you are in difficulties—that a sum of money is necessary to set you straight—that your need is pressing—”

“Well, and what if this were the case?”

“I would do for you as a friend,” answered the Duchess boldly, for she saw that the game was



now once more in her own hands,—“I would do for you as a friend what I never would consent to accomplish under the influence of intimidation. Now then, do you understand me? My conjectures are all accurate—are they not?”

“I have not denied them,” responded Kingston.

“Name the sum that you require,” said the Duchess impressively, “and tell me the hour at which it must be forthcoming to-morrow.”

The Baronet hesitated for a moment; and then he said, “Twenty thousand pounds, at four o’clock to-morrow afternoon.”

“Good,” said the Duchess: “you shall have the amount. A cheque shall be left at your lodgings in Spring Gardens at four o’clock punctually.”

“And now we part as friends?” said Sir Abel; and with that readiness in the art of hypocrisy wherein he was so profoundly skilled, he threw

a sudden blandness and suavity into the expression of his countenance.

“Yes—we part as friends,” replied the Duchess, as she suffered him to carry her hand to his lips.

Sir Abel Kingston then took his departure; and making the best of his way through the grounds, he reached the spot where he had left his phaeton. But the equipage was not to be seen.

“Ah, well,” thought Sir Abel to himself, “Casey supposes that I am locked in the arms of love and beauty, and he has returned to London.”

Thornbury Park was within a short distance of Beaconsfield, and to that town a walk of three quarters of an hour conducted the Baronet. There he obtained a bed for the night; and on the following morning he procured a chais to take him to London. On arriving in the metropolis, he called in Hatton Garden: but he was informed that Mr. Casey had gone out; so that he merely left a verbal message to the effect that he would

call again in the evening or in the forenoon of the morrow.

Let us now return to the Duchess. At an early hour in the morning she ordered the travelling-carriage, and proceeded to the metropolis. On reaching Ardleigh House, she learnt that her husband was at home; and in a very few minutes the husband and wife were alone together.

"Has anything happened, Mary," asked the Duke, "that you return thus abruptly from Thornbury?"

"Nothing very particular," replied the Duchess. "All the family are well. But I have something to ask—something to propose—"

"Speak, Mary: what is it that you require? or what can I do for you?"

"You know how horrified and shocked you were at the idea of signing that paper which I begged you to give me the other day—"

"You need not now refer to it," interrupted the young Duke, somewhat bitterly. "So many grave and serious things have taken place, Mary, and my character and conduct must stand out in a relief of such flagrant boldness, that I cannot in justice suppose you ought to keep any terms with me. Neither have I the faintest shadow of a right to dictate, or to complain—no, not even to advise—"

"Do not continue in this strain, Herbert," said the Duchess; "or you will make me think that you are finding subtleties in advance in order to refuse the favour I am about to ask at your hands."

"No—you must not think this. What can I do for you, Mary?"

"In one word I want twenty thousand pounds."

The Duke gave a slight start; and then he said, "But what has this to do with the document you made me sign the other day?"

"Simply that when you give me the cheque for twenty thousand pounds, I will destroy that document before your eyes."

"Oh! but the mere fact of your having at any time demanded such a paper and that I should have signed it, will remain in our memories—and both of us must ever feel that it was something to shock—to repel—to inspire ineffable disgust—"

"I know full well," said the Duchess, "that everything is completely at an end between you and me, save and except so far as appearances before the world are concerned. But yet, if you only knew why I wish to give you back that paper, and why I need this large sum of money—"

"Tell me then, Mary. You have a right to look upon me as a friend, even if I am no more worthy of being regarded as your husband. Besides, I owe you every consideration! It is I who have sinned against you—and not you against me."

"Well then, listen to me, Herbert," resumed the Duchess. "I have advanced very close to the edge of a precipice—but I have not fallen over: I have played as it were with a serpent, but it has not stung me: I abandoned myself to a passion, but it has not carried me on until I was irrecoverably merged in the whirlpool of destruction. No, Herbert—I do not want to become depraved and lose my own self-respect, if I can avoid it. But I have become so far compromised with a

certain person that a sum of money is necessary—"

"Why, such a man must be a scoundrel!" ejaculated the Duke. "I presume that he has got some letters of your's which he threatens to show—in a word, you are in his power?"

"I am in his power," rejoined the Duchess, "though still innocent and unpolluted. But do not question me farther. Suffice it for you to know that by the aid of the sum which I demand, I can rescue myself from his influence; and then, Herbert—*then* I offer to destroy that document in order that I may be the less independent of my husband—the less free to yield to any future temptation that may present itself."

"You shall have the money, Mary," said the Duke, with some degree of fervour in his tone. "It is not for me to bid you remain virtuous; and yet I know not how it is, but I am not quite so indifferent as to think of the possibility of your straying without experiencing feelings of torture, remorse, jealousy—I scarcely know what—"

"Ah! it is always the same," said the Duchess; "the husband may sin as much as he likes—but he does not like the wife to sin also!"

"This is a reproach, Mary—but a well-merited one," said the Duke. "And now I will give you the cheque. But perhaps you will not require to present it until late this afternoon or to-morrow morning, as it is for a very large sum, and I shall perhaps have to go and make some little arrangement with the bankers."

"I can promise you," answered the Duchess, "that it shall not be placed in the hand of the individual for whom it is intended until four o'clock this afternoon. And now here is the document which I extorted from you the other day. By its destruction I shall fortify myself in the resolves which I have made to continue in that path which cannot be associated with reproach or blame."

With these words the young Duchess tore the paper into fragments; and then lighting a taper, she watched the pieces burning in the grate until they became reduced to tinder.

The ducal husband and wife then separated—the former to go to the City and inquire whether Mr. Warren had seen anything of Ethel—the Duchess to her boudoir, where she enclosed the cheque in an envelope, addressing it in a feigned hand to Sir Abel Kingston.

"At a quarter to four o'clock," she said to her confidante Lavinia, "take a cab and go and leave this letter at the lodgings of Sir Abel Kingston in Spring Gardens."

CHAPTER XXV.

A BACHELOR'S APARTMENTS.

It was between one and two o'clock in the afternoon, and Sir Abel was seated at a table on which luncheon was spread. He occupied the drawing-room floor of a house in Spring Gardens. The apartments were handsomely furnished; and the disorder which prevailed in the sitting-room was precisely that which seemed to be appropriate to the dwelling of a bachelor, especially when that

bachelor was a Captain in the Guards. There were awords and foils, rifles and boxing-gloves, pistols and fishing-rods, cigar boxes and meerschaum pipes, scattered about the place. One of the folding-doors leading into the bed-room was half open; and a glance thrown into the inner apartment, would discern the articles of raiment, alike of uniform and plain clothes, lying about. The toilet-table was indicative of the extravagance of its owner, it being covered with hotles containing the most expensive scents and perfumes which can be purchased at the celebrated emporium in Bond Street.

At the table in the front room, as we have said, Sir Abel Kingston was seated. He now wore a superb flowered silk dressing-gown, confined at the waist by a cord with massive tassels; and on his head was a smoking cap in the shape of a Turkish fez, and decorated with a long tassel. He was certainly a very handsome man: that cap set off his light hair which curled naturally; and the dressing-gown, although loose, seemed to define rather than to conceal the proportions of his slender form.

He was in the midst of his luncheon, when the door of the apartment was thrown open, and the man-servant announced Mr. Sylvester Casey. For various reasons it suited the Baronet's purpose to treat Sylvester with every appearance of a familiar friendship; and such was therefore the demeanour with which he greeted him on the present occasion.

"Well, old fellow," exclaimed Sylvester, "so you've been up to the Garden this morning?—but the governor wasn't at home. What the deuce is the caper now?"

"Why, is anything the matter?" asked the Baronet.

"All I can say is, the governor is furious against you. I can't make it out—he didn't come home till very late last night—in fact I should think it was pretty near two o'clock before he returned—"

"Well, and what did he say?" asked Sir Abel.

"Oh, I was sitting up for him. The brandy was good, and the cigars were good; and though I was all by myself, I didn't mind sitting up an extra hour or two. Well, at last in comes the governor; and precious savage he was!"

"Where could he have been?" asked the Baronet, as if quite ignorant upon the point.

"Ah, that I don't know!—and what's more, he didn't say. He's a rum file, that governor of mine! But I almost thought he must have been with you; for he began talking about you the very instant he entered the house—and then again this morning at breakfast."

"But you have not told me what he said," interjected the Baronet.

"Oh! he threatened to do his worst—he declared you had humbugged and deceived him—that you had regularly made a fool of him—that he would stand it no longer—and that as it was clear you didn't mean to pay him what you owed, and hadn't the means, he should punish you for getting his money out of him. You know I promised you, old fellow, to throw in a word with my father whenever I had the opportunity: so I began saying all I could in your favour."

"And what was that?" asked Sir Abel, who was now somewhat in a thoughtful mood.

"Why, that you was a regular brick—a jolly good fellow—could sing a capital song could handle your fives and play a pretty bout with the sticks—that you was a stunner at driving a four-in-hand—and as for a pretty gal, there wasn't a better judge of beauty or a greater favourite amongst the fair sex than you. And then I went on to say that if you had run through all your property and sold off all your horses except your chargers and your pair—and if you was up to your very eyes in debt, why, it wasn't your fault—you wasn't the less a brick and a trump for all that."

"And this you call speaking a good word for me to your father?" ejaculated Kingston, with some degree of impatience. "Why, it was the very sort of argument to make him all the more bitter against me!"

"Ah, but that wasn't all," interjected Sylvester. "I told him that as you hadn't a penny in the world, it was no use his throwing good money after bad by arresting you or putting you in prison or anything of that sort—for that of course you would go through the Court and snap your fingers at all your creditors—"

"And what did he say then?" inquired Sir Abel.

"Why, he only made a peculiar grimace, just as the old file sometimes does when he means something that he keeps quiet and dark to himself. And so, as I didn't exactly like his humour, I thought I'd just drive round and let you know. Besides," added Sylvester, fidgetting with his watch chain, "if you haven't used that little acceptance of a thousand which I sent you t'other morning, you may just as well give it me back; for if you must go to smash, old fellow, there's no use in lugging your friends into the mess along with you."

"Ah, the little acceptance—Well, I really forgot all about it. But now you mention it—"

"Oh, well then, you haven't done anything with it?" cried Sylvester, rubbing his hands gleefully. "The fact is, you know, old fellow, I wasn't aware the other day when I sent you the acceptance how devilishly involved you were—I thought your difficulties were only temporary—But after all I heard the governor say when he came home last night, and then again this morning at breakfast—"

"Oh, as for that acceptance," interrupted the Baronet, "I remember now! I paid it away to my jeweller—He was pressing me. But as for your father, I hope he won't be foolish enough to do anything hastily; for the fact is I shall have plenty of money in an hour or two. At about four o'clock I expect a handsome sum."

"Oh, well then, I daresay it will be all right enough!" exclaimed Sylvester: "but several things have made the governor precious savage. In the first place he lost five thousand pounds bang—that was yesterday; but he didn't tell me how it happened—though I rather fancy it must have been by some speculation on the Stock Exchange, for it was after he had been to Warren his broker that he came home so deuced queer. And then, too, there's that marriage affair—"

"What do you mean?" inquired Sir Abel, somewhat eagerly.

"Why, I told you about Launcelot Osborne and my sister? Everything seemed to be settled

—but for the last two or three days the business has begun to wear another aspect. Lancelot has not been to the house—and Selina won't go to see Lord and Lady Trentham. We can't understand it. The governor is in a rage about it——”

“Perhaps your sister and Mr. Osborne have quarrelled?” remarked the Baronet.

“Not a bit of it! Selina never quarrels with anybody. Besides, that was the very question the governor asked her, and she said positively there was nothing of the sort. But Osborne's conduct is the most extraordinary: he keeps away—he doesn't say why—he sends no note—— However, my father has got the Trenthams entirely in his power, and he's not the sort of covey to let them fly away from their engagement. So, you see, this business has made him savage; and then there's the loss of the five thousand that I told you about—and now the governor looks as if he really meant to wreak all his anger upon you.”

“But I left a message up in Hatton Garden, to say that I would call again this evening, or else to-morrow in the forenoon.”

“I know you did. But the governor has not been in since you called. I daresay it will stop him from doing anything when he does receive the message: but I thought I'd just drive round and tell you how matters stood; and—and also see about the little acceptance; for I wouldn't have the governor know I'd given it to you for all the world!”

At this moment, before Sir Abel Kingston had time to make any reply, the door was again thrown open, and the Baronet's man-servant announced Captain Cauliflower and Mr. Tiffany. Both were officers in the Coldstream Guards,—the former being about one-and-twenty years of age, and the latter eighteen. They were dressed in plain clothes, and they lounged into the room with an air of such fashionable languor that it seemed as if they were utterly incapable of any strong effort of the physical energies.

“How are you, old fellow?” said Captain Cauliflower, just giving a couple of fingers to his friend the Baronet.

“Well, old fellow,” said Lieutenant Tiffany, presenting his forefinger: and then both the gentlemen stared at Sylvester Casey as if they took him for some phenomenon such as they had never seen before, or for a curiosity not usually encountered beyond the precincts of the Zoological Gardens, where it may be found amongst the monkey species.

“Ah, I forgot! you don't know each other!” said the Baronet. “This is my friend Casey—— Mr. Sylvester Casey, son of the eminent banker—or merchant—or something of the sort.”

Captain Cauliflower bowed stiffly, and Mr. Tiffany giggled a little at the name of Casey—and then he said, “Beg pawdon, Mistaw What's-your-name——But is that your trap standing in the street—haw?”

“I rather think it is,” replied Sylvester, nothing disconcerted by the demeanour of the two officers. “A stunning pair of prads they are too—regular out-an'-outers.”

“Mr. Casey is a good judge of horseflesh,” re-remarked the Baronet.

“Well, I rather think I know a thing or two in that way:” and Sylvester winked his eye with a

vulgar familiarity. “I introduce myself, gentlemen, as a bit of a sporting character—not much—a little——eh, Kingston?”

“I say, old fellow,” said Tiffany, turning to the Baronet, “is your friend strong with the foil or single-stick—haw?”

“I should like to know what he is not strong at,” answered Sir Abel, who at once perceived that there was a prospect of some diversion.

“Come, Mistaw What's-your-name,” said Tiffany, taking up a couple of single-sticks; “and let's see who's the bettaw at this game.”

“By Jove, I'm rather out of practice,” stammered Sylvester, who had never fenced in his life. “Indeed, it's a long time since I had a foil or single-stick in my hand—and one devilish soon forgets——”

“Oh, I'm only a muff at it myself, my dear fellow,” interrupted Tiffany. “You are sure to give me a good thrashing—haw!”

“Well, I've no objection to try,” said Sylvester, encouraged by this assurance; and he thought that by making himself agreeable, he should form an intimacy with these two friends of Sir Abel Kingston.

The table was wheeled away from the middle of the room; and the combatants stationed themselves in front of each other. The sticks were crossed; and Mr. Tiffany actually seemed to be so ignorant of the proceeding as scarcely to know how to take the proper attitude;—whereas there was Sylvester, with his arms and limbs extended like a spread eagle, gathering assurance and hardihood from the apparent inefficiency of his opponent. Sylvester accordingly quickly began the attack, and dealt Tiffany a pretty smart blow upon the arm—whereat the young officer cried out in his affected voice, “Oh, my dear fellow! that hurts!”

“Have you had enough of it?” demanded Sylvester, with triumphant looks.

“Well, almost. 'Pon honour, you are too strong for me! But come, just one more bout—haw. You are a fine fellow and good fenceaw, Mistaw What's-your-name.”

And now, while he was yet speaking, it seemed as if Mr. Tiffany became rapidly inspired with new life. He took the proper attitude—he bent his body back—his chest seemed to expand—a fire gleamed in his eye—and his single stick began to rain rapid blows about the person of Sylvester. Now here and now there—now a tap on the sword arm, then a blow upon the left leg—then over the shoulder—and next across the ribs—so rapid were the proofs of Mr. Tiffany's proficiency. Sylvester was astounded. In a very few moments he was smarting all over as the blows rained mercilessly upon him—until he suddenly threw down his single-stick, exclaiming, “There's enough of it! Why, you're quite at home at this game!”

“Oh, not a bit, my dear fellow,” said Tiffany coolly. “Only one gains by practice, you know—haw.”

Sylvester sat down quite exhausted; while Sir Abel, scarcely able to restrain his laughter, rang the bell to order in more bottled stout and cherry brandy. Sylvester refreshed himself therewith; and Tiffany patted him on the back, telling him he was “a devilish good fellow, and that he should like to see him some day at the mess-dinnaw.”

"I see you've got the gloves there, old fellow," said Captain Cauliflower, as if quite in a careless way.

"Yes," replied Sir Abel. "But I'm out of sorts to-day—I couldn't put them on—"

"Of course you can play with the gloves, Mistah Casey?" said the Captain.

"Oh, Casey? he's up to everything," interjected the Baronet.

"Devilish fine fellow!" observed Captain Cauliflower approvingly. "Come, let's have a turn with the gloves. I don't profess to be strong at this game—I don't think I ever had the gloves on more than twice in my life—and therefore you must be stronger than me."

Sylvester had swallowed a pint of stout and a couple of glasses of cherry brandy; Mr. Tiffany was still patting him on the back; and he was evidently gaining ground rapidly in the opinion of his new friends. At least so he thought; and under this conviction he stood up with a manly air and put on the gloves, mentally consoling himself with the reflection that "they were such nice soft things, they could not possibly hurt even a child!"

Captain Cauliflower also put on the gloves, expressing the while his conviction "that he was a great fool to do so, for that he was sure to get the worst of it—that he didn't know what the devil possessed him, but he supposed it was that he'd got excited by the pleasure of forming Mr. Casey's acquaintance—and so he supposed he must go in and take the chance of it."

And he did go in; but a very little chance it was that he had to take of it—for the truth was that Captain Cauliflower was quite as proficient with the gloves as Lieutenant Tiffany was with the single-stick: and thus, after having permitted Sylvester Casey to give him two or three taps, he set to work and began to polish off his opponent in the most pleasant style possible. Now it was a blow in the right eye—then a blow flat upon the month which made Sylvester's teeth chatter—then it was in the left eye—then a couple of rapid buffets upon the cheeks, so that Sylvester kept dancing and skipping about in his own infinite discomfort, but to the huge delight of the others present, until Captain Cauliflower dealt him one tremendous side-blow, or in other parlance a sound box on the ear which sent him sprawling in the grate.

Bruised in body and mortified in mind—with one eye nearly bunged up, and a cheek swollen as if it were puffed out with a wen—Sylvester picked himself up: he tried to smile, but the attempt was somewhat a faint one. The Baronet saw that he was hurt, humiliated, and more than half inclined to be angry; and as we have before said, it suited Sir Abel's purpose to keep on friendly terms with him. He therefore hastened to take him by the hand, exclaiming, "You did uncommonly well, Casey. Tiffany will remember the knocks he got from your attack—and Cauliflower has no particular reason to triumph. Besides, I will say this, my dear fellow, that whenever there's any fun going on, you're always the first to enter into it. But, I say, by the bye, why shouldn't you three fellows dine here with me this evening?"

"Oh, with pleasure! I'll be one of you!" Sylvester hastened to ejaculate; and now his swollen countenance began to brighten up.

"What say you, Cauliflower? will you come? I'll give you some turtle—"

"Ah! my dear fellow," said the Captain, caressing his whiskers, and speaking with an affected drawl; "turtle's a great institution—a very great institution."

"And a neck of venison," added Sir Abel.

"Venison's great, my dear fellow," interjected Tiffany,—"very great. We are your men for the dinner. Let it be at eight sharp; and d—n the fellow that keeps it waiting."

"Mind and have French beans, my dear fellow," suggested Captain Cauliflower. "There's plenty in Covent Garden."

"I should think so," cried Casey. "Why, it's the middle of May—quite late for peas and French beans—that is to say, in decent society."

"But I say, old fellow," continued Cauliflower, now giving a long lazy yawn; "don't forget the currant jelly. Not that I ever touch it before the fifth plate of venison; but still it ought to be on the table. Ah! by the way, shall we bring up the Colonel with us?"

"What, Bulder?" asked the Baronet, with a slight grimace. "But isn't he rather a bit of a bore with his Indian stories?"

"Well, the fact is," drawled out Tiffany, now catching the yawning infection from his friend the Captain, "Bulder is rather well up in snakes and crocodiles."

"And every one who has been abroad," said the Baronet, "seems to think he has a right to lie about snakes and wild beasts, and all that sort of thing. However, bring up the Colonel if you like. I'll take care there shall be enough—and I'll have some champagne put in ice."

These matters being arranged to the satisfaction of all present, Mr. Sylvester Casey took his departure in his splendid phaeton, to speed to Hatton Garden and tell his mother and sister of the fine new acquaintances he had formed, and likewise to bathe his face with vinegar; while on the other hand Captain Cauliflower and Mr. Tiffany strolled up Regent Street, to look at the women, and to eat ices at some fashionable resort where that cooling comestible was dispensed to perfection.

Sir Abel Kingston, when left to himself, summoned his man-servant and gave orders for the dinner. He then looked at his watch: it was a quarter to four o'clock—the time was approaching when the promised cheque was to find its way into his hands. He began calculating what he should do with the amount; and he speedily found that if he settled all his most pressing liabilities, he would still leave some debts unpaid. But then, could he not again have recourse to the purse of the Duchess? He thought so. He might have asked for thirty thousand on the preceding evening: but he had deemed it more prudent at the time to be comparatively moderate in his demands.

A little before four o'clock a cab drove up to the entrance of Spring Gardens in Cockspur Street; and Lavinia alighted. But at that very same instant another cab halted on the spot; and out sprang the Duke of Arleigh. Lavinia was transfixed with dismay on thus being confronted with her ducal master; and he, taking advantage of her confusion, at once said, "You have something to deliver close by?"

"Yes, my lord—that is to say, your Grace—"

"Give it to me. No harm shall befall you, nor your mistress either. Ah! by the bye, were you to receive anything in return?—any letters to take back?"

"Nothing, my lord," answered Lavinia. "I was simply to deliver this letter, and then return to Ardleigh House."

"Very good," said the Duke. "I will deliver it. You can return home—tell her Grace that you met me, and that I am doing that which is best under existing circumstances. And now go, Lavinia—and be not frightened either on your own account or on that of your mistress."

The abigail entered the cab which had brought her thither; and it immediately drove away. The Duke of Ardleigh then examined the address, and opened the letter which had just fallen into his hands. It contained nothing but the cheque: the address was penned in a feigned writing; and thus it became at once evident to the Duke that his wife was studiously avoiding to compromise herself in respect to correspondence.

"Well and good," he thought to himself. "I must have been wrong in the idea I formed this morning, and she can have no letters to get back from the Baronet. Lavinia was not told to wait for anything. No!—it is as clear as possible there are not any letters!"

The Duke consigned the cheque to his pocket, and proceeded to knock at the door of the house where Kingston lodged. The reader may now imagine with what a sudden surprise and consternation the Baronet was seized, when the door of his sitting-apartment was thrown open and his man-servant announced the Duke of Ardleigh!

A glance showed Sir Abel that it was no accidental visit which the Duke was paying him—but that there was a settled purpose evidenced in the severe composure of his looks: but quickly regaining his self-possession, he smiled, and got his countenance ready as it were to assume any look that might be suitable to the scene that was to take place.

"Sir Abel Kingston, are we completely alone?" demanded the young nobleman, as he flung his eyes around the room, and then plunged his regards into the chamber adjoining.

"Yes, my lord—completely alone," responded the Baronet. "But why—"

"Why am I here? Did you not expect a messenger from the Duchess of Ardleigh? and who better fitted to execute her missions than her own husband?"

The Baronet was confounded: he knew not what answer to give; for he thought to himself that the Duke must be confident of wielding some strong power over him in order to act with this degree of bold independence. But then the next moment Sir Abel said to himself, "Perhaps he means to discard the Duchess—to expose the whole thing—and hence his demeanour towards me!"

"You do not speak, Sir Abel," proceeded Herbert.

"It is for you, my lord, to explain yourself," was the response.

"Very good! You expected a messenger from the Duchess; and I am come in that capacity. You further expected to receive the sum of twenty thousand pounds—but you shall not receive a shilling."

"I am to understand, therefore, that your Grace intends to adopt the extremest measures? Well, I cannot help it. Your wife is innocent as far as I am concerned; but that, I daresay, no earthly power could make you believe."

"On the contrary, I do believe it—and it is in this belief that I have undertaken to become the champion of her cause. I know all. She has been weak, but not guilty; and I will protect her against extortioners and calumniators."

"Do you mean, my lord," demanded Kingston, fiercely, "to apply those terms to me?"

"What does your own conscience tell you?"

"Conscience?" echoed the Baronet, with a sneer. "But if you mean to hush up your wife's reputation, you must purchase my silence, my lord. Now I have said it, and that's the English of the whole affair."

"My wife's reputation is not injured," responded Herbert haughtily.

"No—not yet: but it may be," answered the Baronet menacingly.

"Not by such a tongue as your's. No one would put faith in the statements of a man who at the same time proclaimed himself to be a scoundrel."

"Scoundrel?" ejaculated Kingston, colouring up to the very hair of his head—and all the more so because he felt how completely he deserved the appellation.

"Why, yes—scoundrel," proceeded the Duke, with an air of the loftiest scorn and contempt. "What tale could you tell against the Duchess, except that she gave you some little encouragement—"

"Ah, my lord—you little think," interrupted the Baronet, "to what extent the good name of the Duchess of Ardleigh is in my power!"

"You dare not pretend that any written correspondence has compromised the Duchess?"—and the Duke's looks were riveted searchingly upon the Baronet.

"No. But if you wish to learn a great secret, my lord, and if you wish me to tell you how my silence can be cheaply purchased at the sum of twenty thousand pounds—"

"Proceed. Why do you stop short?"

"Because, if I tell your Grace something that I know, you may possibly turn round upon your wife."

"Nothing that you can do—nothing that you can tell me, will have that effect," answered the Duke.

"Very well, then. Go, my lord, to a certain street which I can name in Lambeth—there inquire at a certain house of no very good repute—and you will find that on the evening of the 8th, a certain lady was in that place. That lady was the Duchess of Ardleigh."

The Duke was for a moment staggered; and he regained not his self-possession ere the Baronet perceived his emotion.

"And will you have the assurance," demanded Herbert, "to tell me that the Duchess went to that house to meet you?"

"No. I do not pretend that such was the case. I simply tell your lordship that she was there. Go and inquire for yourself."

"I will. And now let us understand each other. If I discover a fact the secrecy of which is worth purchasing, you shall have your money."

But if, on the other hand, I find that I am deceived, I shall simply return to tell you that if you dare utter a whisper injurious to the character of the Duchess of Arleigh, I will find means to punish you."

"I am perfectly willing to let the matter stand upon that basis," rejoined Kingston.

The Duke then took his departure: but instead of driving over to the abode of Mrs. Grills in Lambeth, he returned at once to Arleigh House. Lavinia had already arrived, and had quite bewildered and astonished her mistress by telling her how she had been followed and intercepted by the Duke.

The Duchess was in her boudoir, pondering in perplexity the intelligence which she had received, when the Duke made his appearance.

"My dear Mary," he at once said, "I told you this morning that I would be your friend—and I am acting in that capacity."

"What! to interfere in my affairs?" exclaimed the Duchess, "after everything that has taken place between us!"

"You interfered in mine, when you went disguised in male attire into Kent—"

"And then I afterwards served you, by the advice I gave you when I told you to go to Southdale."

"And I have now penetrated into your affairs, merely with a view of serving you likewise. You told me that you required the sum of twenty thousand pounds to silence a villain who had you in his power. The amount seemed enormous; and it also occurred to me that if you once yielded to such an extortioner, you would be constantly laying yourself open to demands that would impoverish *my* purse and harass *you* into the very grave itself. I saw that you would not enter into details with me: I was resolved to take stealthy measures in order to serve you. You told me that at four o'clock the cheque should reach the hand of the person for whom it was destined. I watched and followed Lavinia—she has told you how I obtained the letter from her—"

"And now that you have gone so far with your interference, Herbert," said the Duchess, "be pleased to tell me with what result?"

"Tell me, Mary, first of all, whether the villain spoke truly when he said that on the evening of the 8th of this month—"

"Ah, I know what you mean! I know what he has told you!"—and the countenance of the Duchess became scarlet. "Go to that house if you will—you will find that I was carried off by mistake. It was a young man of the name of Casey who had hired some ruffians for the abduction of the actress Mademoiselle Imogene—"

"And how came you, Mary, to be in a position to be carried off instead of the actress?"

The Duchess averted her countenance for a moment: then again turning towards her husband, she said in a low deep voice, "My child is there. I went secretly and in disguise to the house—I had a thick veil over my countenance—and I was taken for the actress. Now I have told you everything."

The Duke took his wife's hand; and looking her in the face, he said, "It is because you behaved generously towards me in reference to Ethel, that I have endeavoured to behave gene-

rously towards you. You know me too well to suppose it was for the sake of these twenty thousand pounds. And then too, Mary, I was touched by your conduct in destroying that paper this morning, as well as by those assurances, evidently so sincere and so genuine, that you were determined to resist temptation and remain in the path of virtue. Believe me, therefore, I have acted only as your friend. And now, if you think that circumstances will not enable you to set this villain Kingston at defiance—"

"If he were to proclaim that he saw me at such a house—"

"Not a soul in the world would believe him!" ejaculated the Duke vehemently. "It would be too monstrous—too preposterous!—indeed the statement would be deemed too outrageous for even the wildest romance! Unless indeed—and here it is that the point is important,—unless indeed, I repeat, there be any corroborative evidence—"

"If the matter were investigated," said the Duchess,—“if the woman of the house were confronted with me—Oh! I fear that the villain Kingston may prove bitterly vindictive and terribly persevering! He may follow up the clue!—he already knows that I was carried off in mistake for Mademoiselle Imogene—he may proceed to inquire how I happened to be in or near Mademoiselle Imogene's abode at all—and then—and then he may be led on to fathom the dreadful secret which I would sooner die than have known—the secret of my dishonour before I was a wife!"

"If you dread all this, Mary," interjected the young Duke, "I must go and give the villain Kingston the amount which you have promised. But I fear that by thus yielding in this instance we shall only lay ourselves open to future extortionate demands. The same circumstance which now places you in his power, will avail for his benefit in a month—a year—or five years—indeed periodically and frequently! But I will think over the matter for an hour or two—there is no particular hurry—and in one way or another the business shall be settled this evening."

"I am glad that you have taken it up, Herbert," said the Duchess. "You are indeed acting a most friendly part! Ah, if we were only to confide a little more in each other!—But no! that is impossible!"—and she turned aside.

The Duke lingered for a moment, as if he were about to say something: but he probably altered his mind—for he somewhat abruptly quitted the boudoir.

It was about nine o'clock when the Duke of Arleigh returned to Spring Gardens. After due deliberation he had made up his mind to bestow the cheque upon Sir Abel Kingston. On knocking at the door, he was informed by the servant who answered the summons that Sir Abel had company.

"But perhaps your Grace would walk up?" added the domestic. "There's only Colonel Bulder, Captain Cauliflower, Mr. Tiffany, and young Mr. Casey."

The Duke had been on the point of declining to walk up, when the sudden mention of this last name made him alter his resolve. He wanted to form Sylvester's acquaintance, for the purpose of ascertaining whether he knew, as well as the Ba-

ronet, that it was the Duchess who had been carried off instead of Imogen.

"I will walk up-stairs," said Herbert, yielding to the impulse of his second thought.

In a few moments the servant announced the Duke of Ardleigh, in the room where Sir Abel Kingston was seated with his four guests at table. They were now at the dessert; and choice wines sparkled on the board. The Duke entered with an easy well-bred air of friendliness; and the Baronet chuckled inwardly as he thought to himself, "I have won!—he is convinced! he is come to give me the cheque!"

The three military officers had already some slight acquaintance with the young nobleman; but Sylvester Casey was now introduced to him for the first time—and he could scarcely believe in his own good fortune in finding himself in the company of a Duke. What an event to relate in Hutton Garden! what a thing for his mother to blazon abroad amongst all her acquaintances!

"Pray do not let me interrupt the conversation," said the Duke, taking a seat at the table. "I believe the Colonel was just on the point of commencing a narrative when I entered the room."

"Well, my lord," replied Colonel Bulder,—a short stout man, with a fallow complexion and a very husky voice; "I was just going to tell our friends here of something that happened of a very extraordinary character. It was when I was quartered at Canterbury last year, just after my return from India. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I certainly shouldn't have believed it; but I happened to be going through the Cathedral yard at the time, and it was exactly at the hour of noon for the reason which you will presently see. You must know that some masons were repairing one of the upper windows of the Oxford or clock-tower of the Cathedral; and one of the poor fellows happened to let go his hold and tumble. Well, you are all of you shuddering to think of the height he fell and the smash that he came down with! But nothing of the sort! For, lo and behold, he was caught by the waistband of his breeches by the large hand of the clock, which was pointing straight up at the moment, it being as I tell you the hour of noon."

"And you saw this, Colonel, with your own eyes?" asked Captain Cauliflower, with a very serious air, though he kicked Tiffany under the table—and this young gentleman was ready to burst with laughter.

"Oh, yes," answered Bulder. "I saw it with my own eyes—and I stopped in the Cathedral yard till the poor man was lowered down. He had sustained no injury beyond a very severe fright; but of this he presently recovered. Several people who had collected on the spot made a subscription for him. It amounted to eight pounds nine and fourpence—I remember as well as possible."

"Poer fellah!" said Captain Cauliflower, filling his glass, and looking slyly across the table at Tiffany.

"Haw! poor fellow!" observed this young gentleman.

"Well, Colonel," said Mr. Sylvester Casey, who had drunk a great deal of wine and was placing himself on very familiar terms with all present; "I was a witness of something that was

likewise very remarkable — though not such a regular stunner as that."

"A what, sir?"—and Bulder surveyed Casey with an awful dignity.

"Well, then, a buster," said Sylvester. "I'll tell you what it was, my Lord Duke and gentlemen. There was a cousin of mine who was a terrible wild fellow, and always up to all manner of sprees and capers. Well, one day, what should he do but hang on to one of the sweeps of a mill just as the miller was going to set it in motion. Of course the miller didn't see Joe—which was my cousin's name; and round went the mill. Joe clung fast while being carried up into the air; but the instant the sweep came near the ground again, he jumped off. Well, what do you think? poor fellow, his brain was turned!"

"And no wonder, sir," interjected Colonel Bulder, who though very fond of telling remarkable tales, never believed them when they were narrated by others.

"Oh, but that's not all," ejaculated Sylvester: "the wonderful part's to come. Joe was put into a lunatic asylum; and there he stopped for two years without showing the slightest signs of recovery. Well, at last the lunacy doctor, or whatever you call him—he was a ripping clever fellow, mind—one of your regular out-and-overs—and so he hit upon a method to put Tom's brain—"

"I thought it was Joe's?" interjected Colonel Bulder, somewhat triumphantly, as he fancied he had caught his new friend tripping.

"Did I say Tom? Why, of course you must have known I meant Joe's, since I said Joe at first. However, as I was going on to state, this stunner of a lunacy doctor hit upon his plan; and that was to tie Joe to the sweep of the mill again, and send him round just the contrary way—"

"Ah! so as to turn his brain right again?" ejaculated Bulder, with the most indignant sarcasm.

"Just so," replied Sylvester coolly; "and it had the effect too—for I can tell you that Jack—Joe I mean, has been as right and tight in his senses ever since as I myself have."

"Haw! very extraordinary!" said Mr. Tiffany. "But are you sure, my dear fellow, you don't draw a rather long bow?"

Sylvester turned very red indeed—and then thought it best to burst out into a loud laugh.

This laugh was still ringing through the room, when the man-servant entered; and it was evident that there was a certain expression of dismay and consternation on his countenance. Indeed, he seemed to be struggling for the power of speech.

"Well, what is it?" demanded his master, with a sudden start of uneasiness.

"I should like to speak to you alone, if you please, sir," stammered out the domestic. "I think you'd better come, sir."

"Who are those on the landing?" demanded Colonel Bulder.

At this moment a sergeant of police made his appearance, followed by a constable. Every one at the table started up: but the countenance of Sir Abel Kingston was pale as death.

"I am sorry, gentlemen, to interrupt your harmony," said the sergeant: "but the truth is, Sir Abel, you're wanted."



MARTHA

"Wanted?" said Captain Cauliflower. "What a strange word! What on earth does the fellah mean?"

"What does the fellaw want?" asked Tiffany.

"Ah! what does he mean?" growled Bulder, in his hoarse voice. "There must be some mistake."

"No mistake, gentlemen," responded the sergeant. "Sir Abel knows very well what it is, and I daresay Mr. Casey was very sorry——"

"Casey?" cried Sylvester. "My name's Casey."

"Maybe, sir. And yet you are nothing like the gentleman that took out the warrant for this forgery business."

"Forgery?" echoed several voices.

"Sergeant, let us step outside together," said Sir Abel, who trembled like an aspen leaf. "Perhaps we can settle it."

"There's no way of settling it, sir, except by the process of the law."

"My lord," whispered Kingston to the Duke, "what is your decision? The cheque——"

"I don't understand you, sir," responded Ardleigh, turning away with haughty coolness.

"Not understand me?" ejaculated Sir Abel, literally becoming aghast; and he felt as if the gulf of black destruction were indeed opening under his very feet.

"Come, sir—come," said the sergeant, now speaking sternly; and assisted by his constable, he hurried the Baronet, who was utterly overwhelmed, out of the room.

"Poor fellah!" said Captain Cauliflower.

"Poor fellow!" added Mr. Tiffany.

And then the party broke up: but as Sylvester was about to separate from the rest at the front door, the Duke of Ardleigh laid his hand upon his arm, saying with an easy half-familiar air, "Perhaps you will walk with me a little way, Mr. Casey, and tell me something more about this unfortunate business."

CHAPTER XXVI.

HENDON COURT.

WE must now return to Ethel Trevor, at her humble little lodging in Camden Town. The visit of Count Mandeville left her to a series of varied and somewhat bewildering reflections. She could not for the life of her comprehend how he had discovered so much in reference to her affairs, especially on those points wherein they were connected with the Duke of Arleigh and the stock-broker Warren. It however seemed only too evident to the unhappy lady that Warren had infamously plundered her of the money which she had looked upon as a source of a future income for herself and her child. Perhaps she would have so far departed from the resolve she had formed in reference to the Duke, as to communicate to his Grace Warren's villany and the position in which he had left her: but she believed the tale which the Count had told her to the effect that Herbert had gone for a three years' tour on the Continent and that no letters would reach him except through his wife. For what seemed more probable than that the Duke should go abroad after all that had happened?—and could she possibly doubt the statement of a gentleman who seemed so well informed on every subject as Count Mandeville?

Amidst all the painful topics of her thoughts, there was one slight consolation: namely, that she should not be left quite destitute, but that on the morrow she should receive the two hundred pounds which the Count was to bring her. Providence did not appear to have altogether abandoned her. Was not this son of the old friend of her father sent by heaven at that most critical juncture to save her from downright despair? Yes!—in this light did Mandeville's visit seem to the contemplation of the ingenuous Ethel; and as she strained her beloved boy to her bosom, she fervently thanked her Maker for having permitted a single ray of solace to steal in upon her through the dark clouds of her hapless destiny.

Ethel began to reflect seriously upon the course which she ought to pursue. Her position was utterly changed from what she had previously conceived it to be. She had intended to seek some pretty but economical seclusion, where she might live in modest but respectable comfort upon the income arising from the money in the Funds. But now that hope was destroyed—that prospect was dispelled! She was constrained to look upon herself as one about to begin the world again with about a couple of hundred pounds of capital and a few trinkets of some value. What could she do? To become a governess would necessitate separation from her child; and this idea was horrible. To embark her little funds in some business was out of the question, for she was totally ignorant of trading matters. To hire a house, furnish it and let it in lodgings, was the next project which she revolved in her mind; but she presently remembered that the landlady of her abode, when in a garrulous mood, had in the morning of that very day expatiated on the venturesome speculation of embarking all one's little capital in a lodging-house, and she had also mentioned how many persons she herself had known who after dragging themselves through no end of troubles and priva-

tions had been sold up by their landlords in the long run.

Poor Ethel was bewildered by all the successive projects which she envisaged only to reject; and she was sitting in a very desponding mood, when the landlady entered and said, "Here is to-day's paper, ma'am. I thought probably you might like to look over it."

Ethel thanked her, and the woman withdrew. The journal lay for some few minutes untouched upon the table, when Ethel suddenly recollected that its advertising columns contained announcements of all sorts: and who could tell but that there might be something which would suit even her peculiar position? With this idea she ran her eyes over the advertisements; and sure enough! her regards presently settled upon something which she fancied might suit. Indeed so completely did the requirements set forth in that advertisement appear to meet the peculiarity of the young lady's position, that a thrill of hope shot through her heart; and again she murmured to herself, with a feeling of grateful enthusiasm, "No!—heaven has not abandoned me!"

She retired to rest with a heart that was somewhat lighter than but an hour back she could have dared hope it could be; and she arose at an early hour in the morning. She had ascertained, by inquiry of the landlady, that she might pay the visit which she had to make and return to her lodging again by the hour of noon, with the greatest facility. She dressed herself in her best apparel: she bestowed equal care upon little Alfred; and she then set out with the infant in her arms, having assured her maid Susan that she should return by mid-day, at which hour she was to receive the promised visit from Count Mandeville. A short walk of less than a quarter of a mile took Ethel to a point where, after waiting a few minutes, she obtained a seat in a public conveyance that plied between London and Chipping Barnet.

"Do you go all the way, ma'am?" asked the conductor.

"No: I wish to alight at a place somewhere between Hendon and Finchley; and I believe, from the information I obtained, it is on the road which your vehicle pursues. It is Hendon Court."

"I know it well, ma'am, and will put you down as near it as possible."

Away sped the equipage, which was already filled with passengers: it entered Holloway—it passed through Highgate—and in a very short time it stopped at the corner of a lane diverging from the main road somewhere between Hendon and Finchley.

"Down this lane, ma'am, about half a mile—just beyond the trees—and there you are!"

The conductor was a civil man: he assisted Ethel to alight—paid a passing tribute of admiration to the beauty of her sleeping child—and touched his hat as he received his fare together with some little gratuity for his attention. Ethel entered the lane, and continued her way quickly; for it was now ten o'clock, and she had only a couple of hours before her to transact her business at Hendon Court and get back to Camden Town in time for the appointment with Count Mandeville. In about ten minutes she reached the group of trees indicated by the conductor; and then for a short

distance she skirted a close fence which enclosed the grounds pertaining to Hendon Court. The building itself did not break suddenly upon the view, but gradually revealed itself from amidst the trees wherein it was more than half embowered. It was an old gloomy-looking pile of dingy red brick, with small windows; and as there was no flower-garden in front, but only a shrubbery of evergreens, there was nothing to relieve the sombre aspect of the scene. It was a large edifice, with a carriage-drive forming a semicircular avenue to the entrance; but there was not a soul to be seen about the premises as Ethel entered the gate—and a chill sensation like that of a superstitious awe struck through her as she advanced towards the front door.

She knocked—and the sound seemed to be hollow and sepulchral within. It was however a matter of as much surprise as relief to her mind, when a footman in a handsome and even gay livery quickly answered the summons; and when Ethel inquired if Lady Langport could be seen at that hour, he at once requested her to walk in. The hall was spacious, but low-pitched; and it was a step lower than the level of the ground outside. It was wainscoted, and was hung with old pictures, some of which were so black that it was almost impossible to discern the subjects. There were several doors opening from this hall; and a massive wooden staircase with immense balusters led up to the first floor. Thither Ethel followed the footman,—who, throwing open the door of an apartment, requested her to wait a few minutes, at the same time asking what name he should take to her ladyship?

“You may give the name of Mrs. Trevor,” replied Ethel. “although Lady Langport is not acquainted with it.”

The footman, who was very respectful in his demeanour, bowed and quitted the apartment, the appearance of which had already struck Ethel as being in singular contrast with all that she had previously seen of the place. She now examined it more attentively; and she was astonished at the elegance with which it was furnished: the appointments were all complete in the most modern style: chairs, tables, sofas, lounges, draperies, and ornaments,—all had been selected with the most exquisite taste. The only fault in reference to that beautiful drawing-room was its want of height; but this was in a measure compensated for by the paper of a light panel-pattern chosen for the walls, and by the colour of the curtains which were purple streaked with amber. Upon the tables were numerous little nick-nacks and curiosities, remarkable for their elegance: an open portfolio showed that it contained a number of choice and expensive prints: there was a piano in the room—and we should not forget to add that there were porcelain vases filled with flowers. A door at the extremity standing half-open, afforded a glimpse of an inner room, which seemed to be furnished with a corresponding lightness and elegance; so that Ethel marvelled to find so much cheerfulness enclosed within such gloomy walls, and such pleasant places approached by means of such an antiquated staircase and sombre hall. She wondered what sort of a person Lady Langport might prove to be. When first knocking at the door she had fancied that the mistress of the mansion must be an elderly, haughty, old-fashioned

severe dame, with looks as cold and features as rigid as if she were a portrait of other times just descended out of its frame. But now, as she glanced around this elegant drawing-room—so gay, so cheerful, so indicative of a refined and exquisite taste on the part of its presiding genius—she began to conjecture that Lady Langport would turn out to be a very different being from what she had at first conceived. She was not left long in suspense; for in about five minutes the door opened, and a lady came forward with a smiling countenance, a light elastic step, and with altogether a demeanour which at the very first instant made a most favourable impression upon Ethel.

This was Lady Langport. Her age appeared to be midway between thirty and forty. Her hair was perfectly black, and was worn in plain bands; while an elegant French cap with gay-coloured ribbons set off the well-shaped head. The profile of her countenance was very good; the brows, though somewhat thickly pencilled, were well arched: the eyes, of a darkness corresponding with the hair, were clear and bright—though a person disposed to be critical would have suggested that they were the least thing sunken. Indeed, the lady's cheeks were not so plump as they might have been, considering that her figure was of buxom proportions, its *embonpoint* however being perfectly consistent with an admirable symmetry. She was a little above the middle height; and she was dressed in a morning-gown, which modestly ascended to the very throat, and the sleeves of which were fastened at the wrist. This toilet set off her fine shape to the fullest advantage, defining the contours of the bust without permitting the slightest glimpse of them. We should add that her complexion was singularly beautiful: indeed it was of a wondrous fairness; and inasmuch as there was a carnation tint of health upon the cheeks, it was only the eye of a close and critical observer which would have noticed that those cheeks were at all hollow; while inasmuch as there was a total absence of any bleish tint around the eyes, it was only a similar degree of hypercriticism that would have found them to be sunken. As for her lips, they were of vivid scarlet; while the teeth which they revealed, were white as ivory, faultlessly even, and perfect, without loss, spot, or blemish.

It was not at a glance that Ethel obtained a full idea of this portraiture; but it was during the first few minutes of the conversation which followed, that she was enabled thus to scan the personal characteristics and attributes of Lady Langport.

“Pray be seated, Mrs. Trevor,” were the words which her ladyship uttered as she came gliding into the room. “I suppose I may conjecture what has brought you hither? Ah! that charming child! I need not ask if it is your's? Do not awake the dear boy—lay him down upon that sofa while you and I converse together.”

Nothing could be more encouraging to Ethel than such language as this, uttered in a pleasing voice, accompanied by the sweetest smiles, and by a manner utterly devoid of pride or pretension. Indeed, the kindness with which the lady alluded to the child, at once convinced Ethel that she must possess a good heart.

“I hope your ladyship will excuse me,” said

Ethel, "for calling thus early. I was afraid the hour might be unreasonable—"

"Oh, dear me, no!" ejaculated Lady Langport. "I am always up early—at six o'clock in the summer—at seven in the winter. I have invariably finished breakfast by nine. There is nothing like early rising to keep one's self in health!"

"I am glad that I have not come at an unseasonable hour," resumed Ethel; "but I was so fearful that other candidates might present themselves—"

"Oh! I have received several applications," interjected Lady Langport; "for the advertisement has been inserted several consecutive days."

"I only saw it yesterday," said Ethel; and then with a sigh, and an anxious glance towards her child, she added in the half-hushed tone of acute suspense, "Perhaps your ladyship has already engaged with some one?"

"No—not yet. The fact is, I am very, very particular. It is not every one who will suit me. Some applicants are not lady-like in their manners, nor presentable in society: others have relations and friends who would either come visiting them here, or else whom they would want to go and see frequently. Others have a giddy appearance—or else are reserved, ill-tempered, and affording but little promise of proving willing and obliging."

"I hope that in some of these particulars at least, I may suit your ladyship," said Ethel: "for I have no friends to visit me—none whom I could go to visit—"

"You are friendless?" said Lady Langport, surveying her with earnest attention.

"Utterly and completely friendless!" answered Ethel: and she hastily wiped away her tears.

"While I pity you, for the reason that such words should issue from your lips, yet on the other hand the fact of your friendlessness is not the least of the many recommendations that evidently exist in your favour. Perhaps you observed that my advertisement, though worded as delicately as possible, intimated that any young lady who was orphaned and friendless, and to whom a comfortable home, with an ample pecuniary allowance, together with the kindest treatment, were objects of consideration—"

"To me they are indeed!" murmured Ethel, in the fervid hope that her visit to Hendon Court would be crowned with success.

"And moreover," continued Lady Langport, apparently heedless of the interruption, "I intimated in my advertisement that a young widow with one or two children would not be objected to—"

"I have only this child," said Ethel: and without absolutely telling a falsehood, she thus gave it to be understood that she herself was a widow,—little reflecting at the moment that there might seem something contradictory in the fact that she was not in mourning—nor even in half-mourning—and that her child was barely eleven months old!

Lady Langport did not however seem to take any notice of these little inconsistencies; for she went on to say, with that soft urbanity of manner and good-nature which seemed so entirely her own, "I will not ask you to enter into any particulars which must naturally be painful to you. I know

what it is to lose an affectionate husband: indeed I have been less fortunate than you—for you have something to console you"—and she pointed towards the sleeping child—"while my children have all gone down into the grave!" she added, with a tremulous voice. "However, as I was saying," she went on to observe, "I will question you on nothing that regards the past: I will not even insult you by asking for references. Your looks tell me what you are: your countenance is the best certificate of character. Having said this much, you see, Mrs. Trevor, that I on my side am prepared to conclude the compact: but it remains for you to ascertain whether the position which I offer may suit you."

"Oh, how is it possible that I can hesitate?" exclaimed Ethel, clasping her hands in grateful fervour. "So much goodness on your part!—so much unexpected liberality!"

"I am sure that what I am doing, and all I should like to do for you, are nothing more than you deserve. But do not be so hasty, my dear Mrs. Trevor, in rushing at the conclusion that the position will suit you. In the first place, I will tell you the advantages it holds out. You will receive an income of one hundred pounds a year to begin with; and if you remain with me, it shall speedily be increased. You will be treated by me as a friend and as an equal; and nothing on my part shall ever remind you that your condition is at all a dependent one. Indeed, you shall be made to feel as if you had as much right to be at Hendon Court as I myself have. The servants will treat you with the same deference and respect which they show towards me. As you now find me in temper and in manners, so shall I always prove towards you. You will never have to capitulate to submit to; and you will never have to humiliate yourself by addressing me in a tone of flattery or compliment. It is no toad-eater that I require: it is a friend—a companion—and—and"—Lady Langport hesitated for a moment, and then added—"a confidante."

"And your ladyship thinks," cried Ethel, in astonishment, "that I could hesitate for a single moment in accepting a position which is in every way so desirable?"

"Stop!" said Lady Langport: "I have told you the advantages which I have to offer; but on the other hand I have to acquaint you with the duties which you will have to fulfil."

"There are no duties," interrupted Ethel, "which I would not gladly and cheerfully undertake!"

"Again I say stop! be patient, my dear Mrs. Trevor!" interrupted Lady Langport, with a smile, as she laid her gloved hand upon Ethel's arm. "Suppose that having only shown you the bright side of the picture, I was now to exhibit the dark side, by explaining that I require various menial offices to be performed by the lady who becomes my companion—that having an aversion to handmaids and abigails, I will not permit female servants to approach me in my own chamber—that therefore in all matters of the toilet—"

"I understand your ladyship," cried Ethel: "there is nothing that shocks me in all this! I have neither pride nor unwillingness—but on the contrary, every desire to render myself useful."

"Pause! reflect!" interposed the lady. "Do

you know what are the duties of a lady's-maid?—are you prepared to perform all the offices that are menial in respect to the toilet?"

"Only suffer me to prove to your ladyship," exclaimed Ethel, with fervour, "how anxious I am to show my appreciation of the advantages which I shall enjoy! Believe me, there is nothing I would not do for your ladyship!—nothing! nothing! I want a home—and you offer me one! I want to save up money for the benefit of my child—and your bounty will afford me the means! Good heavens! should I not be the veriest ingrate if I did not strive day and night to give you pleasure? And if you were ill, I would nurse you—I would never quit your bedside—"

"And even if pestilence assailed me," interjected the lady, "would you not fly from the infection?"

"No!" was Ethel's emphatic response. "I would remain with you until the last!"

"Ah! this is indeed the very best case that I could possibly suppose, in order to put your sincerity to the test! What, then, if you found me attacked by plague or pestilence—stretched in my bed, an object loathsome to look upon and to touch—"

"Enough, enough, my lady!" exclaimed Ethel: "you are supposing a case to put me to the test—and I call heaven to witness that I should not shrink from my duty! I know not how I can convince you of my truthfulness beyond mere asseveration: but Oh! if I assure you that I possess a grateful heart, is not that a sufficient guarantee—"

"It is now my turn to say *enough, enough*?" interrupted Lady Langport. "The bargain is concluded between us. When will you come to me? The young lady whom you are to succeed, is anxious to leave as soon as possible—for the simple reason that the death of a very distant relative, at whose hands she never expected anything, has suddenly put her in the possession of riches—"

"I will come to your ladyship with the least possible delay," said Ethel. "I need merely return to my lodgings in Camden Town to make my final arrangements."

"Be it so," said Lady Langport. "You will come to me in the course of this day. Ah! by the bye, I should ask you, Mrs. Trevor, do you require funds? Pray take the proposal in the same kind and delicate spirit in which it is made."

While thus speaking, Lady Langport drew off the exquisitely fitting lemon-coloured glove from her right hand, in order to unlock a writing-desk that was on the table; and Ethel could not help noticing that the hand was thin and even lank, considering the buxom *embospoint* and symmetrical richness of the lady's figure. But the complexion of that hand was dazzlingly fair; and the nails, faultlessly formed in the shape of almonds, were of a healthful pinkness. She opened the desk and displayed a quantity of gold and bank-notes: but Ethel assured her, with many expressions of gratitude, that she was not without ready money and that she had no outstanding debts. Lady Langport then offered refreshments: but Ethel did not require them. Her ladyship however insisted upon having some milk

and cakes brought up for little Alfred, who was now awaking; and she played with the child for a few minutes with a degree of kindness that still further won the heart of Ethel.

The young mother took her temporary leave of Lady Langport, inwardly blessing heaven for having sent her so kind a friend. Indeed, when beyond view of the windows of Hendon Court, Ethel knelt down by the side of the lane; and depositing her infant upon the grass, she joined her hands together, murmuring, "I thank thee, O God! that thou hast taken compassion upon me for this dear babe's sake!"

She then continued her way, with the child in her arms; and on reaching the end of the lane, she waited a few minutes until the omnibus made its appearance on its way back from Chipping Barnet. There was plenty of room inside; indeed there was only another passenger besides Ethel—and this was a middle-aged person, who immediately turned his back towards her in a somewhat uncourteous fashion. Ethel did not however notice his behaviour; for she was thinking of all that had taken place with Lady Langport. Presently, however, her fellow-traveller in the omnibus turned slowly round; and as Ethel glanced at his countenance, it instantaneously struck her that those demure features were not unfamiliar to her. She looked again: she recognised the man:—he was Mr. Phipps, the stockbroker's head clerk.

"You are Mrs. Trevor?" he said, with the air of one who after having averted his face with the hope of passing unnoticed, had suddenly made up his mind to speak. "Yea—and you know me—I see that you do!" he continued. "It is fortunate I have fallen in with you."

"Indeed?" ejaculated Ethel, wondering whether it were possible she could be about to hear that her five thousand pounds were to be restored to her.

"Yes," continued Mr. Phipps, speaking emphatically and rapidly, as if he wished to have done with what he had to say before there was a chance of any one else stepping into the omnibus: "you have suffered enough!"—and it now struck Ethel that he surveyed her with a compassionate air. "Will you promise me that if I tell you a secret you will not betray me as the author of it—and indeed that you will not suffer it to be seen that you know it, otherwise than by the prudential course that you will adopt in consequence?"

"If you mean me well, sir," answered Ethel, almost in affright at this mysterious mode of address, "I shall thank you—I shall be deeply grateful!"

"Listen! Put no faith in anything that Count de Mandeville tells you!—he is pursuing you only for the most infamous of purposes! His father never knew your's—and the idea of the debt of two hundred pounds is only a pretext! Take the money or not, as you like—Perhaps you had better, situated as you are: but—"

At this instant the omnibus was halted: Phipps put his finger upon his lip; and retreating to the further end of the vehicle, did not again meet Ethel's eye for the remainder of the journey.

For some minutes the young lady sat in a state of blank consternation on receiving that intelligence. But when she regained sufficient composure to deliberate upon it, her good sense told

her that it was indeed all too true. The mysterious mode of the Count's self-introduction—the fact that he seemed about to take his leave of her when the idea of having a pecuniary obligation to acquit might have struck him as an after-thought—and then the manner in which he caught up and echoed the words which he elicited from Ethel's lips about her father Captain Fraser, and Southdale,—all these circumstances, as she now calmly reviewed them, convinced her that the warning which she had received from Phipps was well founded. At first it was a shock to her that the two hundred pounds which she fancied were so legitimately her own, should slip through her hands: but on deliberate reflection she saw how much better it was that the matter should stand thus than that she should have accepted money to which she had no right, and thus have afforded the perfidious Count a claim over her.

Her hope now was that she should be enabled to get back to her lodging in Camden Town in time to make her arrangements for departure before midday, at which hour she had no doubt the Count would be punctual. It was twenty minutes to twelve when she reached the lodging-house; and she lost not a moment in explaining to her nursemaid Susan, that circumstances rendered it imperiously necessary for them to separate. The faithful girl was much afflicted at the intelligence; but Ethel assured her that if happier times should come, she would not fail to communicate with her and give her the option of returning into her service. She had ready money sufficient to make Susan a liberal present; and she also gave her some little trinket of jewellery as a memorial,—at the same time charging her not to remain in London, but to return with the least possible delay to her parents, who lived somewhere in the neighbourhood of Maidstone.

The bill at the lodgings was settled; and a couple of cabs were fetched. Ethel, with her child, took possession of one; and Susan departed in the other to the terminus of the South Eastern Railway. All this was accomplished by five minutes to twelve o'clock. Punctually at noon a handsome equipage drove up to the door; and Count de Mandeville alighted.

"Is Mrs. Trevor at home?" he asked of the landlady, who appeared at his summons at the front door.

"No, sir, she is gone," was the reply.

"Gone?" he ejaculated in astonishment. "When? where?"

"She went away just now, sir, without telling me where she was going—and I have no more idea than you have."

"Gone? Perdition!" muttered Mandeville to himself: but as he sprang into his carriage again, he mentally ejaculated, "Nevertheless I will find her out yet! She has suspected something! But how?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

LADY LANGPORT.

ETHEL was growing wiser with her experiences of the world—which heaven knows were sufficient to open her eyes somewhat to its duplicities and villainies, and to teach her those lessons of prudence

and caution which the natural ingenuousness of her disposition would otherwise never have dreamt of. On leaving the lodging-house she thought it quite possible that Count Mandeville might hasten in search of her or adopt some measures to find her out. She therefore first of all ordered herself to be driven in a direction contrary to that which she subsequently meant to take. Then she halted, dismissed the cab, and took another into Holloway—whence a third bore her to her destination.

It was quite early in the afternoon when Ethel arrived the second time at Hendon Court. The cab drove up to the door: the footman, and a genteel-looking, well-dressed housemaid came forth to take her luggage; and when her boxes were deposited in the hall, the footman said, "I think, ma'am, you will find her ladyship in the room where you saw her this morning."

"And I, ma'am," said the housemaid, "will take charge of your little boy."

Ethel was now one of the family: there was consequently no formality in conducting her upstairs—while she herself hesitated not to proceed to the apartment which the footman had indicated. On entering that room, she beheld a lady seated upon the sofa, busily engaged in reading a letter, the contents of which seemed to afford her much pleasure; for her countenance was radiant with happiness. And a very beautiful countenance it was!—and it might do any one's heart good to behold bliss depicted on such a face! She seemed to be about three-and-twenty years of age: she had dark brown hair and blue eyes—she was tall and well formed—and altogether had an air that was genteel, well-bred, and amiable.

She did not immediately notice Ethel's presence; and our heroine, not perceiving Lady Langport there, began to make an excuse for what might be an intrusion.

"I beg your pardon—I thought to find her ladyship here—"

"Oh, pray offer no apology!" exclaimed the other, hastening forward from the sofa: "you have as much right here as I—for if I mistake not, you are the young lady who is to succeed me? You are Mrs. Trevor?"

"The same:"—and Ethel surveyed her with a considerable degree of interest.

"Permit me to introduce myself as Martha Crediton," resumed the other: and they now both shook hands very cordially. "I am sorry that we should be about to separate almost at the very instant that our acquaintance commences: but I only waited for your arrival as a signal for my own departure. You have come earlier than I expected—I did not think you would be here until later in the afternoon—"

"I hurried my arrangements; for I thought," continued Ethel, "that her ladyship appeared desirous for me to come with the least possible delay."

"Oh, to be sure!" interjected Martha Crediton; "because, you know, one Companion must never leave until the other arrives."

"I do not exactly understand," said Ethel, "why there is such a positive *must* in the case."

Miss Crediton opened wide her fine blue eyes, and gazed upon Ethel with astonishment, as she said in a low tone, "What! has not her ladyship acquainted you—?"

But she stopped short; and Ethel said, "Her ladyship has acquainted me with the nature of the duties which I shall have to perform."

"Of course! I thought so! Well then, you must surely understand why it is so absolutely necessary that there should always be a new Companion ready to succeed an old one?"

"Ah! I suppose you mean," said Ethel, "because her ladyship entertains such an insuperable objection to be attended upon in her dressing-room by lady's-maids?"

Again Martha Crediton looked very hard at Ethel; and then she said in a peculiar tone, "Yes—that is the reason."

"How long have you been with her ladyship?" inquired Ethel.

"About three years. And I will tell you very frankly," continued Miss Crediton, in an earnest tone, "it is in your power to be as happy as possible—if you can only bring your mind—I mean to say, with the exception—But no matter!" and she glanced quickly around as if afraid that her words might be overheard.

"If you mean," said Ethel, "that apart from the performance of those little duties which some persons might think too menial, it is possible to be happy here,—I can assure you that I shall be enabled to make myself perfectly happy—that is to say," she added with a sigh, "as far as other circumstances will permit."

"Her ladyship is of an even temper," pursued Miss Crediton: "she never scolds—she is never petulant—she will treat you just as if you were her own daughter—"

"But she herself is not so very old!" interjected Ethel: "thirty-five, I should think, at the outside—while I am eighteen. So she would be rather a young mother—"

But Ethel stopped short: for there was now such a peculiar expression on Miss Crediton's countenance that she was almost inclined to ask whether there were not some mystery with which she herself was unacquainted? But she did not like to appear inquisitive within the first few minutes of her installation beneath that roof; and so she gave not utterance to the question which rose up to her lips.

"Yes," said Miss Crediton, taking up the discourse from another point; "I have been with her ladyship three years; and little did I think that I should ever leave her, when all of a sudden I received a letter to tell me that an old relative of mine has died abroad and left me his entire fortune. I keep reading that letter over and over again," continued Martha, "for there are times when I can scarcely believe in its truth!"

"I sincerely hope you will be happy with your newly acquired fortune," observed Ethel.

Miss Crediton gave a suitable answer; and the discourse soon reverted to Lady Langport.

"You must not think," continued Martha, "that you will be dull here. On the contrary, you will see a great deal of society—but it is very select. Her ladyship is fond of company; and all the best families in the neighbourhood visit her. It is for that reason she has modernized this suite of rooms—which you will admit are very elegant. Of course you understand," added Martha, sinking her voice to the lowest possible whisper, "what her ladyship's failing is: but as you will not have to administer to it—indeed as it would be impossible,

knowing what you do, or what you soon will know—it is of no consequence to you. It is a fable, and no crime—Did you happen to notice the two portraits in the dining-room?"

"I have not been in the dining-room?" replied Ethel.

"Oh, come with me!" exclaimed Martha: and she bounded from the apartment, for she was evidently of a gay and lively disposition. "I can spare you half-an-hour, my dear Mrs. Trevor, before I order the carriage and take my departure. Besides, her ladyship must be walking in the grounds—she does not expect you so soon—and I cannot therefore leave you alone."

Thus conversing in a lively strain, Miss Crediton led the way down stairs, Ethel following.

"What a gloomy hall—isn't it? I have often advised her ladyship to modernize the entire edifice inside and out: but she takes a pride in the antiquity of the Court—particularly this old hall, with its red tiled floor, and its great massive beams across the ceiling! But here is the dining-room."

Ethel was now conducted into a spacious apartment, low-pitched like the rest. It was furnished in that handsome massive style which belonged to the middle of the past century: but there was something sombre and gloomy in the general effect—the elaborately carved chairs with their cushions of Utrecht velvet, the dark wainscot, and the ceiling painted of the same colour. Martha drew aside the heavy and dingy red moreen curtains at one of the windows—of which, by the bye, there was an array of five, though all narrow and low;—and the additional light which was now admitted, streamed upon the portrait of a fine handsome man, in the prime of life, and wearing some diplomatic uniform or Court dress.

"That is the late Lord Langport," said Miss Crediton. "He was Ambassador at one of the foreign Courts when that portrait was taken—Yes, and also at the time when he married her ladyship—who, I believe, was a Miss Malcolm and belonged to a very good family. So now you know who the noble couple were, even if you did not know before."

"How long has his lordship been dead?" inquired Ethel.

"About fifteen years," was the answer.

"Then her ladyship was left a widow quite young!" observed Ethel: but she stopped short, for again she saw the dark blue eyes of her companion fixed upon her with a peculiarly mysterious expression.

Then the next instant Martha exclaimed, "Here is the other portrait!"—and bounding forward, she drew back the draperies from the window at the end of the array.

Ethel now found her attention riveted upon the portrait of a beautiful female, whom she at once knew to be Lady Langport—only it delineated her with a more slender figure and with a plumpness of countenance which she did not now possess. The expression of the features was peculiarly sweet and pleasing—seeming to indicate an unalloyed amiability and goodness. Yet there was a certain vanity evidenced in the picture, either on the part of the lady herself, or else uxoriously demonstrated on that of her husband who might have been proud of his beautiful wife;

for she was represented as a being clad in the most gorgeous costume, with pearls on her brow and plumes in her hair, and decorated with jewels and gems to an extent that might have perhaps been striking and dazzling enough at an evening party, but which were little becoming to her appearance when delineated in a picture.

"How long ago was that portrait taken?" inquired Ethel; then, without waiting for an answer to this question, she ejaculated, "But it is easy to perceive!—her ladyship must have been eighteen or twenty! How young she must have been married!—for she spoke to me this morning of having lost several children. You tell me that his lordship died fifteen years ago? Her ladyship, then, could not have been much more than twenty or two and twenty at the outside!—Dear me, Miss Crediton! why do you look at me in so peculiar a manner? This is not the first time! I have been going to ask you once or twice—but I really didn't like to seem inquisitive."

"Hush!" said Martha: "hush!"—for her ear had caught footsteps in the hall.

"If you please, ladies," said the footman, who now made his appearance, "luncheon is served in the breakfast-parlour."

"We are coming, Frank," replied Miss Crediton.

The footman retired; and almost at the same moment Lady Langport made her appearance on the threshold. She was beautifully dressed; she had a gay French bonnet trimmed in the most charming style—her mantelet was embellished with the costliest lace—she wore flesh-coloured silk stockings—and her shoes, also French, fitted her in the most faultless manner. She seemed to have a beautiful foot and ankle; and she walked with an elasticity which might have become a girl of eighteen. The pink ties of her bonnet tended to conceal that partial hollowiness of the cheeks to which we have before alluded; and thus her ladyship appeared absolutely charming. Ethel had given her about thirty-five years when she had first seen her in the morning; she had just now extended that age to thirty-seven when she remembered the allusion to the children: but now, as she contemplated the really beautiful face and the superbly symmetrical form before her, she marvelled how Lady Langport could be a day older than thirty.

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Trevor," she said, shaking her warmly by the hand; "so you've kept your word and come early? I am indebted to you for this consideration: I am also glad that you have formed the acquaintance of my dear friend Martha before she leaves. I suppose, Martha, you were showing Mrs. Trevor over the house? Has she been up-stairs yet?"

It struck Ethel that this question was put with a certain degree of mystery; for her ladyship leant forward and lowered her voice while speaking to Martha.

"No," responded Miss Crediton, also with a certain peculiarity of look—or at least so it struck Ethel. "Mrs. Trevor has not long been here, and I was just beginning to show her the house when Frank announced luncheon. By the bye, dear Lady Langport, I think you said I might have the carriage presently to take me as far as the West End?"

"To be sure, my dear friend!" replied her ladyship. "Give your own orders. Mrs. Trevor and I will take a walk to-day—we can therefore very well dispense with the carriage, for I will show her over the grounds."

The three ladies repaired to the breakfast parlour, where an inviting luncheon was spread. Lady Langport begged Ethel to make a good repast, intimating that they did not dine till seven o'clock. When luncheon was over, Miss Crediton hastened up-stairs to superintend the packing of her last box: the carriage—which was a handsome one—drove round to the door; and Martha took an affectionate leave of her ladyship and of Ethel.

"I will now show you over the house," said Lady Langport. "By the bye, where is your dear little Alfred?"

"The housemaid took charge of him," responded Ethel.

"She is a good young woman, and will treat him kindly. I have ordered a girl, whom I know in Hendon, to be sent for to act as nursemaid for little Alfred. She will be here presently. She is about eighteen, and highly respectable.—Ah, you have seen these rooms on the ground floor—the dining-room—the breakfast-parlour?—and here is the library. That other apartment serves as an ordinary dining-room when we have no company."

They now ascended the staircase, and re-entered the drawing-rooms, which Ethel found to consist of a suite of three, occupying the entire length of the house, in its front part, on the first floor. The back apartments on this storey were also sitting-rooms, and commanded a much more agreeable view than the front windows.

They now ascended to the next floor; and first of all Lady Langport led the way into a large handsomely furnished bed-room, but fitted up in an old-fashioned style, and which she announced to be her sleeping-apartment. Opening a door, she led Ethel into a bath-room. Then she opened another door—but slowly and hesitatingly, and at the same time flinging a peculiar look upon her companion,—a look which the latter could by no means comprehend. It was now a dressing-room into which she was led; and it contained a toilet-table placed near the window, and a large bureau of walnut wood very handsomely carved, at the farther extremity. From that dressing-room a door led into another chamber, almost as spacious and quite as well furnished as the first which they had entered.

"This is your room," said Lady Langport; and her eyes were now fixed upon Ethel's countenance.

"I am very much pleased with it—it is exceedingly comfortable and airy. I presume that I may have my little boy to sleep with me?"

Her ladyship at once answered in the affirmative; and then she said somewhat deliberately, "You are not, therefore, surprised to perceive that your chamber communicates with my apartments?"

"Not at all," replied Ethel, "considering the duties which, as your ladyship intimated, I shall have to perform."

A look of indescribable satisfaction appeared upon Lady Langport's countenance; and she said in a low voice, which appeared to be full of emo-



tion. "You are so amiable and kind, my dear Ethel—for by this name you must permit me to call you—that I already feel as if I had known you for years, and as if I could do anything on the face of the earth to serve you! But now come and let us walk out into the grounds."

Ethel accompanied Lady Langport down the staircase into the grounds; and although there was naught but a gloomy shrubbery in front of the house, yet was there a beautiful fruit and flower garden at the side, consisting of about half an acre, enclosed within four walls, and containing hot-houses and conservatories. At the back there was a spacious kitchen garden. The out-houses were extensive and well kept: there was a neat dairy; and Ethel experienced considerable interest in the inspection of all these premises. Thence they passed into a pretty paddock, adjoining which there was a large orchard; and beyond lay the fields, where sheep and cows were pastur-

No. 17.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

ing,—the compact little estate comprising some ten or a dozen acres.

While performing the part of *chaperon*, Lady Langport displayed the powers of a well-stored mind, and gave great variety to the conversation. She was affable and agreeable—slightly egotistical—but not dictatorial nor imperious. Neither did she play the part of a patroness or a superior; but she maintained that species of well-bred familiarity which was calculated to place Ethel completely at her ease, and make her feel as if she were with one who only considered herself to be her equal.

There were however two things which were floating somewhat uneasily in Ethel's mind. We will allude to them separately. In the first place she could not help thinking, from the nature of her discourse with Miss Crediton—from that young lady's strange looks—and from other little circumstances—that there was some deeper mys-

tery attached to Lady Langport than she had as yet completely fathomed. It hung about her mind like a cloud in the midst of the sunshine: it was as a slimy puddle in her path: it was like a cobweb on the wall of an elegantly appointed apartment. She had a vague presentiment that she did not as yet quite understand all the duties which she had to perform, and that any farther initiation would not be agreeable. Vainly she strove to balance against these contingencies all the advantages of the situation into which she had suddenly and most unexpectedly leapt: she trembled lest something might transpire which should render it impossible for her to keep it!

We now come to the second source of uneasiness. Miss Crediton had told her that Lady Langport saw a great deal of society, and that this was of a select character. What if she were acquainted with the Ardeleighs? Having detected Count de Mandeville's duplicity in some respects, she might reasonably doubt whether he had told her the truth when declaring in so glib and off-hand a manner that the Duke had gone abroad for three years. She began to doubt it: she now fancied it was far more probable that he was looking after herself. At all events the Duchess knew her; and if her Grace happened to visit at Hendon Court she might expose her as the mistress of her husband. To be brief, Ethel found it to be of the greatest importance to her present peace of mind, as well as to her repute in the eyes of her patroness, that she should discover whether the Ardeleighs visited at Hendon Court. But the conversation took no turn which afforded Mrs. Trevor an opportunity of incidentally putting such a question; and after a long ramble through the grounds and in the neighbourhood, they returned to the house at about six o'clock.

"As you and I are alone to-day at dinner, Ethel," said Lady Langport, "I shall not make any change in my own toilet. I am fatigued, and shall repose upon the sofa in the drawing-room until dinner is announced: You can avail yourself of the interval, if you think fit, to arrange your clothes in your wardrobe and drawers."

Ethel accordingly ascended to her chamber, where she occupied herself in the manner indicated: but she had little Alfred with her—and the presence of her child, by eliciting all the mother's fond endearments, helped to wean away her thoughts from the sources of uneasiness to which we have before alluded. The new nursery-maid arrived; and at seven the child was consigned to her care—while Ethel, dressed in a becoming evening toilet, descended to the drawing-room.

Dinner was shortly announced; and she followed her ladyship to that smaller dining-room which was used on ordinary occasions. The repast was of an exquisite character and elegantly served: there were several French dishes; and her ladyship incidentally mentioned that she kept a French cook, for that having been a long time on the Continent in all the early part of her life, she was attached to that style of living. The wines were choice; and Ethel noticed that though her ladyship ate with all the appearance of a remarkable appetite, she was excessively temperate in her beverage, and only drank her wine mixed with water. On the other hand, however, she partook of the several dishes to an

extent which almost amounted to what the French would call *gourmandise* and the English "gormandising;" so that Ethel scarcely wondered the form of her patroness should have expanded into so fine an *embonpoint*. An excellent dessert followed the dinner: the two ladies then ascended to the drawing-room, where coffee was served up; and at ten o'clock they rose to retire to rest.

Ethel's bed-chamber was entered by two separate doors: the inner one communicated with Lady Langport's dressing-room; the outer one with a passage. On reaching the upper landing, Ethel did not know whether she was to accompany her patroness any farther, or whether she was to pass round by the corridor to her own chamber. Lady Langport perceived her hesitation—comprehended it—and for some reason or another looked deeply distressed. Ethel knew not what to think: but obedient to some sudden impulse, she hastily said, "Can I do anything for your ladyship to-night?"

"Yes—this way:" and Lady Langport led her into her chamber.

She shut the door and locked it: she then passed through the bath-room into the dressing-room, and thence into Ethel's own apartment. Little Alfred was sleeping in the bed: Ethel, with a strange and unaccountable nervousness, bent over and kissed the child—while Lady Langport proceeded to lock the outer door of that chamber also. She then returned into the dressing-room, whither Ethel mechanically followed.

"Shut that door, my young friend," said her ladyship, pointing to the one which communicated with Ethel's room.

This was done; and now Ethel trembled so violently—she scarcely knew why—that her emotion was visible, notwithstanding that she strove her hardest to control it. She felt as if she were standing upon the threshold of some strange and fearful revelation.

"Ethel," said Lady Langport, in a voice which was low and now sounded hollow, "the moment is come when you must learn my secret—my fearful secret—to the very uttermost! I think—I fear that you do not altogether suspect it. Perhaps I was not sufficiently explicit with you this morning; and I am afraid that Miss Crediton did not farther initiate you—though I intentionally threw you together for that purpose."

"What does your ladyship mean? Oh, what do you mean?" asked Ethel, quivering from head to foot.

"You are about to know the full extent of your duties," replied Lady Langport. "Ah! your courage is failing you! I warned you against promising too much and pledging yourself too precipitately! Would you like to retreat? But no! it is too late! it is too late!—for Martha is gone," added the lady bitterly; "and not for worlds would I trust this secret of mine to any of those hirelings who have no delicacy of feeling, and who if they quarrelled with me to-morrow would go and proclaim to the world what I am!"

"I will not retreat—I will do my duty, whatever it may be:" and Ethel summoned all her courage; for she thought of her innocent child in the adjacent room, and of the necessity of making any sacrifice of feeling, so long as it was compa-

tible with honour, for the sake of that beloved little one.

"Thank—thank you!" and Lady Langport spoke with a fervour that was even fearfully energetic. "You are now about to see me unmasked!—to behold the living lie that I am!—to mark in me a monstrous moving, breathing falsehood!—a cheat as gross as it is stupendous! Conceive the skeleton divested of its flesh! picture to yourself the loathsome mummy unwrapped from its bandages!—and that abhorrent, revolting thing am I! You think me young? I am old! You fancy me possessed of fine proportions?—but I am of a leanness that is appalling! Instead of the luxuriant fullness of health, it is an almost fleshless skeleton, wasted by some unknown and terrific disease, that you will see before you! It is atrophy personified! Shut your eyes, if you dread to look upon the loathsome mummy—the revolting atomy!"

Ethel's brain was reeling while this appalling speech was being addressed to her; but by the time it was concluded, she had regained her self-possession—for she once more thought of her child; and back to her memory came the assurance of Martha Crediton, that apart from the *one* hideous circumstance which she would have to encounter, she might reckon upon enjoying the most perfect happiness at Hendon Court.

"Now I understand your ladyship," she said, in that soft tone of compassion which was so consistent with her amiable nature; "and I see that you are to be commiserated! Oh, you have promised me all your kindness!—and shall I not be kind to you in return? Yes! yes!"

An expression of mingled gratitude and joy appeared upon the countenance of Lady Langport; and then sinking on a chair, she was for several minutes so overcome by her emotions that she could not give utterance to a word. Ethel accosted her, and spoke in the kindest, most endearing terms. Nothing could exceed the gentleness—the affectionate ministrations of that most amiable lady. Her patroness was soothed, comforted, and encouraged; and pressing her hand she murmured, "Now I know you, Ethel, as well as if we had been years together!—and rest assured that there is nothing on earth I will not do for you! Others have been good to me before you—and I have enriched them. I should have behaved with an equal liberality to Martha Crediton—only that she did not require it—an accident gave her wealth. But I need say no more: for if I comprehend your goodness of heart, you need be at no loss to understand the extent of my gratitude!"

Then commenced the night-toilet of Lady Langport. It was indeed the unrolling of the mummy from its wrappers! Oh, it was a hideous disappearing! Garment after garment, corset after corset falling off—heavens! everything was false—artificial—and succedaneous about her! Her teeth were false: her complexion was the result of cosmetics artistically laid on; and if the dark dye had not penetrated into the very tubes of her hair, *that* would have appeared in all the whiteness of age. At length the horrible process was complete; and there stood the wretched woman, a living skeleton—a withered, toothless hag, loathsome to contemplate—every bone visible beneath the skin, which just covered it without the

intervention of any flesh to yield to the pressure! And she who had looked so fresh and blooming—so young that Ethel had even at one time carried back her age to thirty years—was veritably and actually an old woman of nearly sixty!

We will not dwell upon the scene. Suffice it to say that Ethel endured the shock with as much delicate consideration for the unfortunate being herself, as she could possibly command; and when she had performed such duties as the horrible condition of her patroness required, and had seen her to her couch, she retired to her own bed, where with the cold shudderings of horror she pressed her child to her bosom, wondering whether even for *his* sake she could night after night and morning after morning endure the repetition of that loathsome spectacle for a very long period!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE USURER.

THE clocks of the metropolis were striking the hour of ten at night, when Mr. Casey senior entered upon Waterloo Bridge; and arriving at the seat over the central arch, he stopped and looked around him. He evidently expected some one: but as he was not immediately accosted by any person, he gazed upon the river and the countless lights which bordered it on either side. But whether the aspect of the mighty city, beheld from that point of view and at that hour, with the moonlight shining upon the water, and with all the domes and pinnacles and spires of the huge Babylon standing out in dim relief against the dark-hued sky, produced any particular effect upon the usurer—or whether his thoughts were travelling to other scenes or fixed upon other subjects—we cannot say. Five minutes elapsed: then Mr. Casey heard footsteps approaching: he looked round—and Tim Gaffney was almost immediately by his side.

In order to prevent any mistakes, let us at once inform the reader that Tim Gaffney did not know Casey by his name—did not even know for certain that he *was* the Rupert Pringle of other times—and, in short, was utterly ignorant of all material circumstances in reference to the person whom he was now meeting. He had heard from an acquaintance in the first instance that a certain individual was looking out for an active and trustworthy fellow or two to perform a particular piece of business. Tim Gaffney had preferred his services—an appointment was at once made—and the meeting had promptly taken place on Waterloo Bridge, on the very same spot where Casey and Gaffney now again met. That first interview took place on the 5th of May: it was arranged that precisely that day week there should be another appointment; and it was now therefore, in the evening of the 12th, that the employer and the employed were at the *rendezvous*. We may add that as Casey only knew Tim Gaffney in the business, the latter had not deemed it necessary to bring his friend Mr. Peppercorn with him.

Casey was in reality full of anxiety in reference to the results of the mission which had been entrusted to Tim Gaffney: but nothing on his hard

cold features indicated what was passing in his breast; and it was on account of this imperturbability, as well as the passionless business-like way in which Casey had treated the subject on the first occasion, that Tim Gaffney was so completely at a loss to determine in his own mind whether his employer were really Rupert Pringle himself, or only some agent acting on that individual's behalf.

"Well," said Casey, the instant he and Gaffney met; "what news?"

"Good and bad—it's done and it ain't done—but it's all safe!" such was the enigmatical answer which came from Mr. Gaffney's lips.

"Explain yourself," said the usurer, almost sternly, as he fixed his eyes searchingly upon his agent.

"The papers are in existence—the letter and the forged bill: they are no longer in the Squire's hands—and you can get them with a very little trouble."

"What does this mean?" demanded Casey. "Are they in your possession? do you mean to fly from the bargain which we made together, and to hold out for a larger sum? If so, you'd be mistaken. I have no personal interest in the matter—I am merely acting for another."

"That may or may not be," interrupted Gaffney; "and I am not going to pry into your affairs. You've got hold of the wrong end of the stick—there's no foul play on my part—I always deal right with them which employ me. But it was a strange business altogether down at the Firs, and I'll tell you all about it."

Gaffney then proceeded to describe how he and Jack Peppercorn obtained an entrance into Squire Ponsford's chamber—how everything progressed as could be wished until the point when he (Tim Gaffney) repaired to the library to procure the documents—how he was then seized upon by a person, and what took place between him and that individual.

"Describe his appearance to me," said Casey, who had listened with a sort of impatient attention to the preceding details.

"He was a good-looking fellow—not very tall—deuced well made—light brown hair, all curling—and blue eyes, I think."

"What name did he give?"

"I found out next morning," replied Gaffney, "that his name was Stephen Ashborne, and that he was the Squire's new bailiff."

"And his age? his age?" asked Casey.

"About five-and-twenty as far as I can judge."

"Ah! and you say he kept the documents?" proceeded Casey: "and he told you that—What was it that he said?"

"Just these words," rejoined Gaffney,—"that I was to make my own bargain with the person who employed me—that he wanted no reward—and all that he required was that the person should apply to *him* for the papers."

"And you have nothing more to tell me?"

"Nothing," responded Gaffney.

"Very good," said the usurer. "It was not your fault that you did not bring the papers with you: I can't blame you. I shall give you just the same reward as if you had done so."

Gaffney did not know with what a penurious individual he had to deal—or else he would have been immensely astonished at this display of

liberality on his part. Without the slightest haggling—without the slightest hesitation he placed in Gaffney's hand a number of bank-notes, to the amount originally agreed upon for the transaction of the business. He took Gaffney's word for the truth of the entire tale, because it was so well corroborated by other circumstances.

"Well, sir, whoever you are," observed Tim, "it's a pleasure to do business with such a gentleman; and if so be you should ever again want my services, I'd better tell you where a note would reach me. I used to live for the most part in Kent—but so many things have of late turned up that I mean to establish myself in London for the future. Thomas Gaffney, Esquire—or plain Mr. Gaffney, if you think t'other's too pretentious—at the *Hog in Armour*—a very respectable public it is too—Marylebone Lane."

"I shall not forget—I shall not forget," said Casey: and then in a significant manner he added, "But I think, Mr. Gaffney, for the present that your way lies in that direction, while mine lies in this."

"To be sure, sir—to be sure!" and Tim, turning upon his heels, made a polite bow, and began bending his way towards the Surrey side of Waterloo Bridge. "I would follow him nevertheless," thought Tim to himself; "only he is evidently a deep old file, and he'll take half-a-dozen cabs to baffle me. Besides, he pays well—and whoever he may be, he'll some day want my services again—that's as sure as fate!"

Mr. Casey reached his home in Hatton Garden, his mind full of all that he had learnt from the lips of Tim Gaffney. There was much to move him—yes, even *him*, that man of stony heart and of utter selfishness!—that man whose experiences of the world had rendered him what he was! But he had acquired the habit of concealing what he felt; and thus, when he joined his wife and daughter at the supper-table, they could not perceive by his countenance that anything peculiar had taken place.

Presently some one was heard opening the street door in a hasty manner and rushing into the hall; and Mrs. Casey exclaimed, "Deary me! what can be the matter with Sylwester! what a flurry he seems to be in!"

"You've done it, father!" ejaculated the young man as he burst into the room; "and it's all dickey with him!"

"What on earth do you mean, Sylwester?" demanded his mother.

"Why, hasn't the governor told you by this time? I wonder why he kept it so deuced close—"

"Because," interjected Mr. Casey, curtly, "I am not accustomed to let my left hand know what my right hand is doing. If you were to act more on this principle, Sylwester, I should be better pleased. But in reference to the matter to which you are alluding, I suppose you mean that Sir Ahel Kingston is arrested?"

"Sir Habel?" ejaculated the dame: "what that perlitte gentleman—"

"Gentleman, indeed!" repeated Mr. Casey, with an air of disgust: "he is a perfect villain—he has robbed me infamously by means of forged documents—"

"Who would have thought it?" cried Mrs. Casey. "Ah, Selina dear! I told you when we

came home that night from Hastley's, as how that I thought there was summat that wasn't altogether right about that Sir Habel—and I remember tellin' Mr. Shinybrass next morning, 'when he called to ask your father's wote on putting up as guardian of the 'Oborn Union—'

"Well, well," interrupted Mr. Casey impatiently, "I have no doubt you said a great deal upon the subject. But how came you to hear, Sylvester, that Sir Abel Kingston was arrested?"

"I happened to be dining with him. It was rather too bad, father, that you didn't drop me a hint of what you was going to do: you might have known that being intimate as I am with a set of fellows at the West End, it was very probable I might get thrown in Kingston's way. However, there's no harm done—"

"And so you were actually dining there, Sylvester, at the time?" said his sister, who with a natural delicacy of feeling which was foreign to every other member of the Casey family, was shocked at the thought that her brother should have been partaking of the Baronet's hospitality at the instant when such a catastrophe ensued.

"I was there, as I tell you—and some other friends of mine. I didn't see any of you when I came home in the afternoon to dress for dinner: you was all gone out—and so I couldn't tell you where I was going."

"And who were these other friends of your's?" asked Mr. Casey senior, with a scornful sneer upon his lip. "Silly young men about town, I suppose—who, if they yield to dissipation and debauchery, will one of these days come to the same strait as the scoundrel Kingston himself."

"Come, come, sir," interjected Sylvester, with a self-sufficient air, "that's being too strong on my friends Colonel Bulder, Captain Cauliflower, Lieutenant Tiffany, and though last not least, the Duke of Ardleigh."

"What!" exclaimed Mrs. Casey; "a Dook? Sylvester, have I heerd with my hears that you've been a-dinin' with a Dook?"

"And why not?" said the young man, stretching himself out and yawning in an affected manner in the arm-chair in which he had thrown himself, at the same time that he ran his hand through his horrible red hair. "I can assure you that me and the Duke got very intimate together—and a devilish nice fellow he is—quite a young man, you know—not above six or seven and twenty. Well, when the business was all over, he took me by the arm; and says he, 'Casey, my dear fellow, let's you and me walk along the street together, and chat about this business.' So there we was—"

"Quite fermiliar, I dessay!" ejaculated Mrs. Casey, tossing her head proudly; "and all the perlicemen a-touching their hats as you walked past—and the werry cabmin a bowin' down to the ground at the Dook's presence! Selina dear, if that there Dook should ever come up with Sylvester to take potluck in 'Atton Garding, it would never do for his Greese to stand the chance of meetin' Shinybrass. Besides, them Shinybrasses is so vulgar! We must cut 'em."

"And pray," asked Mr. Casey, "what did the Duke of Ardleigh say to you?"—for the usurer was too much a man of the world not to suspect that the Duke must have had some private reason of his own to affect a sudden friendship for his

son, and go walking arm-in-arm with him through the streets of London.

"Oh! we chatted on different things," replied Sylvester,—“principally on the business that had just took place—I mean Kingeton's arrest. The Duke said he always knew Kingeton to be a blackguard, and that he was in the habit of boasting of his successes with the fair sex, telling a pack of lies and compromising the characters of ladies without the slightest rhyme or reason. In fact, the Duke seemed to hint that he thought it was by no means unlikely Sir Abel might have spoken in an impudent way of his own wife, the beautiful Duchess: but I set the Duke's mind at rest on that score. 'My lord,' says I, 'Kingston and me have been pretty intimate together, and I must do him the justice to declare that I never heard from his lips any bragging or boasting in respect to the Duchess.'—'Well,' says the Duke, 'I am glad of it:' and then he shakes hands with me, bids me good night, and tells me that when I am passing Ardleigh House I'm to look in and give him a call."

Mr. Casey senior now comprehended why the Duke had affected a friendship towards his son.

"His Grace suspects something between his wife and Kingeton," thought the usurer to himself; "and he wanted to ascertain to what extent it might have been known or boasted of by that scoundrel the Baronet."

The Casey family retired to rest; and on the following day the usurer deliberated with himself whether he should write to Stephen Ashborne, or whether he should proceed into Dorsetshire and obtain a personal interview with him. Circumstances appeared to indicate that Stephen Ashborne was his son: but still there was a possibility that it might be otherwise—he might have some different motive for getting possession of the papers—though it was difficult to conjecture what such a motive could be. Nevertheless, Casey was very prudent, and he scarcely liked to commit himself by writing. On the other hand, he did not much relish the idea of venturing into Dorsetshire—especially to seek out one who was now living upon the estate of his mortal enemy Squire Ponsford. What was to be done? He almost regretted that he had not sent off Tim Gaffney into Dorsetshire, to bring up Ashborne, so that a meeting might take place under circumstances altogether favourable to Casey's views and safety.

After a long deliberation, the usurer made up his mind how to act; and the following letter was duly penned and despatched by the post:—

"Hatton Garden, May 13, 1847.

"Mr. Michael Casey is instructed to communicate with Mr. Stephen Ashborne in reference to certain papers which have fallen into Mr. Ashborne's hands. If Mr. Ashborne will therefore acquaint Mr. Casey with his views upon the subject, they shall at once receive the best attention."

The usurer waited with much suspense the result of this communication. We should explain that although he dressed in a sordid manner and sneered at the extravagancies and frivolities of fashionable life, he was in his heart most anxious to form high family connexions. He

was rich—richer even than people generally thought: he knew that he was looked upon as an usurer and a miser, and he was secretly proud of the appellations, for they were an acknowledgment of his wealth, if not an actual homage to it—and he gloried in the power of riches. He dressed meanly and looked shabby in order to maintain the character which the world had given him, and to play the part of the usurious miserly capitalist. But he allowed his wife and daughter to spend what they thought fit upon their toilet; and he furnished Sylvester with the means to maintain a certain appearance among his friends at the West End. For this reason he had allowed him to set up his phaeton—though he affected to grumble at such a piece of extravagance, and to grudge every guinea which he drew from his purse for his son's behoof. This was for the purpose of keeping Sylvester within reasonable bounds, and preventing him from launching out too fast.

Having afforded this little insight into Mr. Casey's character, we must proceed to explain some of his plans, and the reflections with which they were associated. As we have already said, he sought for aristocratic connexions; and he had laboured to bring about an alliance between his daughter and Launcelot Osborne, the heir of the Trentham family. When this matter appeared to be coming to a successful issue, Casey thought to himself that it would be expedient, if possible, to put himself right in respect to the only thing which could at any time materially threaten his peace. This was the fact that he might probably be still in the power of Squire Ponsford. Only conceive what a thing it would be, if just when all his darling ideas of ambition were being gratified, and Selina had become the Hon. Mrs. Osborne, the demon of mischief should suddenly bring Ponsford upon the spot and enable him to denounce *him*, Michael Casey, *alias* Rupert Pringle, as a forger! Such were the reflections which had passed through the usurer's mind; and hence the mission which had been confided to Tim Gaffney. Now, in respect to the contemplated alliance with the Trentham family, although it seemed to hang fire somewhat in consequence of the unaccountable cessation of Launcelot Osborne's visits to Hatton Garden, yet Mr. Casey did not choose to precipitate matters just for the present. He deemed it prudent to await the issue of the business which Tim Gaffney had initiated; for he astutely reasoned that when he himself should cease to be in the power of any one, he could work out his views with all the more confidence and implacability.

The reader may now understand wherefore, for more reasons than one, Mr. Casey awaited with no inconsiderable degree of suspense the issue of the communication which he had sent into Dorsetshire.

One evening—three or four days after that letter had been despatched—Mr. Casey was seated alone in a little back room, which he called his "office," but which his wife perseveringly denominated his "study"—when the servant entered and said, "If you please, sir, a person named Ashborne wishes to see you."

"Let him walk in," replied Casey: and for a few moments he trembled violently after the domestic had retired.

But by the time the door again opened, he was perfectly collected; and rising from his seat, he

steadily met the gaze of the handsome young man who was now ushered into his presence. Earnest indeed was the contemplation on Stephen Ashborne's part; and for the first minute he spoke not a word: he was evidently studying to ascertain whether or not he stood in the presence of one whom he might claim as a father. At length he threw himself upon a seat, and said, "I am here in compliance with your letter. At least I do not know whether you expected me to come to London—or whether indeed you wished to see me? Perhaps it would be better if you were to commence by giving explanations?"

"No," replied Casey: "it would be better for you to commence by explaining for what object you took those documents from the man in the library at the Firs."

"To hand them over to my father," replied Stephen Ashborne, "whenever I may find him:"—and there was an honest frankness in his countenance as he again fixed his large blue eyes earnestly upon Mr. Casey.

"If you bear the name of Ashborne," said the usurer, "where do you expect to meet your father? who is he?"

"He bears not *my* name," interjected the young man. "I know not even whether he now bears the name which is properly his own. But you can tell, sir! If you yourself are not my father, you must know who he is, for you are employed by him."

"How came you to hear the name of Stephen Ashborne?" asked Casey, still betraying naught by the expression of his countenance.

"Ashborne is the name which my mother took after she was deserted by my father. That was before I was born. To be brief, I am the son of a certain Adelaide Clarke, who died six months ago; and on her death-bed she told me everything. If you are my father, I will give you up the papers which will for ever place you beyond the power of the villain Ponsford. But if you are not my father—merely some friend acting on his behalf—you must tell me where I can find my sire, and I will seek him without delay."

"Would it please you to meet your father? You say that your mother on her death-bed told you everything——"

"Before you speak another word," interrupted Ashborne, "listen to me! It is in the nature of man to respect the author of his being; and thus, if I found myself in the presence of my father—no matter who or what he may be—I should kneel at his feet and implore his blessing. But on the other hand, I could not love this father as a child ought to love a parent: for it would be impossible to forget that he abandoned my mother, and for five-and-twenty long years he has never instituted the least inquiry concerning her welfare; nor whether the child which she bore in her bosom at the time he left her ever saw the light or still lived! Thus I should not ask my sire to give me a home, nor to acknowledge me unless he thought fit: I would merely seek his blessing and I would depart."

"Stephen, my son!" murmured the usurer; "I bless you!—yes sincerely bless you! God knows," continued Casey, in a tremulous voice, "I have been guilty of immense wrongs towards your poor mother and yourself; but I have suffered more than I can tell you—my heart was not

originally a bad one—I have been compelled to steel it against the influence of the most harrowing and remorseful reflections—and thus my entire being was changed!"

While Casey was thus speaking, Stephen Ashborne had thrown himself at his feet—and he was weeping and sobbing, not so much on account of what he was hearing from his father's lips, as because everything connected with his departed mother was now vividly recalled to his memory. The usurer stooped down, and raising him up, embraced him.

"Here, father—here," said Stephen, "are the documents which I promised to place in your hands. God grant that under another name you are atoning for whatsoever you may have done in your earlier days!—though heaven knows it is not for me as a son to speak thus to a father!"

"I am rich and prosperous, Stephen," replied Casey. "Tell me what I can do for you? Fear not to make your demand. I take heaven to witness that I shall not hold it to be too large a one!"

"I require nothing, father," replied Stephen. "Keep your wealth for your legitimate children. I understand that you have two—I made some little inquiries in the neighbourhood before I called here—"

"And is there nothing that I can do for you?" asked Casey.

"Nothing, I repeat. Accept my thanks—but I desire naught at your hands, father—except the blessing which you have given me."

"And tell me, Stephen—tell me," continued Casey, in a tremulous tone, "did *she*—your mother—speak bitterly of me on her death-bed?"

"No," replied Stephen. "On the contrary, she hoped that you were well and prosperous—and she wished that she might have heard of you before she died. And now, father, having acquitted myself of the principal business which brought me hither—and having told you as much as you need know in reference to my poor departed mother—I will leave you."

"Promise me this, Stephen," exclaimed Casey, "that if matters should go wrong with you in the world—or if you should require assistance of any kind, you will not hesitate to apply to me. I will hasten to meet your wishes—believe me, I will!—and if during my lifetime you will not afford me an opportunity of doing anything for you, rest assured that you will not be forgotten at my death!"

"Farewell, father!—farewell!" said Stephen, his own voice now quivering with emotion, for he saw that he was very far from being an object of indifference to his sire. "Farewell, *dear* father!"—and then wringing his parent's hand, he rushed from the room and at once quitted the house.

When the door closed behind him, Casey sat down and fell into a deep reverie. At length slowly arousing himself, he exclaimed, "Would that he were my recognised first-born!—would that he were my known and cherished son instead of Sylvester!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE BALL.

It was the evening appointed for Lady Todmorden's ball. Her ladyship was a widow, tolerably well off, holding a distinguished position in the fashionable world, and famed for the excellence of her entertainments. She had been a patroness of Almack's in its palmy times: she had on several occasions filled posts about the person of Queen Victoria when the Tories were in power; and her deceased husband had been an eminent diplomatist. Thus Lady Todmorden was one of the most *élites* of fashionable society. Not to visit at Todmorden House in Piccadilly was almost a stigma, and certainly a humiliation, for any one pretending to frequent the highest circles; whereas on the contrary, to be seen in Lady Todmorden's saloons was to make sure of the *entrée* to all the other mansions of the most exclusive aristocracy.

It is well known there are certain personages in the upper sphere who exercise a species of autocratic power in respect to aspirants for entrance into the fashionable world. Lady Todmorden was one. If she introduced a person no questions were asked: her approval was sufficient—and the fortunes of the individual was made so far as entrance into the highest circles was concerned. On the other hand, if it were hinted that such-and-such a personage, male or female, ought to be called upon and courted, a shrug of the shoulders or a slight toss of the head on Lady Todmorden's part was sufficient to destroy all the hopes of the aspirant. The reader may thence comprehend of what importance it was for the novice in the fashionable sphere to win the smile of her ladyship; because it is one thing to get into what is called "good society," but quite another thing to soar into the sphere which is called the "higher circles."

From all that we have been saying the reader may perhaps be surprised to find that a mere City-man, such as Mr. Warren the stockbroker, should have the *entrée* of Todmorden House. But Warren's father had been useful to the late Lord Todmorden; young Warren was very gentlemanly in manners—he was reputed to be immensely rich—he lived in excellent style—and Lady Todmorden therefore ventured to introduce him. No one asked any questions; all who met him were satisfied; and her ladyship was pleased with the exploit. She thought that she had conferred a favour of stupendous magnitude upon Warren, and that the very least he could do to testify his gratitude would be to marry one of her daughters. Of these interesting creatures she possessed three specimens,—the eldest being two-and-twenty, the youngest eighteen. They were not handsome, nor even pretty: but they were fine grown young women, of very distinguished appearance, highly accomplished, and though imbued with no small degree of aristocratic pride, yet perfectly ready and willing to accept husbands from whatever quarter they might come, so long as they were presentable in person and rich in purse. For the fact is that the three young ladies were portionless, Lady Todmorden's income being composed partly of an annuity and partly of a pension on account

of the "diplomatic services" of her husband, — both of which sources of revenue would necessarily die with her.

Having thus introduced the Todmorden family as far as it is necessary for our present purpose, let us at once proceed to the details of the hall whereat all the *élites* of fashionable society were to be present. It is not necessary to enter into any lengthened description of the splendour of the entertainment, the elegance of the costumes, or of the urbane attentions of Lady Todmorden herself towards her guests. We will suppose that equipage after equipage has set down its exquisitely appalled freight—that the greater part of the company has arrived—that the saloons are nearly filled—and that dancing has commenced in the principal apartment, while in another the card-tables are becoming occupied by the more elderly personages. We will suppose likewise that nothing can be more delightful to contemplate than the brilliant scene, while the music pours its rich harmony throughout the brilliantly lighted mansion.

In one of the smaller apartments to which some of the guests who were not dancing retired for the purpose of conversation, or to lounge away the time until they thought fit to dance or were asked to do so, the Duchess of Arleigh was seated. As her Grace was one of the most brilliant stars in the higher sphere of the fashionable world, she was quickly surrounded by a number of satellites, male and female. The conversation progressed for some little while on a variety of subjects, until Lady Todmorden presently approached the group, saying, with a smile, "I am every moment expecting a guest of whom I mean to make quite a *lion*. I am told great things about him. He is fresh from Paris, and can tell you everything that has recently occurred in Parisian circles. In fact, he has only been about ten days in England."

"And pray," inquired a lady of title, "who is this phoenix of perfection that you are going to introduce amongst us?"

"I'll be bound," cried Lord Aldershott—a young nobleman of nineteen—"I know who her ladyship means! I dined in his company the day before yesterday, with Warren and Tiffany, and two or three others."

"And a very fine fellow he is," interjected Mr. Tiffany, who advanced towards the group at this moment.

"Whom do you mean?" inquired several voices.

"Really," said a young lady, "our curiosity is now at the highest degree."

"Oh, I thought," ejaculated Lord Aldershott, "that anybody would have guessed we were talking of Mandeville."

"Ah! Count de Mandeville!" said the lady of title before-mentioned. "How foolish not to surmise that it was he! My brother the General was telling me that he met the Count yesterday with Captain Cauliflower. He was introduced—"

"And what does the General think of him?" inquired an elderly lady.

"He came home quite charmed with the Count," was the reply.

"And this, then, is the lion whom your ladyship promises to introduce presently?" said a Marchioness, who had not before spoken.

"Yes," responded Lady Todmorden, with the satisfied air of one who perceived that she was sure to make a hit by the introduction of an interesting guest: "you shall see him presently."

"Has he been introduced to your ladyship?" asked some one.

"No—I have not seen him yet; but in consequence of certain representations that were made to me through a mutual friend I sent the Count a card of invitation. He called yesterday—unfortunately I was not at home. He left his card—But, Ah! here is some one who can tell you more about the Count than perhaps you already know. Mr. Warren!"—and Lady Todmorden heckoned the stockbroker towards her.

"I was just observing to Lord Eagleton," said Warren, "what delightful entertainments your ladyship always gives. I don't know how it is, but your ladyship contrives to have the atmosphere so attempted that it is never too hot nor too cold."

"Flatterer!" said Lady Todmorden, tapping Mr. Warren with her fan. "Did I not see you dancing with Alicia?" she asked, in a low tone, thereby alluding to her second daughter.

"Yes—I have just handed the Hon. Miss Alicia to her seat; and I was now seeking for Miss Catharine, to whom I have the honour to be engaged for the next quadrille."

"Hark! the music is playing for a waltz," interrupted Lady Todmorden; "and therefore you have plenty of time to remain here with us for a few minutes, and tell us what you know about a certain personage whose name is upon everybody's tongue."

"Does your ladyship mean the Count de Mandeville?" asked Warren.

"Whom else could I mean? Are you sure he will be here to-night?"

"I am confident of it. Who could neglect an invitation which is almost tantamount to a command?"

"Again I say flatterer!" interjected Lady Todmorden, with a satisfied smile and another gentle tap of her fan. "Tell us about your Count de Mandeville."

"What would your ladyship have me tell you?" asked Warren. "Not that he is a nobleman of very ancient family—or that he is elegant in manners and unsullied in reputation? because unless he had possessed these qualifications, I should never have ventured to solicit your ladyship to smile upon him. But if you speak to me in reference to his fortune—"

"Well, after all," interjected the elderly lady to whom we have before alluded, and who had half-a-dozen marriageable daughters, "it is just as well to obtain information on this head."

"Indeed I am quite unable to tell the extent of the Count de Mandeville's fortune," continued Warren: "but if one may judge by the easy indifference with which he flings eighty or a hundred thousand pounds upon the Stock Exchange by way of speculation—Pardon me, my lady!—Warren suddenly cut himself short; "but the quadrille is about to commence:"—and away he went to seek the fair hand of the Hon. Miss Catharine Todmorden, who was engaged to him for the next dance.

The moment Warren had disappeared, all the members of the group began to renew their com-



ments on the expected guest—all with *one* exception; and this was the Duchess of Ardleigh. She seemed to listen with a cold indifference; and every now and then a smile, either contemptuous or disdainful, curled her lip. Lady Todmorden was piqued at finding that the idea of the expected lion of a French Count made no impression upon the brilliant Duchess; and having vainly waited in the expectation that she would mingle in the discourse, Lady Todmorden again said, "Did your Grace happen to hear of our phoenix from Paris before his name was mentioned this evening?"

"Yes—I think so," replied the Duchess, with an air of careless indifference. "I believe the Duke met the Count at Mr. Warren's office a few days ago."

"Do tell us," cried a young lady, "what report his Grace made of this famous French impertation!"

"Oh, I believe my husband was very well pleased with him," said the Duchess, still with an air of indifference and listlessness.

"I wonder your Grace's curiosity should not have been excited by the report of your own husband," observed Lady Todmorden, still with an air of pique, which, well-bred though she were, she could not altogether conceal.

"Curiosity?" echoed the Duchess; and then she gave a low mocking laugh, but which was exquisitely musical. "I never experience curiosity in such matters. I have no faith in this system of *lionizing* foreigners. Indeed I often think that we English people pay ourselves a very bad compliment in constantly turning our adoring looks upon everything that is foreign."

The Duchess was so high an authority in the fashionable sphere, that no one dared venture to breathe a syllable in opposition to the sentiments she had just delivered,—until Lady Todmorden

remarked in a conciliatory tone, "We know her Grace is thoroughly *English* in all her ideas; and we honour and respect her all the more on that account. But still——"

"But still, my dear Lady Todmorden," interjected the Duchess, smiling with her wonted affability, "you have caught a lion for this evening—and heaven knows that no one more sincerely than myself wishes you to have the full benefit of his presence!"

Having thus spoken, the Duchess of Ardleigh rose from amidst the group, and passing into another room, hastened to pay her warm greeting to her friends, the Earl and Countess of Carshalton, whom she there encountered. The two handsomest specimens of the female sex then present were the Duchess and the Countess,—the latter of whom was once the celebrated tragic actress Ellen Percy.

There was now a sensation at the entrance of the ball-room, and thither Lady Todmorden proceeded; for she had a presentiment of the cause. Nor was she mistaken:—Count de Mandeville was just making his appearance. Her ladyship was most intensely anxious that he should fully come up to the mark of all that had been said or conceived of him; for she felt that the Duchess had endeavoured to throw cold water upon her system of *lionizing*, and she was therefore naturally anxious to render it completely successful. The first glance she flung upon the Count was followed by instantaneous satisfaction. He was dressed with elegance, and yet with that plainness and absence of display which indicates the well-bred person. There was an air of distinction about him. Strikingly handsome he was not; but good-looking he certainly was—aye, almost up to that point at which he might be termed handsome. Then, when he smiled and displayed his brilliant teeth—and when in a voice of the most perfect masculine harmony he addressed himself to Lady Todmorden, apologizing for being late—the mistress of the mansion was as delighted with her new guest as it was possible she could be.

"Your ladyship has a brilliant assembly here this evening," said the Count.

"There are the leading stars of fashion," responded Lady Todmorden, indicating two splendid creatures who were just visible through the open doorway of an adjoining room.

"Indeed?" said the Count: and he looked in that direction.

"The taller one of the two, with the glossy black hair and the magnificent dark eyes, is the Countess of Carshalton. You must not make love to her, Count," continued her ladyship, with a smile; "for she is so devotedly attached to her husband that it would be impossible to wean away her thoughts from him even for a moment."

"And her companion?" said Mandeville,— "the lady with the light brown hair and the clear blue eyes?"

"The Duchess of Ardleigh?" responded Lady Todmorden. "Is she not beautiful?"

"She is very beautiful—though not so handsome as her companion the Countess of Carshalton—And so that is the Duchess of Ardleigh?" continued the Count, in a musing strain. "I met her husband the other day—Ah, by

the bye!" he ejaculated, with a smile—and he spoke in a tone of good-humoured jest; "if it be not permitted to make love to the Countess, does one stand any better chance with the Duchess?"

"Go and try, and make yourself agreeable to her Grace," said Lady Todmorden.

"Try?" and the Count was evidently struck by the word, as well as by the tone and manner in which it was spoken.

"Which I tell you a little secret, Count?" asked Lady Todmorden. "Listen—but mind you do not betray me. You must know that you are already exciting a sensation in our circles—every one is talking of you——"

"Of me? s; humble an individual—without pretension——"

"Don't affect to be ignorant of it, Count!" continued her ladyship, half with an air of good-humoured railery, and half with a species of mysterious confidence. "Before you entered the room just now, every one was speaking of you—some with praise, others with curiosity—all with interest, with only *one* exception."

"Ah! but that one?" said the Count.

"Can you not guess? I mean the Duchess of Ardleigh."

"Oh, indeed?—the Duchess of Ardleigh?"

"Yes; but pray do not mention what I am telling you. Indeed I shall tell you nothing more than this much,—that if you could only induce her to bestow her hand for a single dance, you would achieve a triumph the magnitude of which you cannot as yet comprehend."

"Indeed?" said the Count, with an air of sudden indifference. "If the Duchess of Ardleigh choose to speak lightly or contemptuously of me—as I judge that she has done—But Ah! when I bethink me," he suddenly interrupted himself, "her Grace is your ladyship's guest, and it is my duty to render myself agreeable. Be kind enough to introduce me to those ladies."

"With pleasure!"—and Lady Todmorden conducted her newly arrived guest into the adjoining room, where she at once introduced him to the Duchess and the Countess.

The Duchess of Ardleigh really had no intention of being cool or distant to Count Mandeville, neither had she conceived any prejudice against him. On the contrary, she had heard more in his favour than she had ere now chosen to admit. But she had disliked the manner in which Lady Todmorden was in the habit of *lionizing* individuals, and establishing as it were a particular cynosure of attraction on every occasion of giving an entertainment. For this reason only had the Duchess spoken and acted in the manner above recorded; and she was thinking no more of the affair, when all in a moment, as she was conversing with her friend Ellen, she beheld Lady Todmorden approaching, as if in triumph, escorting the Count.

"Ah!" thought the Duchess to herself, "she is determined, then, to thrust the Count upon everybody, and to hurl him at us perforce!"

The consequence was that when the Count was introduced, the Duchess simply inclined her head with the most distant coldness, and turned away. Lady Todmorden bit her lip for a moment: but she was too well bred to display her rage and spite any further. As for the Count himself, he ap-

peared not to notice the behaviour of the brilliant Duchess; but he at once glided into conversation with the Countess of Carshalton, the Countess of Belgrave, and two or three other ladies to whom he was successively introduced.

At the expiration of a little while, the Count sauntered away from the group with whom he had been thus conversing, and whom he had impressed with the elegance of his manners and the fascinations of his powers of discourse. On proceeding into another room, a glance showed him the Duchess of Arleigh seated a little apart from the rest; for just at that moment three or four ladies and gentlemen with whom she had been talking, moved away into the ball-room. The Count advanced up to the Duchess—bowed with an air that was most unexceptionably well bred—and lounging with fashionable ease over the back of a chair near her, he said, "Your Grace does not dance?"

"Yes—sometimes—but not this evening:" and the Duchess of Arleigh's manner was cold and distant—as contemptuous and repelling indeed as her sense of good-breeding could allow it to be.

"I am glad to hear that your Grace dances occasionally," resumed the Count, with the most perfect self-possession; "as I shall have the honour of soliciting your hand for the next quadrille."

The Duchess drew herself up: her very air was as much as to proclaim with an indignant eloquence, "This is an insolence on your part after the unmistakable coldness which I have shown towards you!"—but though her *look* expressed this much, she simply said *in words*, "I beg, sir, to decline the honour."

"Perhaps your Grace is afraid to trust yourself with a stranger so little known as I," said the Count: "and yet I will conduct your ladyship in safety anywhere—even though it were amidst the mazes of the grounds at Thornbury, and with the danger of falling into the tank of ornamental water."

The Duchess started as if a serpent had stung her; and she flung her searching looks upon Mandeville's countenance: but it was serene with its well-bred smile upon it. Yet what could his words signify? They were pure nonsense unless they were to be regarded as fraught with a deep covert meaning.

"Not that I myself have ever been to Thornbury, nor in its neighbourhood," continued the Count: "but I have heard a great deal of it. Indeed, as a matter of course, on arriving in the British metropolis, I could not possibly fail to hear the eulogies of the *brilliant Duchess*"—and here he howed gracefully—"proclaimed from every tongue. The curiosity that was excited in reference to the beautiful patrician, extended itself to the very places of her abode; and thus your Grace may comprehend how I came to acquire any knowledge of that residence which I believe is your favourite one."

The Duchess was now perfectly convinced that it was merely a random observation which had alarmed her for a moment; and as she happened to glance around the room, she beheld Lady Todmorden evidently watching herself and the Count with a degree of unmistakable interest. It is true that her ladyship instantaneously withdrew

her looks as she caught the eye of the Duchess; and then she affected to be gazing intently on a charming group of young ladies standing near: but the Duchess was not deceived by the subterfuge—and she even began to suspect that it was not altogether without a hint from Lady Todmorden's lips that the Count had now accosted her. She therefore resumed all her cold dignity; and she was just making a movement as if about to rise from her seat, when Mandeville said, "May I hope for the honour of your Grace's hand for the next quadrille?"

"I have already given you to understand, Monsieur le Comte," was the patrician lady's frigid reply, "that I do not intend to dance this evening."

Instead of looking at all embarrassed or disconcerted, Count Mandeville burst into a laugh—not loud nor yet prolonged—but short, low, and harmonious, and likewise accompanied with such an air that it was impossible to take it as a piece of rudeness. Nevertheless the Duchess drew herself up as she rose from her seat; and bending an indignant look upon Mandeville, she said, "That laugh, Monsieur le Comte, was almost an insult!"

"On the contrary," replied the Count, with an easy air of confidence: "if your Grace knew what provoked it, you would acknowledge that it was tantamount to a compliment in respect to one of the highest qualities possessed by your ladyship."

The Duchess was bewildered by this answer, which evidently seemed to contain some hidden significancy; and instead of moving away from the spot, she flung upon the Count a look of perplexed inquiry.

"I was only thinking," resumed Mandeville, "how well a certain person deserved a drenching in a tank on a particular occasion, and what a pity it is that he escaped. But the idea on your Grace's part was so good!—the design was so excellent!—there was such an antithetical singularity in your project of thus cooling the ardour which your own beauty had kindled! Ah, it ought to have succeeded!—but your Grace's powers of invention are not the less to be admired in consequence of the failure."

It was now impossible to doubt any longer that the Count was speaking with a purpose and a meaning; but the Duchess was too much bewildered and perplexed to be enabled to determine all in a moment how she should take the matter.

"And if I may be permitted to admire your ladyship," continued Mandeville, "for that readiness of invention to which I have just alluded, I may also speak in eulogistic terms of that love of adventure which elevates your Grace to the rank of a perfect heroine. Ah! it is not every delicately nurtured lady who would know how to frustrate the schemes of a Gaffney, and turn the tables by giving a cheque that was never intended to be paid. Ha! ha!—how your Grace must have laughed and enjoyed the joke!"

There was not the slightest tincture of sarcasm nor irony in the Count's tone or looks; but he went on speaking in a good-tempered, chatty, familiar style, as if in reality experiencing the most genuine admiration of her Grace's feats, and enjoying the joke respecting Gaffney as much as she herself could possibly have done at the time.

"It is not every lady," he continued, "who looks well in masculine attire, or who can adapt herself, so to speak, to the costume which she may thus put on for her own purposes. But I can easily conceive that your Grace must have looked the perfect gentleman, and that your appearance was calculated to have made the female heart sigh. For no doubt the disguise was so excellent that it was impossible to believe you otherwise than the gay handsome young gallant for which you chose to be taken."

It would be impossible to depict the varied feelings with which the Duchess of Arleigh listened to these speeches which Count de Mandeville addressed to her. It is true that he seemed to be speaking without any special aim or purpose; but she nevertheless felt convinced that there *was* a significancy as well as an object, and indeed that he was playing some deep game which she could not at the moment fathom. Terror, amazement, rage, consternation, blending with the cruellest perplexity, constituted the phases of feeling through which her mind passed. She suffered him to go on speaking; she did not interrupt him; she knew not what to say. How on earth did he know all these particulars? who could have informed him? who could have betrayed her?

"I hope," said Mandeville, after a moment's pause, "that your Grace is not offended with me for having enumerated those qualities on your part which have so much excited my admiration? These are not topics whereon I should speak indiscriminately or generally.—Ah! the music is striking up, and your Grace has promised me your hand for the next quadrille."

The promise had not in reality been given; but how could the Duchess refuse anything to this man in whose power she so completely found herself, and who with a breath could blast her reputation in a minute? There was but an instant's hesitation; and then the next moment her hand was laid in his.

All the coldness—all the frigid dignity—all the haughty indignation which the Duchess of Arleigh had previously been displaying towards Count de Mandeville, were now succeeded by the utmost affability of demeanour. Indeed, every look which the Duchess bent upon him, and every accent of her voice, seemed to imply that she was as anxious to render herself agreeable, to conciliate, and to gain his esteem, as she had previously studied to repel and insult him.

"Well, I declare," exclaimed Lady Todmorden, as she rushed up to some old lady of title who was immensely fond of a gossip as well as of a piece of scandal, "the Count has led out the Duchess to dance! You heard how she went on against him—how she almost reviled him? And now look!—there she is, smiling, and listening with evident satisfaction to the words he is addressing to her! Well, after this we must never be told that the Duchess of Arleigh is a stranger to caprice!"

Several other persons who heard the manner in which the Duchess had in the first instance spoken of Count Mandeville, were now amazed to find that she was accompanying him in the dance; and this triumph on his part was attributed to an exquisite polish of manners and to a power of conversation which were in reality much greater than Mandeville actually possessed. If anything

therefore had been wanting to establish the reputation of the new-comer as the very phoenix of perfection, and to give him a *repute* high above that of all the other gentlemen of the fashionable world, this triumph at Lady Todmorden's house was the very incident best calculated for that purpose.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE USURER'S DAUGHTER.

THE usurer's daughter, Selina, has been already introduced in some slight manner to the reader; but it is now time that we should make them better acquainted with a young lady who is destined to play no inconsiderable part upon the stage of our story. Selina was about nineteen years of age: she was exceedingly pretty, even if she did not altogether deserve the appellation of beautiful. She had dark brown hair, which was luxuriant and naturally wavy, so that when seen in particular lights it seemed to be darker in some parts than in others,—darker, we mean, in what may be termed the hollows of those soft and silky undulations. Her eyes were not large: they were of a clear blue, with a peculiar softness and sweetness of expression, and were unmistakably indicative of an amiable disposition. She had a good mouth and a fine set of teeth: her nose was straight—her chin softly rounded. A little above the middle height, her figure was perfectly modelled; and we may add that her hands and feet were of a faultless symmetry.

But not only was Selina thus attractive in person—she was likewise endowed with the most fascinating mental qualities. Nothing could exceed the sweetness of her disposition nor the excellence of her moral principles. She possessed many accomplishments, for she was gifted with a rare intelligence; and at a time when her father was niggard to a degree in supplying her with the means of a good education (before his ambition soared to the establishment of his family upon a high place in the world) she eagerly caught at all the means of self-instruction and speedily became proficient in whatsoever she undertook.

In no possible respect did she resemble her parents or her brother: she seemed a complete alien to the stock—as different from the common vulgar level of the rest as a beautiful white dove might appear if thrown amidst a troop of uncouth ducks waddling in the mire. She herself could not fail to perceive that her parents and her brother possessed many faults: nor indeed, with all her amiability and her sweetness of temper, could she help sometimes blushing for the gross solecisms in respect to good manners perpetrated by her mother, or the vulgar pretensions and self-sufficiencies of her brother. And what is more, her gentle bosom had often been wrung by a sigh when she heard how her father mercilessly pursued some unhappy debtor with all the rancour that he might bestow upon a mortal enemy—plunging him into gaol—driving him through the Insolvents' Court—and hunting him down into the vortex of irreclaimable ruin. Nevertheless, Selina was loving and dutiful towards her parents; or at least she strove to perform her filial

duties to the utmost of her ability,—though there had of late been two or three little points on which for the sake of her dignity and self-respect she had been compelled to manifest a will of her own.

A week had now elapsed since Mr. Casey had received from the hands of his illegitimate son Stephen Ashborne those documents which might have done him an injury so long as they remained in the hands of Squire Ponsford. But now the usurer felt himself to be in safety and security; and he became impatient at the delay which his plans were experiencing in reference to the marriage of his daughter and the Hon. Launcelot Osborne. That interview with his son Stephen Ashborne, had excited him to a degree which produced a shock upon a constitution that was by no means strong. He was exceedingly indisposed several days afterwards; and thus a week elapsed ere he began to feel that he had energy sufficient for the execution of his most favourite project.

One morning, after breakfast, he desired his daughter to follow him into the little back room which he called his office. Selina looked agitated, for she full easily conjectured on what topic her father was about to address her.

"Sit down, Selina," said Mr. Casey, when they were alone together. "You know, my dear," he continued, "that it is my most earnest desire to behold you comfortably and honourably settled in life. Indeed certain arrangements were made—I need not recapitulate them—but I must ask you—and it is not for the first time—whether you are conscious of any reason for which Launcelot Osborne continues to absent himself from the house?"

"I have before told you, my dear father," answered Selina, casting down her looks, and blushing at the same time, while it also seemed as if her bosom were agitated with a sigh, "that I on my part have given Mr. Osborne no cause to discontinue his visits; but at the same time I should be very sorry if—if"—and here her voice trembled—"he were to continue them on my account, if he had any disinclination—or—or—"

Selina stopped short: she was full of confusion: indeed it almost seemed as if she were deeply afflicted likewise. Her father surveyed her earnestly for upwards of a minute; and then he said, "There is something, Selina, which I cannot understand in all this!—there has been more or less mystery in your conduct! What does it mean?"

The young lady remained silent; and Mr. Casey continued as follows:—

"When in the first instance your mother and I asked you if it would be agreeable for you to receive the addresses of Launcelot Osborne, you replied in the affirmative. Indeed, I think I understood from your mother's lips that you even admitted you could love him, or that he was not indifferent to you—or something to that effect. Was it not so, Selina?"

"Yes, father—it certainly was so—I do not attempt to deny it."

"Well," continued the usurer, "matters went on—the negotiations between myself and Lord Trentham took a tangible shape—and it was arranged that you should go on a certain day and at a particular hour to pay your respects to the noble parents of your intended husband. But

when the time came you would not go,—you would not keep the appointment! Your mother entreated—I commanded—but all in vain!—and thus was it, Selina, that for about the first time in your life you proved disobedient, wilful, and headstrong."

"Do not blame me, my dear father!" interjected the young lady, with difficulty stifling a sob. "I told you that I could not go under such circumstances!"

"Under what circumstances?" asked Mr. Casey sharply. "Three or four times I have desired you to give explanations—and you have invariably returned me some evasive answer."

"Oh, my dear father," cried Selina—"could you not comprehend wherefore I shrank from giving those explanations? Ah! but I will give them now, since we are talking so seriously on the subject, and since you appear determined that it should be brought to a thorough understanding between us. I will confess that at first I was rejoiced and flattered—proud and happy, at the idea of proceeding to Trentham House, to be welcomed by Launcelot's parents as his future wife."

"Ah, then you really do love Launcelot?" ejaculated the usurer.

A deep blush passed over Selina's countenance; and without answering the question, she went on somewhat hurriedly to speak in the following strain:—

"When I came to reflect calmly and deliberately—I will even say seriously and earnestly upon that appointment which was made for me to visit Lord and Lady Trentham, I found that so far from having any reason to feel flattered by it, there was every motive why I should be shocked and humiliated."

"Eh? what?" ejaculated the usurer, in mingled petulance and surprise.

"Yes, certainly," pursued Selina; "for now that the moment of explanation is come I will not shrink from it. Oh, my dear father! think you that I could be otherwise than chafed, galled, and humiliated when on reflection I comprehended how that haughty peer and peeress intended to receive me as a favour and not through any love or friendship!—yes, to receive me *alone*—unaccompanied by my parents, who ought to have been with me on such an occasion! And then my eyes were opened—"

"Opened to what?" demanded her father impatiently.

Selina averted her countenance for a few moments; but a burning blush was still lingering upon her cheeks as she again looked towards her sire.

"Opened to the fact," she said, "that Launcelot Osborne had not sought me in marriage because he loved me, but for pecuniary reasons; and my soul revolted against the idea of being wedded on such terms. For, Oh! if those haughty parents of his were too proud to receive my father, my mother, and my brother, how could I suppose that there would be any happiness for me if admitted by sufferance into such a family? And therefore I would not go to Trentham House on that occasion to see the parents of Launcelot Osborne."

"But, my dear child," said Mr. Casey, "marriages are not always contracted for love—the

days of romance are gone by—people think only of ensuring for their sons and daughters a good social position—”

“Oh, my dear father,” interrupted the young lady, “I beseech you not to talk to me in this strain! I hoped that you would not humiliate yourself nor sacrifice me!”

“Silly girl! Why, you just now confessed—or at least admitted by your silence when I put the question point-blank, that you *do* love Launcelot Osborne.”

Again the vivid carnation mantled upon Selina's countenance; and she said, “But if, father, he does not love me?”

Mr. Casey laughed ironically; and then he replied, “Launcelot is a good young man—he loves his parents—and for their sake he will love you. Never mind what I mean—”

“But I understand you, father!” cried Selina. “You mean that Lord and Lady Trentham are in your power, and that Launcelot will sacrifice himself to effect the salvation of his parents.”

“Well, if such be my meaning, Selina, it is for you to act as an obedient daughter and a prudent young woman. You will acquire station and name—in time you will become a peeress—”

“But if I marry one who does not love me, and into a family that will be ashamed of me,” exclaimed Selina vehemently, “of what avail will be all the advantages of patrician rank?”

“Enough of this argument!” interrupted the usurer. “Will you tell me, Selina, how it is that for the last fortnight or more Mr. Osborne has discontinued his visits?”

“I cannot tell you, father.”

“Do you mean you will not?”

“I mean that I have had no explanations with Mr. Osborne,” rejoined Selina, with her accustomed mildness. “But I will confess that I am not sorry he has remained away—the cessation of his visits has proved a relief to my mind—although—”

“And now, Selina, we must come to the point,” said her father curtly. “I wrote yesterday to Lord Trentham—and I have no doubt his son will be here presently. I am resolved that this match shall take place. I rely upon your filial obedience: I am not going to suffer any maudlin reasons of love or nonsense to interfere with these arrangements which have been made for the ensurance of your welfare. It is my duty as a parent to provide for my children; and it is not for them to dictate to me the sort of provision they wish to have made on their behalf. You can now retire, Selina, and reflect well upon all that I have just been saying to you.”

There was a sternness in Mr. Casey's tone, as well as a resoluteness in his look—aye, and a harshness in his very manner, which forbade the hope that any further remonstrance, representation, or entreaty on Selina's part would avail to move him from his purpose. She accordingly retired from his presence and sped to her own chamber. She knew how useless it would be to endeavour to enlist her mother in her cause; for the ambition of the maternal parent was as immoveably set upon this aristocratic alliance as that of her father. As for falling back upon her brother, *this* was out of the question:—he would only laugh at her for what he would term her stupid punctiliousness, and he would bid her

marry Launcelot whether he loved her or not. The poor girl felt completely and utterly friendless; and retiring to her chamber, she gave way to a flood of tears.

Her surcharged heart was thus relieved; and she was now more competent to look her position in the face and deliberate upon the course which she ought to pursue: She loved Launcelot—dearly loved him! It was not so much the beauty of his person as the amiability of his disposition and the intelligence of his mind which had made an impression upon her heart. Oh, if he only loved her in return, how happy should she be! But he did not: of *this* she felt convinced; and with the delicate sensitiveness of her own mind, she thought she could understand how it was possible that Launcelot should never be enabled to love her. She fancied that he would recoil from any position into which it was sought to drive him perforce! But though Selina, loved him so tenderly, and could have even worshipped the very ground on which he trod,—yet she was far too high-minded, too well-principled, and too deeply imbued with a proper delicacy of feeling to accept him under existing circumstances as a husband.

A couple of hours passed; and it was approaching one o'clock in the afternoon, when a maid-servant tapped at the door of Selina's chamber, and informed her that the Hon. Mr. Osborne was in the drawing-room. Selina had by this time perfectly recovered her self-possession: she was pale, it is true; but upon her countenance there were no traces of recent grief, as she walked with a firm step down the staircase to the apartment where Launcelot was awaiting her presence.

The young gentleman was pacing to and fro in the drawing-room when Selina entered; and she at once saw that he was labouring under a violent agitation. Some few moments elapsed ere he noticed her presence; and then, instead of hastening towards her, he stopped short, while his countenance “became very pale, his lips quivered, and he trembled visibly from head to foot.

“Mr. Osborne,” said Selina, closing the door behind her, and accosting him with a modest dignity of demeanour; “you need not labour under any excitement on beholding me. You have no apologies to offer for any supposed neglect on your part: you need not commence by explaining wherefore your visits have ceased for a period;—for, in plain terms, everything is at an end between you and me!”

Launcelot gave a start of amazement:—for a moment an expression of wild hope swept over his countenance; but the next instant it was succeeded by a look of doubt and sadness—and he was evidently under the influence of varied feelings.

“You say that everything is at an end between us, Selina?” he cried; “but I do not understand—”

“I have made up my mind to speak frankly and candidly to you,” she interrupted him; “for this is no subject for a fastidious punctiliousness: it is one on which I, although of the softer sex, have as much right to speak resolutely and unreservedly as you yourself can have.”

“No doubt, Selina! no doubt!” said Launcelot, wondering more and more to what issue

this preface was to lead. "What am I to understand?"

"That I have reasoned with myself," continued Selina,—"that by means of a variety of circumstances I have been led to comprehend the basis on which it was proposed this alliance should be settled; and my soul revolts against the idea of being forced as a bride upon one who loves me not—and who perhaps loves another?"

"But your father, Selina?" exclaimed Osborne: "he has written a terrible letter to my father—its terms are peremptory—he even fixes the day—"

"They cannot drag me to the altar," responded the young lady firmly; "and of my own accord I will not go."

Launcelot gazed upon her with mingled astonishment and admiration: he wondered to hear her speak thus—and he admired her for the noble, the independent, and the spirited part which she was performing. He had never understood her real disposition nor comprehended the excellence of her qualities until now.

"This morning," she continued, "I had a long and serious discourse with my father. I fear that your parents are in his power—I know not how, nor to what extent—but this I do know, that you are called upon to make a tremendous sacrifice—"

"It would be paying the worst possible compliment to yourself, amiable and excellent young lady that you are!" cried Launcelot, "if I were to allow you to speak of this sacrifice in such strong terms. For any man might be happy in possessing you for his wife—unless indeed—unless"—Osborne paused, hesitated, and then added,—“ unless, indeed, he should chance to love another!"

"And this"—Selina's voice trembled, but it instantaneously grew firm—"and this, Mr. Osborne, is *your* case?"

"With you I can practise no dissimulation—much less deal in falsehood. Yes, Selina—for I continue to address you thus familiarly, because even if I do not become your husband, there is no reason why I should not remain your friend,—yes, I will confess that I love another—one whom I had seen before I knew you—But, Oh, heavens! you are ill? you seem as if you were about to faint?"

"No, Mr. Osborne—it is nothing. I am better now:—and Selina, disengaging herself from his arms, as he sprang forward to support her, sank upon a seat.

Though she had suspected that it was probable Launcelot might love another, yet when the avowal was made—when there was no longer a doubt, and consequently no room for a hope—the effect was like that of a shock upon her; and for an instant she had been unable to bear up against it. The little incident served to open Launcelot's eyes to the fact that he was truly and veritably beloved by this young lady who was making the most magnanimous sacrifice of her own passion on his behalf.

"Selina," he said, in a low and tremulous voice, "it rends my soul to think that there should be unhappiness or sorrow in any quarter on account of the part that I may have taken in these transactions. When I offered you my hand,

I did not tell you that you possessed my heart—I did not altogether deceive you—but I feared that on the other hand you loved me—I am now convinced of it—and Oh! I feel as if I were a wretch who has trifled with the best and purest feelings of one so good, so amiable, and so magnanimous as thou!"

"Do not reproach yourself," said Selina. "To my father's ambition must all these evils be traced. But you shall not be sacrificed. I will presently tell my father that of my own accord I have broken off everything betwixt you and me: I will acquit you of all blame—I will even declare that you yourself are still ready to make the sacrifice—but I will vow and protest that I will sooner perish by my own hand than be dragged to the altar!"

"Oh, Selina!" murmured Launcelot, deeply affected; "are you to make your own life miserable—"

"Yes, sooner than steep your's in misery! Listen to me, Launcelot:—and now for the first time during this interview she called him by his Christian name. "I will confess that I love you—heaven knows how well!—too well to render you miserable! I will therefore do all I can to promote your happiness. If I refuse to accompany you to the altar, my father cannot prove so unjust and cruel as to punish your family for his own daughter's disobedience."

"Alas, Selina, he will do it! he will do it!" cried Osborne. "In his letter of yesterday to my father, he spoke of the possibility of certain fastidious punctiliousness existing between 'the young people'—for thus he spoke of us; and he went on to say that he should hold *me* accountable for the result if I failed at the next interview with his daughter to convince her of my love and of my readiness to make her happiness the study of my life."

"Do your parents know that you love another?" inquired Selina.

"Yes," replied Launcelot. "I will tell you an incident. You remember that afternoon on which you were to call at Trentham House?"

"Yes: it was exactly three weeks ago."

"True. And a marvellous coincidence took place," continued Osborne. "On that day, and precisely at that hour, the very being whom I love beheld me in the street—she followed me to the house—She was closely veiled—The circumstances are so peculiar you will scarcely believe them: but as heaven is my judge, I am speaking the truth!"

"Oh, I believe you, Launcelot! I believe you!" interjected Selina, as she gazed upon that handsome countenance, with its frank honest expression, and the pure light of intelligence that shone in the fine blue eyes. "Proceed—proceed! What happened?"

"A strange series of mistakes and errors. That veiled one—the being whom I love—was greeted by my parents, who thought that they were welcoming *you*. Then there was a scene between her and me—and I, thinking the while it was you, made a confession—told the tale of my real love—"

"Yes—I understand!" murmured Selina. "You told the tale of real love to her whom it most nearly and dearly concerned?"

"It was so. But let me make an end of this tale

What could I do? I was compelled to explain everything to my parents,—everything except the name of her whom they had welcomed and who owned my love!"

"Then Lord and Lady Trentham," said Selina, "know that you love another—but know not who that *other* is? Is it thus that you mean me to understand the matter?"

"It is so.—Ah, Selina! if she whom I love were in a high position and wealthy, and enabled to bring riches into the family, so that our own ruined fortunes might be rebuilt, it would be different! She whom I love is poor and dependent—"

"Would to heaven that I could enrich her, Launcelot," murmured Selina; "for assuredly this would I do for your sake! But are you certain that my father would be so harsh—so wicked—"

"Listen to me, Selina," interrupted Launcelot; "and I will tell you exactly how the entire matter stands. This is the 24th of May: your father has fixed the 31st for the bridal. My parents have implored and entreated that I will throw no obstacle in the way—"

"What?" exclaimed Selina: "they ask you to sacrifice yourself?"

"Alas, yes! Perhaps they have a right to demand this sacrifice at the hand of their son!—perhaps they are justified in looking to me as the one who shall redeem the fortunes of an ancient family from destruction, and the name of a proud lineage from disgrace!"

Selina reflected for upwards of a minute; and then she inquired, "What answer did you make them?"

"I gave them none: I quitted their presence in despair! I could not tell them that I would see ruin brought down upon their head without taking the steps that should avert it:—neither could I on the other hand—"

He stopped short; and Selina said, "I understand you! You could not on the other hand trample all your hopes under foot, and in a moment seal your own unhappiness! But what is to be done? One week—one short week—"

"That is all," said Launcelot.

"And what—what would be the consequences," pursued Selina, "if I were to give the most positive and absolute refusal to accompany you to the altar? Would ruin be immediate? would it come with a crash? or would there be yet a chance of staving it off for a period?"

"No chance!" replied Launcelot. "Such is the position of my father's affairs that *your* father could at any moment seize the estates for no less a sum than fifty thousand pounds. Yes—and the house in London and all the furniture for a further sum of ten thousand—"

"I did not know that my father had ever been wealthy enough to lend such large amounts," said Selina, in bewildered amazement.

"Oh! I have not even mentioned the worst," proceeded Launcelot. "My father is indebted to your's altogether to the amount of eighty thousand pounds: but the first seizure that would be made is for fifty only. However, it would require little of additional legal processes to consummate the ruin of the Trentham family!"

"And we have but one week before us!" said Selina, who spoke abstractedly, as if she were revolving in her mind some idea that had occurred

to her: "only one short week to avert this deplorable catastrophe! Nevertheless," she added, "something shall be done—something *must* be done! Heaven itself will not permit so much infamy to be accomplished! Launcelot, we are friends. I swear to you that I will never seek against your will to be anything more. And now leave me. Alas! I have no words of hope to hold out at this moment—But still—but still—there *is* something in my mind which prevents me from sinking altogether into despair."

"Such an assurance from your lips," exclaimed Launcelot, almost with enthusiasm, "is tantamount to the proclaiming of a hope. But in whatever manner all these things may result, I shall never forget, Selina, your goodness—your magnanimity! May God in heaven bless you!"

He wrung her hand with the impassioned fervour of the most heartfelt gratitude, and then hurried from the apartment.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ASTLEY'S.

THERE were unusual attractions at Astley's in the evening of the day of which we have just been writing: A magnificent equestrian spectacle was announced under the name of "Valentine and Orson," and a real bear was to appear in the circus, supposed to be the veritable animal who nourished Orson along with its own little cubs in the forest. The celebrated acrobat, Mr. Blundell, was to perform the part of Orson—an impersonation which would afford that individual an opportunity of displaying his skill by climbing up and down trees, and performing a thousand antics, such as the wild man might be supposed to have indulged in. Mademoiselle Imogene, arrayed in a complete suit of beautiful armour, was to enact the part of the young knight Valentine; and it was expected that with her equestrian skill, her fine Bayadere-like form, and her remarkably handsome countenance, she would perform that chivalrous *role* with the most striking effect. Miss Alice Denton and Mademoiselle Rosa were also to figure conspicuously in the *Grand Spectacle*, the announcement of which produced an immense sensation throughout the neighbourhood of Lambeth in particular, and the frequenters of Astley's in general.

A little while before the doors of the theatre were opened, Mr. Sylvester Casey sauntered over Westminster Bridge, smoking his cigar. He had dined at a coffee-house in Bridge Street,—his repast having consisted of a couple of mutton chops, potatoes, bread, and a pint of ale, the whole coming to sixteen pence, leaving twopence for the waiter when a shilling and sixpence were thrown down upon the table.

Just at the foot of the bridge Sylvester ran against Launcelot Osborne, who seemed to be walking along in a thoughtful and abstracted manner.

"Why, my dear fellow!" exclaimed young Casey, "people don't keep their eyes fixed on the pavement when they're walking through the crowded thoroughfares of London in the evening."



"Oh, indeed—I—I—mean to say—I did not observe you at the moment."

"I know you didn't," laughed Sylvester. "A pretty rig it would be if you was to go and get run over by a cab just as the wedding day's fixed and you're to be spliced to my sister in a week."

"Ah, then your father has told you——"

"Told me that it's all arranged, and that you was in the house with Selina when I went in to lunch. I didn't choose to disturb you—I thought you was having a nice little *tête-à-tête* together."

"Oh, then you have not been home to dinner?" asked Launcelot, anxious to know what account Selina might have given of the result of the interview.

"No—not I. I dined up at the Clarendon in Bond Street. Just a little turbot, some turtle, No. 19.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

and a neck of venison—a pint of champagne and a bottle of claret,—that was my dinner," added Sylvester, giving three or four complacent puffs at his cigar.

"Well, it is very strange," said Launcelot, "but I was coming along Bridge Street about an hour ago, and I could have declared that I saw you enter that little coffee-house near the news-shop——"

"What!"—and Sylvester became scarlet. "Me go to a coffee-house? Well, by jingo, Launcelot, if you think so ill of me as all that, I'd better go and pistol myself——"

"Ill of you? Indeed I should not think ill of you on that account."

"Come, d—— it, man!" cried Sylvester, affecting to be half-indignant, "a joke's a joke: but

to say that I did anything so precious low as to go to a coffee-house—a slap-bang perhaps—a trough——”

“Well, I daresay I was mistaken,” interrupted Osborne; “and this is all the more likely inasmuch as the person whom I took for you, seemed to dive suddenly in, holding down his head somewhat, just as if he did not care particularly to be seen.”

“Ah, well—now you’re convinced it wasn’t me,” exclaimed Sylvester. “I almost wish it had been; for now I’ve got the turtle and venison rising in my throat. It was too rich a dinner. I’m afraid I feed too well.—But where are you going? To Astley’s, no doubt?”

“Well,” faltered our Launcelot, “I was thinking of looking in there for a few minutes: but I am not sure——”

“Oh, nonsense! come along. We’ll pass round to the stage-door. I won’t tell Selina that you go behind the scenes——”

“Thank you. I shall not go behind the scenes this evening.”

“Well, I will join you presently,” resumed Sylvester, “in the boxes. I just want to step behind the scenes to say a word to my pretty Alice. I haven’t seen her these two days; and the truth is her weekly money was due yesterday—ten guineas, you know—and I must go and give it to her. I hate being behindhand in these sort of things—and I can’t bear to look mean.”

The two young gentlemen now separated,—Launcelot bending his way towards the principal entrance, the doors having been just thrown open—and Sylvester passing round to the rear of the theatre, so that he might get upon the stage. On ascending into that region, young Casey found that a part where a light usually burnt, was now involved in darkness; and he was groping his way along, when he heard voices in whispering conversation close by. He was mean and paltry enough to have listened under any circumstances: but still less likely than ever was he to hesitate when he recognised one of the voices to be Miss Alice Denton’s. But to whom was she talking in this mysterious manner? and who could be the subject of her discourse?

“Of course I hate him,” she was saying at the moment: “how could it be possible to do otherwise? a stupid conceited fellow! as ugly as a haboon—and giving himself as many airs as if he were the greatest lord in the land!”

“Why, who *can* she mean?” asked Sylvester of himself.

“With that horrid red hair of his—and those green eyes—and his face covered with freckles——”

“A whipper-snapper coxcomb!” said the other voice: “I should like to punch his head for him!”—and now Sylvester discovered that his beautiful Alice was in discourse with no less a person than the famous acrobat Mr. Blundell.

“He is the meanest fellow too on the face of the earth,” continued the young lady: “he did not bring me my paltry allowance the day before yesterday—and so I suppose I shall see him to-morrow;—and then next pay-day he will make to-morrow week, so that by these means he will gain three clear days! That’s the way he is accustomed to serve me, with his nasty mean tricks!”

“Well, never mind, my dear Alice,” said Blundell: “he doesn’t suspect how thick you and me are together; and you had better keep friends with him just for the present. But I say, come along—we shall be wanted.”

Sylvester heard a sound very much resembling the meeting of two pairs of lips; and this was followed by the creaking of footsteps moving away from the spot where the preceding colloquy had taken place. Sylvester’s blood was boiling: the place was pitch dark—and he could not resist the temptation of doing what Mr. Blundell had expressed a desire of doing towards himself—namely, of inflicting that species of chastisement which is called “punching the head.” Sylvester therefore groped his way hastily forward in the direction which he fancied his faithless mistress and his rival had taken: he proceeded some dozen paces—he paused to listen—he thought he heard the sound of persons breathing close by him; he advanced—stretched out his arms—and was already gloating at the idea of the punishment which he was about to inflict on the acrobat, when, behold! as he crept noiselessly on, he suddenly came in contact with a hairy object—and he found himself hugged in a couple of hirsute arms that seemed to be ready extended to receive him in their embrace. Sylvester comprehended the truth in a moment—he was in the grip of the bear—and a terrified cry pealed from his lips!

We must here explain that the bear was tutored to perform particular antics in the presence of a certain number of lights,—which lesson the sagacity of the animal had enabled it to acquire with the utmost proficiency. But inasmuch as there was no necessity for the brute to practise its tricks behind the scenes, it had been placed in a secluded spot where there was no need to have any lights at all for the time being; and thus the gas which was usually flaming there at that hour had been extinguished. Hence the miserable dilemma into which poor Sylvester Casey plunged with so fearful a suddenness.

The cry that pealed from his lips rang through all that portion of the establishment: lights quickly flamed around—carpenters and scene-shifters came rushing to the spot—the doors of the several dressing-rooms opened—and out rushed a number of actors and nymphs in their theatrical costumes. Ejaculations of dismay and shrieks of terror at first indicated the feelings which were inspired by the spectacle: but in a very few moments a peal of laughter broke in upon the other sounds—this was followed by another, and then another—until all who were assembled there yielded to the hilarious inclinations engendered by the ludicrous figure which poor Sylvester cut in the embrace of the bear. And we are compelled by a strict regard for truth to add that no explosion of merriment was more jocund—we had almost termed it boisterous—than that which emanated from the faithless Miss Alice Denton.

The carpenters and scene-shifters quickly commenced an assault upon the bear, in order to induce the animal to relax his hold upon the unfortunate victim who was roaring and screaming, and crying and yelling in the hirsute arms that held him tight. The brute’s muzzle was over his shoulder: but fortunately it was a good-natured

specimen of the ursine race—and it had been drilled by theatrical discipline into comparative harmlessness. In a short time, therefore, Mr. Casey junior was rescued from the embrace of the bear—but only to encounter a tremendous horse-laugh sounding in his ear; and on turning with rage and humiliation to see from whom the taunting cachinnation emanated, his looks met the malicious regards of Mr. Blundell, the acrobat, dressed as Orson.

Sylvester was in his heart a desperate coward: but there are moments when even the greatest poltroons in the universe may be goaded to desperation. Such was the case in the present instance. Sylvester thought of his wrongs:—back to his memory flashed all that he had heard pass betwixt Alice and Mr. Blundell; and though nearly all the breath had been squeezed out of his body, and he had at first sunk panting and exhausted into the arms of one of the scene-shifters, he now made a desperate rush at the acrobat, and hurled him against the *King*, who in his royal robes of tinsel and a crown of pasteboard on his head, was gazing with all the majestic condescension of hilarity upon the scene. The royal personage began to blaspheme in a manner highly inconsistent with the dignity of his regal office; while Mr. Blundell, picking himself up, flew at Sylvester, vowing amidst a series of imprecations which even out-Heroded the *King's*, that he would smash his assailant everlastingly. But all of a sudden a beauteous form, clad in aerial garments, glided betwixt the fierce Orson (Mr. Blundell), and his intended victim (Mr. Sylvester Casey): so that the effect was magical. Mr. Blundell fell back; and Sylvester was dragged by a pair of naked white arms into the ladies' dressing-room, where his fair deliverer at once bolted the door. She and Sylvester were now alone there together; and perhaps our readers may not be altogether very much surprised when we inform them that the beauteous being was none other than Miss Alice Denton.

Mr. Blundell fell back so suddenly, and abstained from any remonstrance against the fact of Miss Denton's thus bearing off the object of his hatred, for the simple reason that it all in a moment flashed to his mind how expedient it would be to suffer the syren to make her peace with the person who allowed her two guineas and a half a week: for the worthy acrobat suddenly suspected that as Sylvester had evidently entered the premises in darkness and stealthiness, he might have overheard what took place between himself (Mr. Blundell) and the frail fair one. As for the rest of the company, they likewise winked at Alice taking the young man into the dressing-room; for it was pretty generally known that she was under his protection.

But let us re-enter that dressing-room. Sylvester threw himself on a seat, panting for breath—bewildered and discomfited—half enraged against Alice, yet half inclined to be thankful for the timely succour with which she had rescued him from the fury of the acrobat and the terrible imprecations of the *King*. As for the young lady herself, she leant against the wall and burst out into as merry and genuine a peal of laughter as was ever heard within that sanctum of Thespian toilet. At length the laughter died away—and

Sylvester began to recover breath as well as self-possession.

"Well," he said, in a sulky tone, "this is a precious rum start, and as queer a go as ever I knew in all my life! To be hugged by a bear, and insulted by a set of brutal wretches—"

"Who do you mean, Sylvester?" asked Alice quickly.

"Well—and I may add too to be made a fool of and laughed at by one that ought to know better—particularly after the blow-out of white-bait and champagne I gave you a fortnight ago—"

"Oh! you are alluding to me—are you?" cried Alice. "And pray, who could he laughing?"

"Well, I tell you what it is," interrupted Sylvester: "the game's up between you and me, Alice—I'll have nothing more to do with you—"

"What! just because I laughed at what was enough to make the gravest judge or bishop split his sides? Come, Sylvester dear—don't be a fool," and Miss Denton passed her hand caressingly over his cheek.

"You false creature, you!" cried the young man. "I've found you out at last! I always suspected it: but now I know it! And to abuse me too behind my back, with that odious fellow Blundell!"

"Ah!" and now a light flashed in unto Miss Denton's comprehension: but instantaneously assuming the part of an injured woman, she said, "Oh, Sylvester! who could ever have thought that you were capable of playing the eavesdropper and listening?"

"Never mind! I know what I heard, Alice—and I'll never forgive it."

"Yes, you will, dear!"—and she coaxingly threw one of her white arms round his neck. "The truth is, I was very cross indeed with you because you did not come to see me either to-day or yesterday—"

"And you wanted your money?" interjected Sylvester tauntingly; "and you accused me of meanness. Oh, I heard all you said! And then—and then—about my complexion too—"

"Well, Sylvester, I have always told you that it is your own fault for being *rather* freckled; because if you'd only use some elder-flower water, or something of that sort, you would soon have a very beautiful complexion. I am sure I always stick up for you, unless you put me into a pet; and then of course, you know, a woman is apt to say things that she's afterwards sorry for."

While Alice thus spoke, her countenance gradually approached Sylvester's; and now she looked so sweetly and entreatingly into his face with her large blue eyes, that he began to melt.

"Well," he said, "suppose you were in a pet with me, why should you go and tell your grievances to that fellow Blundell?"

"I met him by accident."

"What! in the dark I suppose? Oh, ah! a jolly accident!"

"Well, my dear Sylvester, it was not my fault," rejoined Alice mildly, "if the manager ordered the gas to be put out in that part of the theatre on account of the bear."

Everything was going on well up to this point: Sylvester was melting beneath the warmth of the syren's caresses: but now, as she unfortunately recollected the figure which he cut in the

embrace of the bear, her natural love of gaiety prevailed over every consideration of policy, and she once more burst forth into a merry peal of laughter.

"Well, after this," cried Sylvester, springing up from his seat, "I'm done! It's all up, Alice! I was a fool to think of forgiving you. I ought to have recollected how you and Blundell chuckled at the idea of my not knowing of your intimacy—And then too there was a sound—a smacking sound, Alice!" he vehemently exclaimed; "and it was just like when lips are meeting. So, as I don't pay you two and a half guineas a week, besides whitebait and champagne dinners, to bestow your favours on a coarse vulgar fellow like Blundell, I'll cut it at once."

"Then if this be your resolve, sir," replied Alice, "you had better separate from me in a gentlemanly manner, instead of indulging in this abuse. Mr. Blundell would be incapable of such conduct!"

"Oh, I dare say you think him a very fine fellow," exclaimed Sylvester spitefully: "but depend upon it I'll punch his head yet before I've done with him!"

Thus speaking, Mr. Sylvester Casey flung open the door and rushed out of the dressing-room—Alice Denton not thinking it worth while to make another effort to conciliate or retain him. He caught a glimpse of the ominous countenance of Mr. Blundell peering round a piece of stage-machinery at a little distance; and not feeling pugnacious on the present occasion, he dashed down the stairs and made his *exit* from the rearward premises of the theatre. Full of spite and vexation at the incidents which had just occurred, he did not think of rejoicing Launcelot Osborne: but recrossing Westminster Bridge, he wandered about the streets smoking cigars for a couple of hours, and on his return to Hatton Garden assured his mother that he had passed a most delightful evening in company with some dozen young aristocratic friends of his acquaintance.

As for Launcelot Osborne himself, he soon forgot that Sylvester had promised to meet him in the boxes; for until the performances commenced, the young patrician was profoundly occupied with his own reflections: but when the object of his devoted love, the beautiful Imogen, appeared in the circus, all his attention became at once concentrated in that cynosure. How well she looked in the chivalrous attire which she now wore!—how admirably it fitted her symmetrical form!—and with what mingled grace and skill did she sit upon the steed that bore her! Yet, Oh! to be enabled to take her away from this atmosphere—to bear her off from that arena—and to retire with her into some seclusion where they might dwell in love and happiness together,—Oh, *this* was the acme of all the young man's hopes and desires!

Launcelot waited until the conclusion of the piece in which Imogen had to bear a part; and then he quitted the theatre. On issuing forth he stopped and hesitated: then he walked on again: once more he paused to reflect—and again he continued his way. Passing round to the rear of the theatre, he waited at a short distance for the appearance of his beloved one. This was the first time that he had ever attempted to see her after the performances,—the first time that he

had lounged in that neighbourhood to meet her,—the first time, in a word, that he had done aught which was at all calculated to compromise her reputation, apart from visiting her regularly every day at her own dwelling and there passing hours in her company.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ALONE TOGETHER.

It was Imogen's general custom to dress in her theatrical costume at her own abode, and thence pass to the theatre enveloped in a cloak, and further protected by the shades of evening in a neighbourhood which was not too plentifully supplied with gaslights. But on the present occasion she had been compelled to dress at the theatre itself, as she could not very well go walking through the street in a suit of armour, although it was made of tin plates instead of steel, and was thus of the lightest material. After the performance of the grand equestrian *spectacle* in which she achieved a fresh triumph, she put off her armour in a private dressing-room allotted to her own use, and resumed her ordinary apparel. Launcelot was thus kept waiting nearly half an hour until he beheld Imogen approaching; and it was now verging towards eleven o'clock.

"Dearest Imogen!" he said; "forgive me for thus waylaying you—"

"Heavens, Launcelot! is anything the matter?" inquired the actress, at once smitten with the idea that there must be something amiss.

"I want to speak to you particularly," replied Osborne: "there is something on my mind—I feel that I cannot go to rest until I have told you everything—"

"Launcelot," interrupted Imogen, laying her hand upon his arm, and fixing her beautiful blue eyes upon his countenance, while the expression of her own features indicated a deep anxiety,— "you are not going to tell me that you have ceased to love me? nor that something has occurred which must compel us to separate? I could endure almost anything but such tidings as these!"

"Oh, Imogen!" exclaimed Osborne in an impassioned tone, "it were impossible that I should ever cease to love you!—and heaven forbid that circumstances should ever separate us!"

"Now my mind is relieved," said Miss Hartland, with a sigh that showed how the weight of suspense was indeed lifted from off her bosom: and she added, "A thousand thanks, dear Launcelot, for those assurances! But still it must be something important—"

"Imogen," he said, in a hesitating tone, "may I accompany you?—or is it too late—and do you fear that I shall compromise you?"

"What care I for all the world in comparison with *you*, Launcelot?" interrupted Imogen. "So long as I possess your good opinion, it is sufficient for me. Come."

She took his arm with that air of confidence, so bewitchingly ingenuous, which the woman who loves for the first time is ever wont to display towards the object of her attachment. A sense of indescribable rapture thrilled through the heart of the young patrician, as he felt the arm leaning

upon his own and met the upturned gaze of his beautiful companion; for it seemed to him as if she had become doubly dear to him since she had just given that proof, so artless and yet so signal, that he was all in all to her.

Fanny, the maid-servant, was in the habit of sitting up for the return of her mistress from the theatre; and as she opened the front door she gave a momentary look of surprise on finding that Miss Hartland was accompanied by Launcelot Osborne. Imogen did not however notice it, or care to observe it; while Launcelot himself of course said nothing. Supper was spread upon the table in the neat parlour: the child had long ago sunk off to sleep in its little couch up-stairs.

"You need not sit up, Fanny," said Imogen, in the most innocent and artless manner in the world, as she tossed off her bonnet and shawl. "Mr. Osborne will stay and take some supper with me; and I will presently let him out."

Fanny's countenance brightened up; for she knew her mistress well enough to perceive in a moment that she was not playing any hypocritical part; and as she had been assured that Mr. Osborne was paying his addresses to her mistress with the most honourable intentions, though under circumstances of caution and privacy, she thought that it was not very strange, after all, that he should escort Miss Hartland home from the theatre, or that having so done, he should enter the house to take a morsel of supper in her company.

Fanny retired: Launcelot and Imogen were now alone together in the parlour. Neither needed any refreshments; for the former was too anxious to disburden his mind of what he had to say—and the latter was too eager to learn what important matters had made him seek her at that late hour. And perhaps also they were both too much absorbed in the pleasure of being in each other's company to care for all the possible delights of the table, even if the most splendid banquet had been spread before them instead of the comparatively frugal repast that was there.

"I should have come to you this afternoon, or in the evening before the performance commenced," began Launcelot, "only that I knew you had to be at the rehearsal, and therefore I had no opportunity of seeing you except at this late hour."

"What has transpired, Launcelot, since you were with me this morning?" asked Imogen anxiously.

"I will tell you. When I left you—it was at about noon—I returned home. My father had been inquiring for me—he was in the library, with my mother and sister—they were all much agitated—"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Imogen. "I foresee what is coming! That odious usurer—"

"Yes—he had written in a peremptory and even menacing strain. My father implored me to lose no time in calling at Hatton Garden. I went—in a state of mind which you may conceive, Imogen, but which I cannot describe—"

"Dearest, dearest Launcelot!"—and she pressed his hand to her bosom. "Is the love that you bear for me destined to be fatal to your happiness!"

"Oh, speak not thus, sweet Imogen! How can that be fatal to my happiness which constitutes

it? And Oh! I possess a noble-minded and magnanimous friend in Selina Casey. I told you that I thought she was different from the rest of the family to which she belongs:—but, Oh! I little expected to find a being so replete with the loftiest sentiments and most generous ideas as she!"

Launcelot then proceeded to give Imogen Hartland the details of all that had occurred between himself and the usurer's daughter; and the reader may imagine with what varying sentiments of interest Imogen listened to the narrative. At one moment the tears ran down her beautiful cheeks, as Osborne repeated all the feeling and eloquent language in which Selina had declared that she would not permit him to sacrifice his own happiness to any worldly or selfish considerations; and when the young patrician ceased speaking, Imogen threw herself into his arms, murmuring, "Oh, Launcelot, you are advancing up to the very brink of ruin for my sake!—aye, and not *alone* are you proceeding to the verge of the precipice—but you are dragging your parents and your sister along with you—and all this for my sake, I repeat!"

"No—not for your sake only, dearest, dearest Imogen!" he replied, pressing her again and again to his heart; "but for the sake also of that love which I bear you, and for mine own happiness! It is not only because you love me, dearest Imogen, so truly and fondly; but it is also because on my own side I feel that I cannot live without you. But let us not despair! There is a little star of hope shining in the distance—I mean those last words which Selina spoke to me—vague, indefinite, and uncertain though they were—"

"But if that hope should be disappointed, Launcelot," interrupted Imogen, "what is to be done? One short week! Oh, my beloved! I almost fear that I ought to say something for your sake—I ought to perform a duty—to make a certain sacrifice—aye, and not only to make one on my own account, but also to dictate one on your's!"

"Good heavens, what mean you, Imogen?" cried Launcelot: for while she was speaking she gently and gradually disengaged her form from his embrace—she withdrew her waist from his circling arm—she released his hand from the clasp in which her own had held it—she retired to a little distance upon the sofa where they were seated. "What mean you?" he again asked, with rapid and excited utterance.

"I mean, dear Launcelot," she resumed, in a low tremulous voice, and with an expression of countenance which seemed to indicate that despair was taking possession of her soul,—“I mean that we ought to separate—that this dream of love and bliss cannot last—it is too beautiful and too elysian to belong any more to the condition of earthly beings!"

"Imogen! Imogen! You would not—you could not tell me to separate from you?" and Launcelot extended his arms towards her.

"Listen for a moment," she said, waving him back by a gesture; and her look grew more placid, while her voice became firmer, as if she were inspired by a growing sense of duty. "The happiness of an entire family is at stake!—the prosperity of your father, your mother, your sister—aye, and your own—"

"Imogen!" interrupted Launcelot vehemently,

"much as I love and revere my parents—fondly attached as I am to my dearest sister Avaline—yet I love thee incomparably more! Oh! it may be a crime thus to feel and thus to speak: but I am not the master of my actions or my thoughts! Were I only concerned there is no sacrifice that I would not make to ensure the welfare and happiness of all whom I love!—aye, even to being stretched upon the rack, or to undergo any other hideous tortures that ever were invented by demon-hearted men! But there is no such sacrifice to be made!"

"Yes!" exclaimed Imogen, rising up from her seat; "sacrifice your love for me to your duty towards your parents!—sacrifice it, I say, Launcelet—and in so doing, take to yourself all the merit of enduring the hideous tortures to which you have alluded!"

"Do I not tell you, Imogen," replied Launcelet, "that if it regarded me alone, I would do this? But you, my well-beloved—you who are the angel of my life—how can I think of plunging *you* into the vortex of unhappiness! Oh, I know that you love me——"

"Yes, Launcelet," answered Imogen, tremulously: "too well—too well to suffer you to commit a thousand follies for my sake! Oh, you would feel like one accursed!"—and she shuddered visibly as she spoke—"if you were to bring down destruction on the heads of your parents and your sister!"

"Now, hear me, Imogen," said Launcelet; and he also rose from his seat, while he spoke in a voice that had a terrible seriousness for one naturally so amiable and mild as he. "No one is more impressed with his filial duty than I: no one is more sensible of all that he owes to kith and kindred! But I take God to witness that I will *not* sacrifice your heart's happiness, Imogen, for these selfish considerations that would send me perforce as Selina's bridegroom to the altar! What! for the sake of acquiring the cross that shall restore the fortunes of my family, am I to be thus sacrificed? It was not I who ruined those fortunes! Or to save the name of Trentham from disgrace am I to be offered up as a victim? It was not I who brought the black clouds of menace and danger to gather above the noble house of Trentham! Then wherefore should I be called upon to plunge a dagger into your heart, Imogen—to bring a curse and a blight upon your existence—to poison the very springs of your life—and to drag you down perhaps in sorrow to an untimely grave? For if you love me to the extent that you have declared, and as I love you, such would be your fate! And as for mine own—God help me, Imogen, if I be compelled to work all this tremendous mischief against thee!"

He sank upon the sofa, exhausted by his feelings; and Imogen, weeping and sobbing—full of indescribable emotions—fell upon her knees by his side. She took his hand—she pressed it to her lips—her eyes gazed earnestly and lovingly up at him through her tears—her bosom was heaving and swelling like the billows of the tumultuous ocean.

"Launcelet, Launcelet," she murmured, "I do indeed love you!—heaven knows how fondly I love you! But——"

"We will never separate, Imogen!" he cried,

in an impassioned tone; and the next instant she was clasped in his arms. "I love you before all the world!—ten thousand times more than parents or kindred!—and I swear that your happiness only will I consult! What! to bring torrents of tears from those beautiful blue eyes—to let the floods of weeping furrow these damask cheeks, so soft and warm—or to think that these sweet lips which I kiss thus—and thus—should ever writhe in anguish instead of wreath in smiles! Oh, no! no!—never! never!"

Then again and again did he press the superb creature to his heart: he imprinted a thousand tender kisses upon her face—and she gave them back again.

"Oh, Launcelet," she murmured, "you have shown to me that your love is the strongest and most devoted that ever yet was cherished in the heart of man; and I will prove to you that mine is the tenderest and the most devoted which ever harboured in the soul of woman! Illimitable are the sacrifices which you are making for my sake; and there are none which I will refuse to make for yours! I will be your slave, if in such capacity I can serve you! Oh! no thought will I have but for you!—your will shall be my law—and my greatest happiness shall consist in obeying you with the blindest confidence! I am your's, Launcelet—your's in all the strength of this first love which my soul has ever known!"

"And I am your's, Imogen,—your's—your's only!" replied Launcelet; "and I take heaven to witness that never by deed or word of mine shall the teardrop be drawn from those eyes or the smile he crushed upon those lips!"

It was thus in terms the tenderest and the most fervid, that the lovers pledged themselves to each other. They were alone—the night was advancing—silence was around them—all the circumstances in which they were placed were peculiar—and they were frail and fallible like other mortals. Their love was deep and impassioned: they felt as if they were indeed all in all to each other; and while on the one hand Launcelet had vowed to make every earthly sacrifice for Imogen, she on her part felt that there was none which she could refuse to offer as a proof of her own devotion. Need we say more?—unless it be to add that this was no deliberate seduction on Launcelet Osborne's part, nor was it a meretricious surrender on the part of Imogen: but it was the almost inevitable result of the circumstances which surrounded them and the influences which had been brought to bear upon this young loving couple.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MYSTERIES OF A TOILET.

A fortnight had elapsed since Ethel had entered upon her situation at Hendon Court; and she found that Martha Crediton's assurance had been fulfilled to the very letter, that apart from the *one* drawback she would experience perfect happiness under Lady Langport's auspices. She was treated with kindness and consideration—as an equal by her ladyship, and as a mistress by the domestics. All her wants seemed to be anticipated; and on two or three occasions she received an intelligible

though delicately conveyed hint that the future welfare of herself and her child should prove the care of Lady Langport.

During this fortnight her ladyship invited no company to the house,—observing that “she would wait until her friend Ethel became more settled and found herself perfectly at home ere she would ask her to mix in gay society.” Several visitors of distinction however called daily at the Court; and Ethel found that Miss Crediton was again right when she informed her that all her ladyship’s acquaintances were of a select description. We should remark that Ethel had succeeded in discovering that Lady Langport was not acquainted with the Duke and Duchess of Arleigh; and thus one very serious cause of apprehension which she had at first entertained was removed from her mind.

We must now speak somewhat more in detail of Lady Langport herself. She was in reality an old woman of nearly sixty, though she contrived, by the most exquisite refinement of a particular art, to give herself the air of a person of little more than half that age. Every species of cosmetic was to be found in the dressing-room. We have spoken of the toilet-table that was placed near the window, and the large bureau of walnut-wood very handsomely carved which stood opposite. The drawers of the table and the drawers of the bureau were always kept carefully locked. And no wonder!—for when their contents were displayed, they made such an assemblage of jars, bottles, gallipots, phials, boxes, and canisters, that it might seem as if it were purposed to convert that dressing-room into an apothecary’s shop. The labels upon some of those bottles and cases indicated that her ladyship’s cosmetics came from various parts of the world,—from Oriental climes as well as from the cities of the West—from Cairo and Constantinople as well as from Paris and Brussels.

There were jars and large bottles full of perfumes; for her ladyship took fragrant baths morning and evening. There were chemical preparations to dye the hair a perfect black, without staining the skin; and there were oils and castonades, pomatums and other unguents, to give it that gloss which should conceal the dye and simulate a natural lustre. There was the Oriental *rusma*—a stroug depilatory which removed that down from the upper lip and those hairs from the chin which are apt to appear upon the countenances of elderly females. There was the Damascus nut which gave to the eye-brows and eye-lashes that lustrous blackness which was consistent with a youthful appearance; there was the Egyptian *Kahol*, an impalpable powder which when thrown into the eyes themselves gave them a clearness and a brilliancy remaining unimpaired and undimmed for many hours. Then too there was the enamel for the complexion, in addition to an infinite variety of washes, lotions, kalydors, and other cosmetics for the beautifying and purification of the skin. There was the Parisian carmine, or rouge, which if laid on with artistic carefulness, would defy the penetration of even the most scrutinising observer to distinguish its artificial existence from the natural tint of the carnation on the cheeks of healthy youthfulness. There likewise was the Moorish preparation for the lips—a crimson salve, which if used once or

twice a-day (once being generally sufficient) imparts to them the hue of a vivid scarlet, together with the appearance of a wholesome moisture. We must not forget to observe that there was the Oriental *henna*, to bestow a delicate pinkish tint upon the nails; and we might mention numerous other cosmetics and appliances if we were to enter more minutely into the mysteries of all the auxiliaries and artificial aids that were associated with this lady’s toilet.

We may proceed to state that in her earlier years she had been eminently beautiful, and her profile was perfect. By the loss of her teeth her mouth would have fallen in: but by the presence of a complete set of false teeth the regularity of the profile was preserved. These teeth were made in Paris: her ladyship possessed half-a-dozen sets, and each set cost about three hundred pounds. Never was the triumph of the succedaneous art of dentistry more complete than in the present instance. It was impossible to discern that those two rows of ivory were not the natural growth of the wearer’s mouth; and when they were shining between the moist vivid scarlet of the lips, there seemed to be all the delicious freshness of youth in that mouth.

When Lady Langport represented herself to Ethel Trevor as a skeleton divested of its flesh, or a mummy unwrapped from its bandages, she scarcely exaggerated the hideous truthfulness of her deplorable condition. Indeed this condition was, as we have described it, that of a living skeleton—a withered, toothless hag, loathsome to contemplate—every bone visible beneath the skin, which just covered it without the intervention of any flesh to yield to the pressure! Yes—wrinkled and withered she was; but in respect to her face the process of enamelling filled up the lines, indentations, and furrows traced by age; while the application of a pearly powder most artistically laid on, concealed the blueish tint around the eyes. This, together with the dazzling brightness imparted by the *Kahol* to those eyes, brought them out as it were into relief, and prevented them from appearing sunken or haggard. Then, as for the cheeks, the carnation tint redeemed them from hollowness:—or, at all events, by means of the aids which we have just described, those eyes looked less sunken and those cheeks less hollow than they actually were.

Lady Langport’s hands were, as we have already said, thin and lank,—though by means of the same cosmetics and auxiliaries that were used for the face, the withered, wrinkled appearance of old age in respect to those hands was diminished if not altogether changed. She however usually wore gloves: but when it was seen how dazzlingly fair were those hands, and of what a pellucid pinkness the almond-shaped nails appeared to be, the eye of the observer speedily ceased to dwell upon the leanness and thinness that might for a moment have attracted him. Lady Langport’s feet were excessively high-arched, long, and very narrow; so that it was easy to give to them an admirable shapeliness. By the very configuration of those feet in respect to the height of the instep and its arching gracefulness, her steps were elastic. Though reduced to a mere skeleton she was not physically weak; and thus she was perfectly upright in figure—she had tutored herself to maintain a statuesque elegance of deportment—and she

moreover walked at a quick pace; so that in her gait, her movements, and her gestures, there was a lightness as well as an ease and a flexibility which tended to maintain the illusion in reference to her age.

In respect to her toilet, she invariably wore her dresses ascending to the throat, with long sleeves reaching to her wrists. There were no cosmetics nor aids by which she could conceal the hideous leanness of her breast if she half-bared it, or the skeleton-like thinness of her arms if she wore them nude. But she always dressed in a certain style which impressed the mind with an idea that there was a scrupulous modesty in those evening toilets where the bosom and the arms were covered as well as in the morning ones. Everybody fancied that the folds and plaits of those robes of silk, or satin, or *moire antique*, covered the contours of a well-developed bust, and that the sleeves enclosed plump and well-rounded arms. The reader now knows the reverse; and he has obtained a sufficient insight into the mysteries of Lady Langport's toilet to be aware how she gave fullness to her skeleton shape and counterfeited the appearance of that glorious *emboupoint* which might so well have belonged to a gay and buxom widow of five-and-thirty.

Apart from the terrible wasting away of her ladyship's form—apart, we mean, from that fearful atrophy which was in itself a cruel and hideous malady—she enjoyed excellent health. She was never seriously ill; and if occasionally indisposed, she knew how to act as her own physician. Her appetite was voracious; and she was frequently compelled to smuggle food privately up into her chamber that she might thus partake of it by stealth. Was it a tapeworm which devoured all the nutriment that ought to have gone into her system, and that required for its own reptile-like existence the wholesome juices that ought to have passed into the circulation of this poor lady's blood? We know not what it was that had reduced her to the sapless, withered, emaciated creature that she was. But if she ate voraciously, and by this fact might encourage the idea that she was possessed of a tapeworm, she was very careful in respect to drinking. She seldom or never drank wine unmixed with water—and then only in very moderate quantities. The truth was, the influence of alcoholic beverages very soon reached her head and obfuscated the brain; whereas there was no person on the face of the earth who had more need to keep the head clear and the brain collected. She was a living lie—a walking counterfeit—a breathing, moving cheat; and therefore she was ever compelled to be upon her guard! The least inadvertence might raise suspicion, and ultimately lead to exposure in reference to the stupendous secret that was concealed beneath all those cosmetics and auxiliaries, those aids and those artificialities, those paddings and waddings, those numerous under-garments and countless layers of corset!

Now, was vanity the sole cause which influenced Lady Langport in leading an existence alike strange and terrible, false and inconvenient? Was this the sentiment that could alone account for so much self-martyrdom?—those weary hours spent in the morning in making up a being whom it took almost as many hours to pull to pieces

again at night! But if vanity were the motive power, of what use was it? Lady Langport did not seek to captivate a heart—to obtain a husband or a lover: it was obvious that she had done with all such tender sentiments as these. But if it were not vanity, what other motive could there be? Ethel could discern none. Almost every day did she ask herself the questions which we have just been putting; and she could find no other solution than this—"It must assuredly be vanity!"

If, then, it was vanity, of what a singular nature!—surpassing any other phase of that feminine weakness which had ever come within the cognizance of Ethel! That a woman of sixty might use all the advantages of the toilet to make herself look fifty, was natural enough, and was indeed an every day occurrence: but that a woman should be sufficiently bold to say to her toilet, "By your means I will strike off almost half my age!" *this* was the perplexing point for Ethel's mind. Or to go further,—that Lady Langport should endeavour to conceal as much as possible her horrible emaciated condition, was likewise conceivable and natural enough: but that she should simulate the possession of buxom beauty, and an almost juvenile freshness of charms, was indeed sufficient to make Ethel marvel!

One evening, when Mrs. Trevor had been about a fortnight at Hendon Court, she lounged into the large dining-room,—being partly impelled by a sentiment of curiosity to contemplate the portraits which had so much attracted her attention the first day she was beneath that roof. She had not seen them since that occasion, and she thought she should like to view once more that portrait which represented Lady Langport. Curtains had been suspended to gilt rods in order to be drawn over the portraits and protect them at such times when the dining-room was not in use. Ethel therefore drew aside those draperies, and began to contemplate the portraits which they revealed.

"How long ago could they have been painted?" she asked herself. "That Lord Langport was about forty years of age when his lineaments were transferred to the canvass, is evident enough. But how old was her ladyship? Eighteen or twenty, according to *those* appearances!" and Ethel fixed her eyes earnestly on the portrait. "Ah, but appearances are so deceitful! It is impossible to surmise!"

At this moment Ethel heard footsteps approaching from behind; and glancing quickly round, she beheld Lady Langport. Colouring deeply, Ethel said, "I hope, my dear madam, I have been guilty of no indiscretion——"

"Indiscretion, my dear friend?" cried her ladyship. "Oh, no, no! How could you possibly dream of such a thing? Have I not told you over and over again that you are to look upon this house just the same as if it were your own—to go whithersoever you will——"

"You are very kind," said Ethel: and then, with an air of the most ingenuous frankness, she added, "I only was afraid you might think it impertinent curiosity on my part——"

"Silly girl! silly girl!" interrupted her ladyship gaily: "impertinent curiosity indeed! So now tell me, my dear, whether you wish to ask



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me any questions in reference to those portraits? Come, speak out!"

"His lordship, I believe," said Ethel, "has been dead about fifteen years—at least so Miss Crediton gave me to understand——"

"True," said her ladyship. "That portrait was painted in the very same year that he died. You see that he was in the prime of life—he had just completed his fortieth birthday."

Ethel's eyes travelled from the portrait of the nobleman to that of the lady. There was a silence of some moments; and then her ladyship whispered in a very low tone in Ethel's ears, "My portrait was taken at the same time. That was fifteen years ago, I repeat. I was then nearly forty-five, and consequently between four and five years older than my husband. I know what you would say. That portrait represents me as a girl of eighteen or twenty!"—she paused, and then added in a tone which was only just audible, "I was almost as hideous a wretch *then*, Ethel, as I am at this present moment!"

Mrs. Trevor started; for she at once comprehended, from the announcement just made, that Lady Langport must have therefore been in her husband's lifetime a living lie and cheat as she was now.

"I deceived him—yes, I deceived him," her ladyship proceeded to say: and it was still in a very low voice that she spoke.

Again Ethel started, and turned her looks inquiringly upon her patroness.

"Ah! but the deception was mutual," rejoined her ladyship,—“yes, mutual! We were both to blame! There was vanity matched against cupidity!—diamond cut diamond! Never was there a more striking illustration of that saying!—You would like to know my history, Ethel?"

"I have no undue curiosity——"

"Oh, but I am sure you would wish to learn it!—and you shall. Come with me."

Ethel lingered for a moment to draw the draperies over the two portraits; and then she accompanied Lady Langport from the dining-room. Her ladyship led the way up-stairs: Ethel thought that she was about to pass into one of the drawing-rooms; but instead of doing so, she continued to mount the next staircase. On reaching the second landing, Lady Langport did not enter her own chamber as Ethel fancied she was now about to do: but she stopped at the entrance of a passage in another direction, and at the end of which was a door, leading Ethel knew not whither—for when she was shown over the house, this particular door had not been opened,—an incident that the young lady had since forgotten.

"Go to my dressing-room, dear Ethel," said her patroness, "and bring me a key which you will find hanging just inside the bureau."

Lady Langport always kept about her own person the keys of the toilet-table and the walnut-wood bureau: she now handed Ethel the latter key—and the young lady hastened to the dressing-room to fulfil the request that had been made. She quickly returned, with the particular key for which she had been sent; and Lady Langport now proceeded to open the door at the extremity of the passage.

"Start not, my dear friend, at what you will see," she said, in a low tone, as she stood with her fingers upon the handle.

She then pushed the door open; but in spite of the injunction that had been given, Ethel *did* start—for the first object which met her eyes was a coffin standing upon tressels. It was in a very small room, and appeared to serve as a sort of lumber-closet; for there were several trunks, pieces of old bedsteads, and other articles of furniture there;—but the *one* conspicuous object was that which so *ominously* met Ethel's regards in the manner just described.

"Do not be timid nor foolish, my dear friend," said her ladyship, with a smile wherein a certain degree of solemn mournfulness mingled with its wonted amiability. "Come in, and shut the door."

Ethel did as she was requested; and then she glanced with a look of shuddering inquiry from the coffin to her patroness.

"Are we not all mortal, my sweet friend?" asked Lady Langport, in a low mild voice; "and must we not all die sooner or later? Has not some celebrated French author remarked that we are all condemned to death, with reprieves of a longer or shorter date? Well, then, wherefore should we hesitate to look upon the preparations for our own obsequies?"

"What does your ladyship mean?" inquired Ethel, again shuddering. "That coffin——"

"Is mine. Yes—it is for me, when my mortal career shall have reached its end! And that, dear Ethel," added her ladyship, now heaving a profound sigh, "cannot in the course of nature be far off. Ah! you think, perhaps, that this sigh indicates a regretfulness to leave the world which is but little consistent with the philosophy of the remarks that I was ere now making. But I will confess that the world has its charms for me——"

"And yet, perhaps," said Ethel, "it is after all as well that we should occasionally—aye, frequently, have our attention directed to the solemn certainty of our fate——"

"It was not for so moral a purpose," interrupted Lady Langport, "that I caused this coffin to be made secretly, in some low neighbourhood of London, and had it brought here privily in the middle of the night, so that there is not a single domestic in my household who suspects that it is beneath this roof."

"For what purpose, then," asked Ethel, "if not for occasional contemplation——"

"Cannot you guess, my friend? It is that so soon as I shall be no more, my cold corpse may be at once consigned to this long narrow tenement, so that there may be no need nor excuse for undertakers to come and measure me——"

"Enough! enough!" interrupted Ethel, who was almost shocked at the idea that this woman was suffering her vanity to extend itself even beyond the limits of this life, and cross the threshold of the tomb!

"Nay, but I have a promise to exact from you, dear Ethel," said Lady Langport,—“a solemn promise! I do not ask you to bind yourself by an oath—because I know that you are all faithfulness and integrity, and you will keep your word. Promise me, therefore, that if you are with me when I shall be no more, you will keep away from my remains the vultures that would otherwise fasten upon them—that you yourself will lay me out—and that you will with the least possible delay consign me to this coffin——"

so that my terrible secret," added her ladyship, in a voice that became subdued and hollowed as she spoke, "may be entombed with me!"

There was something so horrible, or at least so awful in the terms of the speech thus addressed to Ethel, that she recoiled with a ghastly countenance from her patroness: and then she was smitten with a sensation that resembled a remorse, as she caught the look of indescribable anguish that settled itself upon the features of that lady.

"Pardon me, dearest madam! pardon me!" cried Ethel, grasping Lady Langport's hand: "pardon me if even for a single instant I seemed to hesitate! But now, when I assure you after a few moments of deliberation that your injunctions shall be complied with, you may place all the greater reliance thereon than if I had inconsiderately and precipitately rushed forward to give my answer!"

"Dear Ethel," murmured Lady Langport, "I felt convinced that I possessed a sincere friend in you! You have spoken with so much genuine fervour that I will not ask you to ratify your promise with an oath."

"And yet if needful to ensure your peace of mind," said Ethel, "I will do so;—and therefore without any further hesitation, I swear that if I should be with you at the time when your Maker summons you into his presence, I will to the best of my ability superintend your obsequies according to your instructions."

Lady Langport made no answer: but she bent upon her fair companion a look of indescribable gratitude. They then passed forth from the room containing the coffin; and they descended to one of the sitting-apartments, where the curtains were now drawn and the lamp was lighted, for the dusk of evening had by this time closed in.

"I promised to tell you my history, Ethel," said Lady Langport, after an interval of silence and meditation both on her side and on that of her companion; "and I will fulfil my word. It is an extraordinary narrative and contains one incident so remarkable—But let me not anticipate!"

"If the narration of this history will cause your ladyship the slightest pain," said Ethel, in her kind, gentle voice and with her sweet looks of a ministering angel, "I would not for the world that any little sentiment of curiosity on my part should be gratified at such a price."

"It is impossible, Ethel, that situated as I am—living under such circumstances," replied Lady Langport, "my former existence can be looked back upon with the utmost complacency. No!—this is impossible! Besides, methinks that when we were just now in the dining-room, contemplating the portraits, I let slip a few syllables which startled you at the moment: I spoke of deception on my side—deception also on that of my late husband!—and for my own sake I must now explain to you in what that deception consisted. I will therefore tell you my history, Ethel."

Her ladyship paused and reflected for a few moments: then she drew forth a little bunch of keys which she invariably carried about her own person; and indicating one of the keys, she pointed to a piece of furniture at the extremity of the apartment—a species of *console* richly inlaid and ornamented.

"Open the drawer in that *cheffonier*, Ethel," she said; "and bring me the book which you will find there."

The young lady did as she was directed. The book, which was very handsomely bound, had the word *Album* upon it; and it was one of the large quarto size usually characterizing lady's scrap-books. She handed it to her patroness, who opened it upon the table; and first of all she turned over some beautiful drawings in water-colours and some pages containing pieces of poetry. At length a portrait was displayed, which instantaneously made Ethel exclaim with a start, "Ah, your ladyship?"

"No," said Lady Langport. "Examine it well."

Ethel took the volume and contemplated the portrait with attention. It was in water-colours, and beautifully executed. It represented a young lady whose age might be about eighteen or twenty, and who was half reclining in a large easy chair in a morning *deshabillée*. The countenance was exceedingly beautiful, yet with a certain expression which Ethel could not quite understand, but which a more experienced eye would have perceived to be a soft voluptuousness bordering even upon sensuousness. And now, as Ethel surveyed it with attention, she remarked that though the profile bore a striking resemblance to that of Lady Langport—and although there was a certain look about the face of this portrait which reminded her of the large picture in the dining-room—yet it became evident that they did not represent the same person. For in Lady Langport's portrait the hair was black, and the eyebrows, though thickly pencilled, were well arched: whereas in this little water-colour portrait in the Album, the hair was brown, and the brows, also strongly marked, were nevertheless by no means highly raised; and this perhaps was the only defect in a face which otherwise would have been of faultless beauty.

And as Ethel still dwelt upon that beautifully executed portrait, she remarked that the hair was drawn to represent the most redundant luxuriance and that it undulated in rich glossy waves. The brows were many shades darker than the hair, and the eyes were darker still. The nose was beautifully formed; the mouth was of corresponding perfection; and the configuration of the countenance was oval. In respect to figure, the drawing conveyed the impression of a somewhat voluptuous fullness; for the draperies were so disposed as to afford a glimpse of a luxuriantly developed bust. At the bottom of the portrait some turtle-doves were represented as billing and cooing amongst roses, as if illustrating the beautiful oriental legend of the Loves of the Bulbul and the Gul;—and below the doves, at the foot of the page, appeared the name of MILDRED.

"What think you of that portrait?" asked Lady Langport, after she had afforded Ethel a sufficient opportunity for contemplating it with attention.

"At the first glance I thought it was intended for your ladyship: but now I perceive that this could scarcely have been. And yet there is a certain expression—a certain air—something that one would be apt to regard as a family likeness—"

"Ah!" interjected her ladyship; and then after

a few moments' hesitation, she added in a lower voice, "You are right, Ethel—you are right—You are gazing upon the portrait of—of—my daughter."

"Your daughter?" repeated Ethel: and then recollecting how her ladyship had informed her, on the very first day of their interview, that all her children had gone down into the grave, she sighed and bent a deeply compassionating look upon her patroness.

"Restore that volume to the place whence you took it," said Lady Langport; "for now that you have seen Mildred's portrait, I will without further delay enter upon my own strange romantic history."

The Album was returned to the *console*—the drawer was locked—the bunch of keys was restored to Lady Langport's keeping; and Ethel prepared herself to listen to the narrative which will be found in the ensuing chapter.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

LADY LANGPORT'S HISTORY

"You already know that I am close upon my sixtieth year. It is a long time to look back to my youthful period; and the retrospect cannot be otherwise than accompanied by many a bitter pang. Perhaps you have not altogether fathomed my true character, Ethel!—perhaps you have not entirely comprehended my besetting sin—the vice, the weakness—the foible, the failing—I scarcely know how to denominate it—which has exercised so vast an influence over my entire life. Its name is however expressive enough. It is Vanity. As a girl I was exceedingly beautiful. I was an only daughter—the darling of doting parents, who spoilt me. Every one told me that I was beautiful, until my head was completely turned with this incessant adulation. My father was a country-gentleman, living in very tolerable style: he was a good easy man, exceedingly hospitable, and very careless in money matters. My mother belonged to the younger branch of some very grand aristocratic family; and though so excessively fond and indulgent in respect to myself, I am afraid that if I represent her in her true character, I must depict her as frivolous and narrow-minded, of a boundless extravagance, very proud of her high birth, and very supercilious towards those who were of an inferior degree. My father died when I was about fourteen or fifteen; and it then transpired that his pecuniary affairs were in a most desperate condition. His estates were mortgaged—heavy debts were claimed by wine-merchants, lawyers, and money-lenders; and as if nothing should be wanting to achieve the catastrophe, my mother's creditors, consisting of jewellers, linendrapers, and milliners, whom for years she had managed to keep quiet or to pacify with small payments, became clamorous for the settlement of their accounts. Everything was therefore seized and sold; and my mother—overwhelmed with shame and grief, unable to lift up her head amongst her former friends, and having nothing to hope for on the part of her own poor but proud family—retired with me to a

humble residence in a village far distant from the county where these misfortunes occurred.

"My mother had no moral courage to sustain her under the weight of adversity. Instead of striving to hear up against her evil fortune, she seemed to abandon herself willingly to despair. In me she found no consolation—but quite the reverse. She loved me as tenderly as ever—but not with the love that could teach her to summon all her fortitude to her aid and try to live for her daughter's sake: but it was with that doting blindness and weakness, and prostration of energy, which made her incessantly weep over me, wondering what was to become of her 'dear darling child!' She had fancied in the days of her frivolity and fond maternal vanity, that I should form some very high and grand matrimonial alliance: but now that we were completely down in the world, and had suddenly fallen from the higher circles of society, my mother was incessantly deploring the destruction of all her brilliant hopes in that respect. Thus, what with continued fretting, she brought herself to the very verge of the grave; and her medical attendant recommended her to remove to the sea-side that with change of air and scene there might be yet a chance of saving her life. We accordingly repaired to a watering-place, where after a lingering illness my poor mother breathed her last, leaving me at the age of sixteen an orphan and almost penniless.

"Amongst the very few acquaintances that we had formed at the watering-place, was a Mr. Malcolm. He was about thirty years of age at the time of which I am speaking—by no means good-looking, but of gentlemanly appearance, and of manners that were sufficiently agreeable although they had something in them which bespoke a business-like precision. He was the son of a wealthy merchant in London; and he was in partnership with his father. His mother was dead—he was an only child—and his present position was not only good, but his prospects were excellent. The mercantile firm traded chiefly in Baltic produce, and had established a branch at St. Petersburg in Russia. Edward Malcolm had been for the last five or six years superintending that branch: his health had suffered—and for its renovation he had returned to his native country. As I have already said, he was staying at the watering-place in Devonshire where my mother died; and I may now add that he displayed the greatest sympathy towards myself. He remained at the watering-place much longer than he had originally intended: his attentions soon became marked, though they were indeed most delicately paid, for I was wearing mourning for the parent whom I had only so recently consigned to the tomb. At length he made me an offer of his hand: and I accepted it. I was then barely seventeen years of age—friendless otherwise than in *his* friendship, and with but a slender purse, the bottom of which would in a short time be reached. What, then, could I do but accept Edward Malcolm's proposal? I did not love him—but I *liked* him. There was not the slightest romance in the feeling which I entertained towards him. I could have lived with him altogether as a friend or companion, without any emotion or desire beyond. I even reproached myself for egotism and interested motives at the very time when I gava

him an affirmative response. But I could not endure the thought of poverty—equally averse was I to the notion of toiling for my own bread. I loved to dress well, and to have leisure to attend to all the details of the toilet. The humiliations which had killed my mother, had by no means destroyed, but merely sobered down my own peculiar vanity. I thought that if I could not marry a title and wealth combined, I would at least secure the latter when the opportunity presented itself. I do not know that I actually reasoned deliberately and coolly in this strain with myself: but these were assuredly the influences under which I acted in consenting to accompany Edward Malcolm to the altar.

“He placed me for a few months as a boarder in a highly respectable family, so that our marriage should not follow with indecent haste upon my mother’s funeral. He visited me occasionally; and brought his father to be introduced. To be brief, when I was about seventeen I became Mrs. Malcolm. A year or two after our marriage the business of the mercantile firm compelled my husband to return to St. Petersburg, with every prospect of remaining there for a lengthened period. He generously left me to decide between the alternatives of accompanying him or remaining in London with my father-in-law. I did not like the old man: he was severe and exacting in his conduct towards me: he lived too in a dingy old house, which though spacious and well-furnished, was nevertheless exceedingly gloomy; and moreover I wanted to see the world. I therefore at once decided upon accompanying my husband: and my answer was given with a readiness which might very well be mistaken for the enthusiasm of love. He was delighted—for he loved me devotedly; and perhaps he beheld in me none of those faults of frivolity, vanity, and love of admiration, which I had more or less inherited from my mother, and which the clearer eyes of old Mr. Malcolm had not failed to discern. We set off for St. Petersburg; and arriving there, were speedily established in a handsome house which my husband hired and furnished.

“Years passed away. We had several children—but all died in their infancy with the exception of our first-born, Mildred; and *her* we succeeded in rearing. My husband was the kindest and best-tempered of men: he was fond and affectionate, without being uxorious; he was proud of his beautiful wife, without the fault of rendering himself or me ridiculous by the display of an excessive admiration. He was a reasonable and a sensible man; and there was not a particle of jealousy in his disposition. Neither did I give him any cause for such a sentiment. My own principles were naturally good, and my mind only required to experience the warmth of genial influences in order to develop those better qualifications which had lain dormant during the period of a spoiled childhood and a girlhood’s defective education. I studied my utmost to accomplish my husband’s happiness—and perhaps all the more sedulously because I felt that I did not love him in the true sense of the term: I merely liked, esteemed, and admired him. Besides, I experienced a boundless gratitude towards him for the many kindnesses he heaped upon me; and mine is no ungrateful heart. Thus nothing could exceed the happiness which in our married state we

enjoyed, and the only drawbacks to which were the loss of our children. In a pecuniary sense everything was most prosperous: my husband amassed wealth—and the death of his father, which occurred some few years after our marriage, left him the sole representative of the firm.

“We were now possessed of riches; and my husband consulted me on a very important point: that is to say, whether we should continue to reside at St. Petersburg, or whether we should return to England. I considered myself bound to pay the utmost deference to his will; and I expressed myself accordingly. He then informed me that it would assuredly suit him better to remain in Russia for three or four years longer—that certain mercantile operations which he had undertaken would then be effected—and that he should then be in a position to close his affairs in such a manner as to enable him to give up altogether the cares attendant upon the maintenance of a branch house in the Russian capital. In St. Petersburg we accordingly remained, moving in the best society, and with our daughter Mildred growing up in the possession of a beauty that promised to equal if not eclipse her mother’s. At length the period arrived when my husband’s affairs were to be wound up in Russia and our preparations for departure were to commence. We had then been married exactly twenty years, and our daughter Mildred was eighteen. She had never been to England: she was educated in St. Petersburg—but she spoke English with the utmost fluency; and she possessed every accomplishment requisite for the adornment of a young lady of her station and prospects. She was longing to visit England; and she was looking forward with anxiety to the day when we should bid farewell to the city on the banks of the Neva, when a sudden calamity occurred which plunged us into affliction. This was the death of my husband, who was smitten down by the lightning-stroke of apoplexy, and who having risen to all appearances in the full vigour of health in the morning, was a cold corpse at night.

“The shock occasioned by this incident threw me upon a sick bed, where I remained hovering between life and death for some months. Fever had supervened; and for weeks together my senses were lost in delirium. As I began slowly to recover, I became conscious of the attentions which I received from my daughter; and I was assured that I had likewise to thank the venerable physician whose skill, added to Mildred’s ministrations, had brought me back from the very verge of the grave. I found that in consequence of my husband’s sudden death the managing clerk of the London establishment had arrived in St. Petersburg; and he was waiting to submit to me a statement of the circumstances in which I had been left—for I should observe that my husband had made a will leaving me sole executrix. I likewise discovered, in his desk a paper recommending me, in case of his premature or sudden demise, to dispose of the business with the least possible delay—for which purpose I might fully trust Mr. Lea, the head clerk above alluded to. On going into my affairs with this gentleman, I found that I was left in possession of a very large fortune; and I empowered him to dispose of the London branch of the business. To be brief, Mr. Lea accomplished this matter in the course of a

few months; and I had every reason to be gratified with his straightforward conduct as well as with my pecuniary position.

"My recovery was slow: the winter had set in—and it was impossible that weak and feeble as I was, I could undertake a journey from St. Petersburg. I therefore yielded to the representations of Dr. Nevel, the physician to whom I have before alluded; and I abandoned all thoughts of leaving the Russian capital at that season. I however dreaded the effect which would be produced upon the mind of Mildred, and what a disappointment it would be when she learnt that for another six months her desire of visiting England must be postponed. But to my joy—and I must also add to my amazement, Mildred received the intelligence with the most perfect good-humour; she threw her arms round my neck, declaring that she could be happy anywhere with me, and imploring that I would not on her account precipitate a journey which might cause a relapse in my delicate condition. I wept tears of delight at this affectionate demonstration on Mildred's part; and Dr. Nevel, who entered the room at the time, passed some high compliments on her filial devotion and obedience.

"Nevel was a man past sixty years of age: he was one of the most celebrated practitioners in St. Petersburg, and was much patronised by the Russian Aristocracy. He had never attended at our house until the day when my husband was stricken with apoplexy; and then he was hurriedly sent for, his abode being nearer than that of the medical man who was wont to visit us. Thus, having once gained a footing in the house, Dr. Nevel was requested by Mildred to attend upon me; and so soon as I recovered the faculty of appreciating the circumstances in which I was placed, I felt deeply grateful that one so talented in his profession, so amiable in his manners, and so paternal in his conduct should become our friend as well as our physician.

"Time passed on: the winter was wearing away,—that long Russian winter of whose severity people in England can have no conception!—and my recovery was slow but sure. Months had elapsed during which nothing was said of a visit to England—until at length I one day casually observed to Mildred that we might soon think of making our preparations for leaving St. Petersburg altogether. She begged me not to think of hurrying, but to recover my health completely; and she added that for her part she felt herself to be so entirely *Russian*, that she did not on maturs reflection care whether she ever quitted a country wherein she almost considered herself to be naturalised. I was somewhat astonished at this discourse when I recollected her anxiety to visit England a twelvemonth back: but still I thought that she might be speaking with a kind consideration on my behalf. I think it must have been at about the period of which I am now speaking, that the portrait of my daughter was taken in water-colour 'by a lady who had formerly been her drawing preceptress, and who occasionally called to see her old pupil. The likeness was perfect: but, alas! little did I think at the time when those beautiful features were being delineated, there was so sad a fate in store for my unfortunate Mildred!

"Dr. Nevel was a married man; but he had no

children. His wife seemed to be just as amiable, good-tempered, and well-meaning as he himself was. She called upon me when I became convalescent, and thenceforth was a frequent visitress at the house. She professed to have taken a very great fancy for Mildred; and at this I was well pleased, inasmuch as I looked upon it as a change of scene for her to be enabled to visit the physician's wife. I encouraged her to pass her time with Madame Nevel as much as she thought fit; and her visits to that lady accordingly became more frequent and longer. Months had now elapsed—indeed nearly an entire year since I had crossed the threshold of my dwelling; and one forenoon I took it into my head to indulge myself with a drive in a droshky, or hired carriage. It was the warmest and most cheerful day that had yet succeeded that long gloomy night of winter: I felt in good spirits—and I thought to myself how surprised the Nevels would be if I were to make my appearance suddenly at their house and pay my respects on thus going abroad again for the first time! And Mildred too, who I knew had gone as usual to see Madame Nevel,—Oh! I pictured to myself the delight the dear girl would experience on beholding me ushered into the physician's drawing-room! Invalids—or rather, I should say, persons who have just recovered from long illnesses, frequently entertain little caprices of this kind,—childish whims which when in a stronger frame of mind they would possibly discard as ridiculous. Well, to be brief, I took my seat in the droshky, being well wrapped up with warm furs; and having made a short tour through the principal streets, I was just on the point of ordering the equipage to be driven to Dr. Nevel's, when I was suddenly struck by the idea that I beheld Mildred leaning upon the arm of a gentleman, and looking lovingly up into his countenance, as they both turned into a bazaar close by. I was so astounded that I sank back in the vehicle, which had just stopped in front of that bazaar in obedience to the check-string which the driver held and which I had pulled. While he dismounted from his seat, a thousand thoughts flashed through my brain. Could it possibly have been Mildred? or could I have been mistaken? But if it were she, who was the person escorting her? That he was tall, slender, and distinguished-looking, I had perceived at a glance; but I had not obtained more than a transient glimpse of his countenance, and did not think that I should be enabled to recollect him again. That the lady—whether Mildred or not—was gazing up with unmistakable tenderness into his face at the time, was a deeply-seated conviction in my mind. The driver of the droshky asked me three or four times what my instructions were, before I could so far gather my ideas or regain my self-possession as to be enabled to give him a response. I then desired him to let me alight; and I rushed rather than walked into the bazaar, the folding-doors of which at once closed behind me as I had seen them abruptly close behind her whom I had taken for Mildred and her companion. The bazaar was a spacious one, and consisted of three storeys. I rapidly made the tour of each floor: there were crowds of people, and in some instances it was almost with rudeness that I forced a passage amidst them. I beheld no Mildred—no one at all answering her description. There

was an entrance from another street; and it was therefore possible that she might have left the bazaar by that means of egress. I returned to the droshky, took my seat therein again, and ordered the man to drive to Dr. Nevel's.

"During the quarter of an hour that was occupied in proceeding thither, I thought to myself that if after all I should be mistaken, it would be outrageous to accuse Mildred unjustly, or to show that I had such little confidence in my own daughter as to rush to the immediate conclusion that she could be guilty of the grossest hypocrisy and indiscretion. I therefore calmed the violence of my emotions as well as I was able; and at all events I resolved to act with caution and prudence. In this frame of mind I alighted at Dr. Nevel's house. I was at once conducted up into the drawing-room; and there I found Mildred quietly seated over her embroidery, which she had brought with her, while Madame Nevel was reclining on a sofa near her. Both gave vent to an ejaculation of surprise on beholding me; and Mildred, throwing herself into my arms, exclaimed in accents of joy, 'Ah, what a surprise, dearest mother! what a surprise!'—I embraced her with effusion. Never, never had she seemed so dear to me! I was convinced I had wronged her most cruelly; and, Oh! what a relief it was to my mind to be enabled to greet her with these feelings! Having remained to chat with Madame Nevel for about half-an-hour, I rose to depart; and Mildred offered to accompany me. But inasmuch as it was yet early in the day, and she was accustomed to remain until a later hour with Madame Nevel, I did not choose to take her away with me. I bade her remain and return home in time to dress for dinner.

"With a light heart I descended to resume my seat in the droshky, when I found that I had left my fur cuffs in Madame Nevel's drawing-room, and I retraced my way up-stairs to fetch them. As in most Russian houses, there was an ante-room leading to the saloon by means of folding-doors. As I approached those doors, and was just on the point of opening one of them, I heard Madame Nevel say, 'Well, I declare, Mildred, I was at first quite frightened!'—'Oh, I could tell by my mother's looks,' responded Mildred, 'that nothing was the matter. But how all this is to end I know not, unless he fulfil his vow and make me his wife speedily.'—'My dear young friend, you must have patience,' answered Madame Nevel.—'Patience indeed!' cried Mildred, almost in accents of despair: 'how can you talk to me of patience when in another month I shall be utterly unable to conceal my situation any longer?'—'Trust to the Doctor, my dear friend,' rejoined Madame Nevel, 'to devise some excuse: he has immense influence with your mother; he will recommend her to go to England by herself, or visit Italy or the South of France, and leave you, my dear, behind, on the plea that as you are so completely acclimatised in this region of our's it would injure your health to remove you hence.'—'Ah, but why all these subtleties?' demanded Mildred. 'Tell me, I conjure you, have you any doubts of the fulfilment of his pledge? Tell me not that he is too highly placed to wed one so comparatively obscure as I! It was not thus he spoke when he declared his love and triumphed over my weakness! No, nor was it thus that

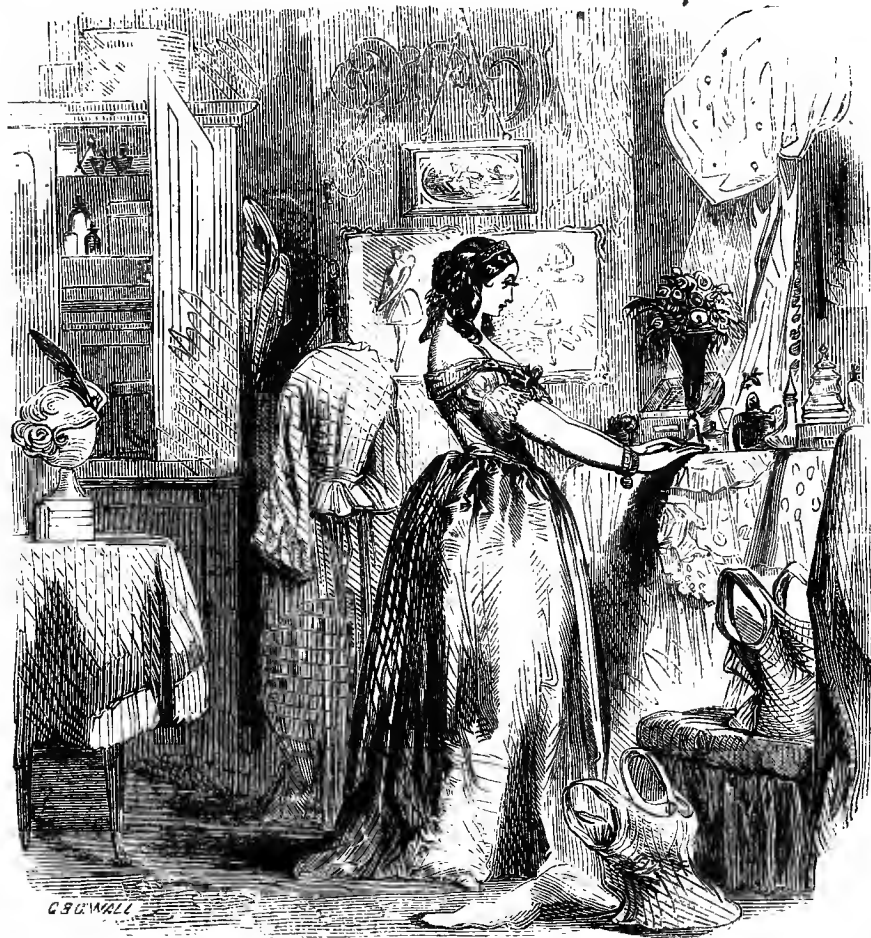
you or your husband spoke when you first introduced him to me. Oh, it smites me with the effect of a remorse when I think how I used to steal forth from the side of my poor mother's couch as she lay steeped in the torpor that followed the ravings of delirium, to meet—'—'Hush, my dear young friend!' interrupted Madame Nevel, 'do not reproach yourself.'—'Ah! methinks,' proceeded Mildred, 'I am now so steeped in hypocrisies, so thorough a mistress of dissimulation's art, that there must be something inherently base and vile in me that I am become such a proficient in duplicity in so short a time! But let that pass, and reply to me, Madame Nevel! Do you apprehend any possibility of further delay in the fulfilment of his vows?'—'You saw his lordship just now, my dear,' responded Madame Nevel: 'surely you must know what he said to you?'—'Ah! it is always the language of love and affection when we are together,' cried Mildred; 'and then I am so devoted to him that it is so easy for him to satisfy my fears for the time being, or to seal my lips with a kiss! As for the interview just now, it was so brief a one—he had some particular business on hand at the palace—that we merely walked from the bridge to the bazaar, which we traversed, and then we separated at once. Indeed it was fortunate that we did; for what would my mother have thought if she had come hither and found me out?'—'Did you not tell me,' asked Madame Nevel, 'that he is coming hither to meet you to-morrow? If so, we must take more than usual precautions, inasmuch as your mother is now getting about again.'—'It is not here that we are to meet to-morrow,' replied Mildred. 'It is on the Neva.'—'Ah, to be sure!' ejaculated Madame Nevel: 'I forgot the fancy-fair! Well, of course,' she added, with a chuckling laugh, 'you will go to the fair with the Doctor and me, and your mother will feel certain that you are under the escort of friends who would not for a moment suffer you to roam out of their sight, much less get into mischief.'—'Do not be ironical, Madame Nevel! do not make a mockery of the matter!' interrupted Mildred seriously; 'for I can assure you that scarcely even the immensity of my love reconciles me to the detestable part of a dissembler which I am now compelled to play towards my dear mother!'—'Why, my young friend, I was only jesting!' cried Madame Nevel. 'Do you think that the Doctor or I would lend ourselves to anything of this sort, unless it were under very peculiar circumstances?'—'I should hope not; nor unless it were with a certain conviction,' continued Mildred, 'that there are the most honourable intentions on one side as there has assuredly been the tenderest confidence on the other. However, to-morrow, precisely at four o'clock in the afternoon, I shall meet him; and then I will appeal to his goodness, his love, and his sense of honour, to delay not in making me his wife! Yes, I will appeal more energetically than I have yet done; and if he love me as fondly as his tongue incessantly proclaims, he will not torture me with excuse or evasion!'—'You are exciting yourself, my dear Mildred,' said Madame Nevel. 'Pray compose yourself. Let me ring for wine: a glass will do you good.'

"I now effected a precipitate retreat from the folding-doors. I did not enter the drawing-room to fetch my fur cuffs. I threw myself into the droszky in a state of mind that may perhaps better be conceived than described. I was half confounded, half distracted. What terrible revelations had met my ears! Mildred seduced—undone—in a way to become a mother! The Nevells no doubt the infamous tools and agents of some licentious nobleman of distinction! Oh, with what feelings had I listened to the terrible tale! How it was that I restrained myself from bursting into the apartment, overwhelming Mildred with reproaches, and inflicting summary vengeance upon the base wretch Madame Nevel, I do not know. But perhaps there was at the time in my thoughts the consideration that I had better proceed cautiously, and first of all ascertain who my child's seducer was. Indeed, when I grew comparatively calm—or, at least, when after my return home I was enabled to deliberate upon the entire circumstances of the case, I determined to adopt this prudential policy. And yet how difficult to dissemble my feelings when Mildred came back!—and Oh! as I looked in her face, and saw how eminently beautiful she was, I could not help mentally apostrophizing her a thousand times during the remainder of that day, to this effect, 'Art thou indeed a wanton and a hypocrite?'"

"At length I retired to rest—but still to ponder painfully and in sleeplessness the ruin that had overtaken my daughter. I now recollected a thousand little circumstances which previously seemed trivial, but which were now all significant in their connexion with the *one* tremendous fact. Her change of mind in respect to leaving St. Petersburg—the encomiums which Dr. Nevel had passed upon her filial devotion—the praises which she in her turn had accorded unto the physician—the growing frequency and increasing length of her visits to Madame Nevel—everything was now explained! Yes—and I even remember that it was her own hand which had added the turtle-doves to the water-colour portrait drawn by her late governess; so that I had now no doubt in my mind she had intended that portrait as a present to her seducer if I had not in my maternal love taken a sudden fancy to it and insisted upon having it to place in my Album.

"But let me not dwell upon trifling details; for I am now approaching a stupendous incident in my narrative. It is the custom at St. Petersburg—or at least was during the many years of my sojourn there, to hold a fancy-fair upon the frozen bosom of the Neva just before the arrival of the season for the breaking up of the ice. There was no particular date for the holding of the fair: it was annually regulated by the severity and duration of the cold weather, and it was considered as a sort of farewell to Winter and welcome to Summer. Madame Nevel sent a note early in the morning to Mildred, requesting her company to visit the fair. The billet was of course written for the purpose of blinding my eyes to what was going on; and I could scarcely prevent myself from springing in a rage at my daughter when with every appearance of deferential meekness she handed it to me, requesting my permission to accept the invitation. I however restrained myself and bade her go. The appointment she had made with her seducer was for four in the

afternoon. Slowly—Oh, how slowly passed the long hours until three o'clock!—and then, enveloping myself in my furs, I issued forth from the house, took my seat in a droszky, and repaired to the banks of the Neva. The dusk was already closing in; and myriads of lamps were springing as it were into light. The frozen surface of the river was covered with booths and wooden sheds—places of refreshment and of amusement—theatres and dancing saloons. It was a sort of carnival amongst the lower orders, who were dressed in masquerading costumes, picturesque and grotesque—droll or serious—in short, representing all the various features which are usual on such occasions. There was the usual sprinkling of police-officials, and numbers of the Imperial Guards strutting about in their green uniforms. There were ladies and gentlemen—nobles and the female members of the highest aristocracy—and I heard a whisper to the effect that some of the Princes of the Imperial family had also mingled in the busy scene. However, I had no interest in any circumstance of this kind: all my ideas were concentrated on *one* object. I passed amidst the crowd with a thick veil over my face, and in a short time I beheld the physician and his wife glancing behind them in a particular direction as they walked forward with a certain air of mystery. Keeping out of their view, I sped towards the same point in which their looks had travelled; and by aid of the brilliant illuminations, I presently discerned Mildred leaning upon the arm of the same tall gentleman in whose company I had seen her on the preceding day. I knew him by his gait and his height, for he was muffled in a cloak the fur collar of which almost completely concealed his countenance. A sudden sickness at the heart seized upon me—my brain reeled—and I staggered against the wooden wall of an amphitheatre. The spectacle of my daughter walking so familiarly with a paramour, and the doubt which existed whether he would make her an honourable woman, were almost too much for me to bear up against! To the little incident which I am just relating I was probably indebted for my life. For all of a sudden a fearful din, or rather a horrible assemblage and succession of sounds smote the ear. The cracking of the ice—the escape of the previously confined air, exploding with the roar of thunder or of cannon—the falling-in of wooden structures, mingled with the cries, the screams, the yells of horror and shrieks of anguish which indicated the terrible catastrophes. Long lines of illuminations, which had crossed the Neva in every direction, sank and disappeared from the view, so that darkness soon lent its added horrors to the scene. Ten paces from the spot where I halted the ice opened at my feet like a yawning gulf; and if I had not been held back by the force of my own feelings I should have perished. Oh, it was an awful scene! I cannot dwell upon it. Even now the brain reels and memory recoils from the retrospective contemplation. How I got away from that stage of horrors I know not: I had no distinct remembrance of anything definite until I found myself alighting from a vehicle at my own door. Had Mildred returned? 'No,' was the answer.—'Let some one speed at once to Dr. Nevel's house and inquire for her there!'—One of the servants went. Oh, the agonies of suspense that I en-



dured while he was gone! He came back: the physician and his wife were still absent from their own house. I could no longer bear up against the horror of my feelings: I sank into a swoon, which lasted for hours and resembled a trance. Meanwhile Mildred did not come back: neither did the physician and his wife return to their own home. They were amongst those who perished on that terrible occasion when upwards of a thousand souls were engulfed in the bosom of the Neva!

"When I could no longer close my eyes against the terrible truth nor shut out from my conviction that the very worst had happened, I grew comparatively calm; or at least I did not abandon myself to any more passionate paroxysms of grief. I almost began to think it was better that my daughter should have thus perished than have lived on in dishonour. Her secret had died with her, except in reference to myself; for there could be no doubt that her seducer, whoever he was,

No. 21.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

had been engulfed with her, and that the physician and his wife—the base intermediaries in the affair—had perished also. Time passed on—months went by—and I gradually became aware that I was growing thinner and thinner all over my body except in the face. I consulted a physician: but he candidly told me that he could do me no good, nor did he think this emaciation was the result of the illness through which I had passed. He recommended me to remain for the summer in St. Petersburg, and to spend the ensuing winter in the South of Europe. I resolved to follow his advice; but to my increasing alarm and horror I was getting thinner and thinner, although in every other respect my health seemed to improve rapidly, for I grew strong and vigorous, and my appetite augmented in the inverse ratio that the food I ate failed to benefit me.

"I must here observe that the Russian Government had ordered a report to be drawn up of the

accident on the Neva, and a list to be prepared as carefully as possible of all the persons who disappeared on that particular evening, and who might therefore be supposed to have perished in the catastrophe. Those who had missed relatives or friends on that special occasion, were enjoined to give the names of the lost ones at a particular Government Office. I proceeded to fulfil the melancholy task in respect to my poor child; and the following entry was made in the books:—*'Mildred Malcolm, daughter of Widow Malcolm and the late Edward Malcolm, merchant. English.'* A few days afterwards the report was published, when by some mistake or another the entry appeared as follows:—*'Mildred Malcolm, Widow of the late Edward Malcolm, merchant, English.'* As weeks went by I observed that the principal Continental newspapers, in recording the most notable names of those who perished by the accident on the Neva, mentioned my name as one of those who were lost. It was the same with the English newspapers, and then in due course came letters from Mr. Lea and other persons who happened to have known me, addressed to *Miss Malcolm*, and offering the sympathies of the several writers to that young lady on account of her mother's death!

"And while time was thus passing, and these little incidents were occurring, I was shrivelling away into a skeleton: but my countenance retained a marvellous juvenility of appearance. I was distressed beyond degree at the thought of the loathsome object I was becoming in respect to my shape; and my vanity quickening within me—that vanity which had only slept and had never died—experienced a mortification which grew more and more intolerable. It became a demon goading me almost to suicide: it appeared like a fiend bent on driving me to desperation! What! at the age of forty to shrivel up into a wretched old hag?—to become a living skeleton? The thought was madness! If I could not ward off the hideous calamity, at least I might conceal it from the world! And then, as I brooded over all these things—as I plunged deep into the study of the uses of cosmetics, and gained experiences in those succedaneous arts, which are now, so to speak, the very conditions of my existence,—a certain idea gradually took growth in my brain. At first I repelled it as outrageous: next smiled at it as ridiculous: then I envisaged it more attentively—until at length I suffered myself to grow familiar with it, to contemplate it earnestly, and finally to calculate all the chances of success which would attend upon its adoption. And this idea—what was it? Oh, the immensity of that human vanity which could conceive it! For that idea was nothing more or less than to profit by the species of suggestion thrown out by the report in the newspapers—to personate as it were my own daughter—to maintain the idea that it was indeed *Mrs. Malcolm* herself who had perished, and to go forth into the world as *Miss Malcolm*!

"Never, I must again repeat, did human vanity present so singular a phase or take so strange a development! Yet I can assure you that at the time when my resolve was taken, it was not with the least idea of forming another matrimonial alliance. It was not love which I courted: it was admiration. Indeed the very fact of entering upon a course of such extraordinary hypocrisy

must serve as a sufficient proof that a second marriage was with me altogether out of the question at the time, and that as I intended to assume the name of *Miss Malcolm*, so did I intend to remain *Miss Malcolm* for the rest of my life. However, not to dwell too much upon details, I must proceed to relate that when my mind was made up to accomplish the stupendous fraud—the counterfeit—the deception—or whatsoever you may choose to term it, I quitted St. Petersburg and retired into an obscure town at a considerable distance. There I resided for a twelvemonth in the strictest seclusion. Meanwhile the hideous atrophy which had seized upon me, continued to make its frightful inroads, and I became reduced to a mere being of skin and bone, save and except with regard to the countenance, which most singularly retained its plumpness and its freshness. Indeed, although I had then accomplished the grand climacteric of forty years, my face seemed to belong to a person of no more than five-and-twenty. And here I should observe that I had always been remarkable for an exceeding juvenility of appearance in respect to the countenance. During this retirement of a twelvemonth I carefully and minutely studied the art which has ever been to me as a second nature: I procured all kinds of cosmetics—got them analyzed by a chemist—and thus found out which were calculated to be useful, which were deleterious, or which empirical and ineffective. There was an amusement in the study; and thus I obtained a means of recreation while adopting the requisite processes to gratify my inordinate and most wondrous vanity.

"At length I quitted my retirement, and leaving the Russian territory altogether, I proceeded to Vienna, where I made my appearance as *Miss Malcolm*. I had taken care to provide myself with handmaidens who knew nothing of my antecedents; and at that time my disguise was not of so elaborate and detailed a complexity as to render it requisite for me to have a confidential assistant at my toilet. Having the command of money, and at once beginning to live in good style, I was soon spoken about and visited by persons belonging to the highest grades of society. There were several mercantile firms in Vienna to whom the name of *Malcolm* was well known alike in its connexion with St. Petersburg and London; and thus the tale which I wished to be circulated was set afloat and corroborated for me from those sources—namely, that I was the daughter of Mr. Malcolm, an eminent deceased merchant, and that my mother had perished at the time of the terrible accident on the Neva. The same tongues which spread these statements, superadded the fact that I possessed great wealth; and thus I was quickly courted, flattered, and welcomed by a host of admirers.

"I have no doubt that in making these revelations—these confessions indeed—I must appear in the most contemptible light, as the most frivolous of human beings. But the danger of incurring this opinion will not prevent me from telling the exact truth. Frankly, then, do I avow that I was intoxicated with joy at the adulation I received: my heart was elated—my pride was flattered—my vanity gratified. There was even the giddiness of joy in my brain when I found myself courted and sought after in preference to

many women who were *really* young and *really* beautiful without artifice, fraud, or disguise. The triumphs which the *belle* of a season may achieve, were nothing to those which I accomplished. It is only natural that some beauteous creature of eighteen or nineteen should succeed in attaching hosts of admirers to the wheels of her chariot; but that I, a woman past forty years of age, should be enabled to effect similar conquests, was indeed something only too well calculated to make my brain reel as if with the ebriety of wine. But although I received the homage that was thus paid to me, I did not play the part of a heartless coquette, at times giving encouragement, and then bestowing cold looks instead of smiles. My behaviour was one unvaried system of courtesy and affability towards all who approached me. I could not give it out that I did not mean to marry and did not therefore wish to be courted for matrimony's sake; because that would have seemed most unnatural—indeed most strange and extraordinary for a young lady of only *three or four and twenty years of age!*—and suspicions would have been excited. But on the other hand, I was not heartless nor base enough to encourage hopes in any special quarter, or to single out any one of my numerous admirers as a particular favourite.

“Having remained some months at Vienna, I visited Baden-Baden, where I was again courted and admired; and thence I proceeded to Berlin. It was there that I first formed the acquaintance of Lord Langport. He was principal *attaché* to the British Embassy at the Prussian Court: he was unmarried—handsome in person—elegant in manners—and agreeable in conversation. In respect to his age, he was between four and five years younger than what I *actually* was, though ten or fifteen years older than what I then *seemed*. He was immediately struck by my appearance: he told me that my fame had preceded me from Baden and Vienna; and our acquaintance had not lasted very long before I comprehended that Lord Langport was bent upon paying his court to me. I endeavoured to show him that his attentions were not agreeable if meant to exceed the mere politeness of friendship: but he was not a man to be so easily baffled; and situated as I was—cherishing a hideous secret—his addresses amounted to a veritable persecution. I abruptly left Berlin, and came to London. On my arrival in the British metropolis, I was resolved to put my stupendous imposture to a test of a far more severe character than it had yet experienced. I went boldly and called upon Mr. Lea, my late husband's managing clerk, but who had now become a leading member of the new firm. He was an elderly man; and he welcomed me with paternal cordiality. Addressing me as *Miss Malcolm*, he evidently felt convinced that I *was* Miss Malcolm. He spoke to me of my ‘dear deceased parents,’ and with tears in his eyes deplored the dreadful catastrophe of the Neva whereby I had ‘lost a tender mother.’ I felt shocked at the turn the discourse took: for it seemed to me as if there were something criminal, wicked, and impious in the part that I was playing. I accordingly abbreviated the interview as much as possible; and I did not breathe freely until I was outside Mr. Lea's office. Then however, so soon as that solemn moral impression was removed from my

mind, I rejoiced infinitely at the success of the test to which I had put my imposture.

“I did not remain very long in London; for all my habits and tastes were so entirely foreign that I longed to get back to the Continent. Another reason induced me to shorten my sojourn in the British metropolis; and this was the appearance of Lord Langport, who had obtained leave of absence from Berlin that he might follow upon my track. He again began to persecute me with his addresses; but I fled and paid a visit to Italy. I resolved to settle myself for awhile in Rome; and I had just conducted a negotiation for a suitable mansion, when Lord Langport again appeared in my presence. He vowed that he was desperately enamoured of me—declared that my beauty and accomplishments were the only attractions, inasmuch as he had far greater wealth on his own side than I could possibly have on mine. Indeed, to convince me of his sincerity, he offered to settle all my fortunes on myself; and he swore that it would prove the proudest moment of his life when he might conduct me to the altar and place a coronet on my brow. To this torrent of eloquence he gave vent before I could possibly check him; and indeed I will confess that for the first time since I had commenced my career of imposture, I experienced a woman's weakness in the presence of a handsome man proclaiming the language of love. I felt towards him as never before I had felt towards man—no, not even to my own husband Edward Malcolm. But suddenly exercising a strong power of control over my feelings, I implored Lord Langport to rise from his suppliant posture; and I promised that he should receive my decision on the morrow. He departed, counselling himself with this pledge, and buoyed up with a hope which in a moment of weakness I had suffered him to conceive, and which I had not subsequently the moral courage to dispel upon the spot. During the night that followed I abruptly quitted Rome, leaving a letter to be delivered to his lordship. I therein told him that I felt flattered by his addresses, but I could not receive them; and I besought him not to follow me elsewhere.

“I went to Paris, where I mingled less in society than for some time past I had been doing. I felt restless and unsettled: it seemed as if new ideas had taken birth within me, and as if there were a void in my heart which required to be filled up. Some months passed; and one day I read in the English journals of the appointment of the Right Hon. Lord Langport to the post of Ambassador at the Court of Wurtemberg. A thrill passed through me; and I could no longer doubt that which for some time past I had been suspecting, but to the truth of which I had been endeavouring to blind myself. I loved Lord Langport! And Ah! while his image was thus vividly conjured up anew in my mind, who should be introduced into my presence but he himself? He was on his way to assume the duties of his exalted diplomatic post; and now again I beheld him at my feet. Again too did he pour forth the language of love, assuring me of the disinterestedness of his affection. I burst into tears:—in a passionate tone I declared that there were reasons why I could not marry; and I begged him never to approach me again. I then

rushed from the room. An hour or two afterwards I received a letter from him, in which he most delicately, yet feelingly and kindly, as I thought, alluded to the unguarded ejaculation to which I had given vent, 'that there were reasons why I could never marry.' He said that if my affections had on some former occasion been engaged and blighted, it should be the study of his life to restore happiness unto my soul. He proceeded to observe that if my weakness had been triumphed over by some unscrupulous villain, this need not be a barrier to our union, and that he should admire me all the more for the candour with which I was disposed to treat him. He concluded by declaring that his own happiness was at stake, and by imploring me to reconsider my decision. I sent no answer to the letter, and fled at once from Paris, thinking that after such conduct he would never approach me again, and that I should thereby be putting an end to an affair which had already grown to a point of serious perplexity and embarrassment.

"I went to Madrid; but still I felt restless and unhappy. I loved Langport—passionately and devotedly loved him. Oh! how keenly, keenly I felt my position, which prevented me from accepting his addresses and becoming his wife! I now knew what love was: I found that I had only *liked* my deceased husband, but that he had never possessed that same hold upon my heart which Langport had obtained. I wept bitter, burning tears; and there were moments when I was even mad enough to think of writing to Langport, telling him the whole stupendous truth, trusting to his love, and throwing myself on his mercy. But when I thought of what I was, I rejected the idea with mingled horror and affright.—'Miserable personification of vanity that I am,' I thought to myself in my calm and reasonable moments; 'it is not the woman as she really is whom Langport loves—but the woman as she seems to be!—and if I throw off my disguise and reveal myself in my true condition, will he not turn from me in disappointment, loathing, and disgust? Yes!—I must abandon all these mad, these insane ideas which have been revolving in my brain of late!'

"Being restless and unsettled, I was more accessible to caprices, whims, and fantasies than perhaps under other circumstances I should have been; and I resolved to travel to remote places. I went to Cairo and Constantinople; and at the latter city a strange occurrence took place—an incident so fraught with mystery that I have never been enabled to penetrate it—no, nor even to form the slightest conjecture that might lead to a solution of the enigma. I will enter into details. There is a splendid hotel at Constantinople for the accommodation of foreigners, and it is kept by a Frenchman. It was there that I took up my quarters; and I soon received visits from the leading English families who were settled in the imperial city. The British Ambassador's wife left her card; and I was invited to a *soirée* at the Embassy. I went. The entertainment was a splendid one, and all the members of the other foreign Embassies were present. Amongst them was Count Olonetz, the Russian Ambassador. He was an old man, with a severe intelligent countenance, courtly yet formal manners, and of distinguished appearance. It hap-

pened that in the course of the evening he was lounging with the English Ambassador round the principal apartment, where I was seated in company with a French gentleman and lady whom I had known in Paris, and whom I now met in Constantinople. At the moment the two Ambassadors approached, my French friends rose and hastened away from me, for they had just recognised an intimate acquaintance on the opposite side of the saloon.—'Ah!' ejaculated the British Ambassador, speaking in French, 'Miss Malcolm all alone by herself! Count,' he continued, turning towards the Russian diplomatist, 'let me present you to a lady who is well acquainted with your country, and who speaks its language as well as you yourself. Miss Malcolm, my friend Count Olonetz.'—The Russian gave a slight start for a moment, and then he bowed with formal politeness. The British Ambassador strolled away to another part of the room; and the Count, seating himself by my side, said, 'And so, Miss Malcolm, you are well acquainted with Russia?'—'I lived there for many years, my lord,' was my answer; and we were speaking in the Muscovite tongue.—'Indeed,' he ejaculated, 'you do veritably pronounce our language like a native.'—'And no wonder,' I rejoined with a smile, 'for I was brought up in Russia from my infancy.'—'I know the name of Malcolm well,' said the Ambassador.—'Ah?' I observed; and then I remembered how he had given a slight start as if of recognition when my name was mentioned.—'Yes, the name of Malcolm,' he continued, 'had an honourable repute in St. Petersburg when it was borne by the great English merchant who was so long established there. Surely you cannot be a relation of that gentleman?'—'Indeed,' I answered, with another smile, 'that gentleman was most nearly related to me; he was my father.'—'Your father?' exclaimed Count Olonetz; and methought he again started as he looked very hard at me. 'How many children had he?'—The question seemed strange; and without immediately replying to it, I inquired, 'Did your Excellency know my father?'—'Yes, a little,' was his immediate response; and methought that he had only one daughter living, who was looked upon as an heiress?—'Well,' I said, smiling, 'I am that daughter.'—'You?' and he now started more visibly than before, so that I was seized with a sudden fright; for I thought to myself, 'At last my secret is detected! he has penetrated the imposture! or at all events he sees enough of me to be convinced that I am not the young and handsome Mildred whom he may have known in St. Petersburg!'—'Pardon me,' he instantaneously added, recovering his self-possession, and even smiling most affably; 'but it seemed to me so extraordinary that I should thus meet at Constantinople a young lady of whom I heard so much when at St. Petersburg, that I was astonished to hear you were the same. May I ask if your mother is with you?'—'My mother?' and for a moment I felt as if I should drop at his feet.—'Ah, pardon me,' he again said, with increasing politeness, and even kindness: 'perhaps I have touched upon a mournful topic, and you have had to deplore the death of your mother as well as your father?'—'Yes, my lord,' I said; 'it is evident that you are ignorant of the fact that my

poor mother perished at the time of the accident by the breaking up of the ice on the Neva.—‘Ah?’ said the Ambassador after a pause: ‘I was not aware of this circumstance: and once more I must crave your pardon for having alluded to a painful topic. May I inquire whether it be your intention to revisit Russia? have you no inclination to return to St. Petersburg?’—I thought it might seem singular, and even excite suspicion, if I were to proclaim my resolve never to set foot in the Russian capital again, or even if I were to show any distaste for so doing; and I therefore said, with an air of easy carelessness, ‘Oh, I think it is very probable I shall some day take St. Petersburg in my way; for I am a very great traveller. I cannot tell how many thousands of miles I have journeyed in my time.’—‘Ah, indeed?’ said Count Olonetz; and again I could not help thinking there was something peculiar if not mysteriously significant in his look, his manner, and his accents. But this impression was almost immediately effaced, when rising from his seat, he took me by the hand, saying, ‘It will afford the Countess the greatest pleasure to welcome you, Miss Malcolm, at the Russian Embassy. I am sorry her Excellency is not here this evening, or I should be gratified in presenting you.’—I thanked the Count for his kindness; and as my French friends, accompanied by other acquaintances, now came to rejoin me, his lordship bowed and retired to the upper extremity of the saloon.

On the following day I received a card of invitation from the Countess Olonetz for a party in the evening. I went with a number of friends for an excursion upon the waters of the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus: and I greatly admired the scene, for there were war-ships of nearly all nations assembled there. Amongst the crowd of vessels my attention was particularly attracted by a superb steamship bearing the Russian flag; and I was informed that it was there at the orders of Count Olonetz for any service in which a fast-going ship might be required. Steam-vessels were not then quite so plentiful as they are now-a-days, particularly in that part of the world: and thus it was no wonder that the particular one to which I am alluding should have been an object of such special admiration on the occasion. I returned to the hotel; and after dinner, I was thinking of my toilette for the *soirée* at the Russian Embassy, when the landlord entered my sitting-apartment. I have before said that he was a Frenchman: he was a little active bustling person, of middle age, very intelligent and good-natured. He closed the door; and advancing towards me with a mysterious air, apologized for the intrusion, but excusing himself on the ground of the importance of the purpose which he had in view. I begged him to explain himself.—‘Do not be frightened, madam,’ he said: ‘but you incur a very great danger, and it is against this that I come to warn you; not only to warn you, but also to aid your escape from it.’—‘A great danger?’ I ejaculated. ‘Good heavens! what can you mean?’—‘You yourself, madam, can best tell,’ continued the landlord, ‘how you have drawn down upon your head the anger of the Russian Government, or else of the Russian Ambassador individually; but so is the fact.’—I looked confounded, for such indeed I felt; and then I assured the Frenchman that he must be mistaken, for that I could never have possibly

given any offence to the Russian Government, that I was on good terms with the Russian Ambassador, and that I was going that evening to a *soirée* at the Russian Embassy.—‘To be sure,’ said the Frenchman, ‘that is a part of the stratagem. You will go to the *soirée*; but when you leave the Russian Embassy, it will only be to be carried forcibly and stealthily on board your steamship, to be borne to Sebastopol or Cherson, and thence God knows whither; either to be plunged into a Russian fortress, or to be sent thousands of miles away into the awful wilds of Siberia.’—I shuddered for a moment at the picture that was thus drawn; and then I smiled and said, ‘I thank you for your kindness, which is evidently well meant; but believe me you are labouring under some egregious and unaccountable mistake.’—‘Madam, I am not. You do not think that I should be fool enough to frighten away a good customer from my hotel; but if you value your safety you will depart. I know not how you have offended the Russians, and if you yourself do not know, there must either be a mystery or mistake on their part, but of which you will not the less become a victim. Your name is Mildred Malcolm; your father was a merchant at St. Petersburg; he died there; and your mother was drowned in the Neva? Is all this correct?’—‘It is,’ I answered, beginning to grow alarmed for more reasons than one; for if anything unpleasant occurred or seemed to threaten me, I invariably associated it with the secret of the imposture which I was practising upon the world.—‘Well then,’ pursued the Frenchman, ‘you must not delude yourself, madam, with the idea that I am labouring under any error. I will briefly tell you my authority, and then you must act for yourself. The fact is, the chief engineer of your steam-vessel is an Englishman, as most of the engineers in foreign steamers are. He is a worthy man, has a good situation, and is engaged to my niece. This morning one of the persons employed in the Russian Embassy went on board the steamer, was closeted with the captain, and told him to get ready to start in the middle of the coming night, for that he was to receive on board his ship, under certain circumstances, an English lady named Mildred Malcolm, who was at present staying at this hotel. Some little farther conversation took place, every portion of which the worthy English engineer overheard, for he happened to be at the time in a position to catch what was going on, though his presence so close at hand was unsuspected. Not choosing to let a fellow-countrywoman of his suffer such villanous treatment when no real crime seems to be brought against her, he obtained leave to come ashore just now, and he made me acquainted with the facts of the case. Now, madam, I repeat, you can judge for yourself. But, Ah! here is some little corroborative evidence at all events! The Russian steamer, which has been lying perfectly quiet for the last six weeks, has now got her steam up, and she has laid herself right opposite the steps leading down to the water from the garden of the Russian Embassy! There, madam! look from this window, and you will see that it is so!’—The moonlight was shining brilliantly upon the waters; and on glancing forth, I saw everything precisely as the Frenchman had described

it. I had listened to his speech with increasing alarm; and I was now fully convinced that for some unaccountable purpose or another it was intended to render me the victim of Russian hatred or tyranny. I implored the Frenchman to save me.—‘That is precisely what I came to do, madam, if you would permit me,’ he answered; ‘and I should counsel you not to throw yourself henceforth in the way of Russian Embassies in countries where they may possess the power to injure you. Moreover, I hope for my intended son-in-law’s sake, you will keep the business strictly private; and in order to avert suspicion, you will have the goodness, madam, to write a letter to the Countess Olonetz excusing yourself for not being present at her *soirée* and alleging some reason for your precipitate departure from Constantinople. I will take care that your note shall not be delivered until the first thing in the morning.’—I expressed my most grateful thanks to the good-hearted landlord; and I insisted upon leaving a very handsome pecuniary present for his intended son-in-law, the engineer of the Russian steanship. He then accompanied me on board a Genoese vessel, which, as he had previously ascertained, was to weigh anchor that evening; and I was soon beyond the reach of my Russian enemies. Thus terminated this strange episode; but for the solution of the mystery thereof I have never been enabled to obtain the slightest clue; and the only conjecture I can form is that the whole proceeding must have been the consequence of some strange mistake on the part of the Russian Ambassador at Constantinople.

“And now let me turn to other subjects, and hasten to bring this narrative of mine to a conclusion. I arrived in safety at Genoa, where I determined to remain for a few weeks: but on the very day after I landed there, whom should I meet inhaling the pure Mediterranean breeze upon one of the noble quays of that city, but Lord Langport? He was looking pale and ill; and he informed me that it was as an invalid he came to acquire new health from that delightful region. He had recently been elevated from the embassy at Württemberg to that at Turin; and I had remained in ignorance of the change, for during my sojourn in the East I had seldom seen any English newspapers. His lordship mournfully and reproachfully gave me to understand that his illness had chiefly arisen from grief and annoyance at my conduct in so abruptly flying from Paris without condescending to afford him so much as a single line in answer to the letter he had sent me. I told him that it would be painful for me to enter into explanations relative to the particular phrase of which I had made use on the occasion of our last interview; but I begged him to understand that there was no criminal weakness for which a woman might blush at the bottom of my resolve to remain unmarried.—‘My dear Miss Malcolm,’ he answered, ‘whatever your real reason may be, I swear that if you reveal it, it can make no difference in my sentiments. I love you for yourself only; but I fear you do not give me credit for sincerity?’—I suffered him thus to continue talking to me, for there was an indescribable rapture in listening to his voice and I felt touched by his pale pensive appearance.—‘At all events, my dear Miss Malcolm,’ he said, as I

was about to bid him farewell, ‘let us see each other as friends, even if it be impossible that we may meet on other terms. I swear to you that if you agree to this, I will not again mention the word *love* in your hearing.’—What could I say? I deeply loved that man, and I was weak enough to suppose that we could meet only as friends without any further detriment to my peace of mind. And thus we *did* meet; and we walked together daily upon the quays—and he kept his word, for he breathed not again the language of love, though I must confess that on the other hand he was always giving me the most fervid assurances of his friendship. His health improved, the colour came back to his cheeks, and at the expiration of three or four weeks after we thus met at Genoa, he looked handsomer than ever. One day he told me that as his strength was perfectly restored, he must return to his post at Turin. There was a pause, during which I felt deeply affected. At length the silence was broken by Langport himself, who in a tremulous voice asked me what my plans were—whether I purposed to remain at Genoa, or whether I intended to go elsewhere? He then in a cold tone apologized for asking these questions, adding that he knew he had no right on the mere ground of friendship to interrogate me in respect to my movements. Although then a woman of forty-three years of age—too old, you will think, to make such a silly fool of myself—I nevertheless felt inclined to cry like a child at these remarks and at the tone in which they were delivered. Langport saw his advantage, and he exclaimed in passionate accents, ‘Oh, why have you yourself restrained me to the cold language of friendship when it is in far other terms I would address you now that we are about to separate? Who can tell when we shall meet again? It is your presence which has given me health here, at Genoa! I know not how it may fare with me on my return to Turin! Really, Mildred, you make me think that there is some terrible mystery at the bottom of all this: but if so, believe me when I declare that however nearly or closely this mystery may concern yourself, it could have no possible influence with the strength of my affection.’—‘Leave me now,’ I said, my heart palpitating violently; ‘and to-morrow we will meet here again and at the same hour.’

“We separated accordingly; and I returned to my hotel, pondering everything which had taken place, and becoming more and more resolved to reveal everything to Langport on the morrow. ‘He is so noble-minded, so generous-hearted, so disinterested,’ I said to myself, ‘he will sympathise with me; he will not blame me; he will regard me with friendship and not with disgust! We may go to the altar for the sake of maintaining appearances before the world; but it shall be as a brother and sister that we must live together!’—And then, silly fool that I was! I abandoned myself to this dream with as much ardour as a young maiden in yielding deliciously to the impressions of a first love: I conjured up visions of happiness more fantastic than those which had ever appeared through the vapours of opium to the oriental reveller in the drug. But let me not dwell upon this phase of my weakness, my silliness, my vanity: let me pass on to the next incident in my narrative.

"The hotel where I had taken up my quarters, was built in the form of a square, as most of these establishments are upon the Continent. On the inner side there was a verandah, screened from the court-yard itself by an array of ever-greens, orange-trees, and other shrubs, the intermediate spaces being filled up with blooming flowers. In the evening of the day of which I have been speaking, I descended into this arbour for the sake of its refreshing coolness; and seating myself in the obscurest nook, I gave way to my reflections. Presently I was startled by hearing my name mentioned close by; and I soon ascertained that there were two English gentlemen walking to and fro in the court-yard, smoking their cigars and chatting familiarly. To make myself more intelligible, I should explain that they were pacing just outside the barrier of ever-greens and flowers, while I was thus ensconced behind it. And now let us see what they were saying.—'Well,' observed one, 'Miss Malcolm is no doubt a great catch;' and this was the first sentence that drew my attention.—'I should think she is too! How the deuce could Langport do better? If she is not a lady of title, she descends from a very good family by her mother's side, while her father was an eminent merchant.'—'True,' replied the first speaker; 'and now-a-days the blood of patricians is brought to mingle with that of plebeians when self-interest is the motive power.'—'No doubt: and God knows,' continued the other, 'self-interest is the motive power in this instance. Langport was telling me just now that he thinks he shall bring the business to book to-morrow; for the fair Mildred got very spooney upon him this afternoon when they were walking together on the quay. He does not think that she has the slightest suspicion of the desperate state of his circumstances; in fact he is sure she knows nothing about the matter; as how can she indeed? for she is scarcely ever in England. So it is not *that* circumstance which has made her hesitate to marry him. He thinks she has perhaps been in love before, and got disappointed, and so made a vow to remain single all her life; which vow she now repents of, but does not exactly know how to break it.'—'And I suppose,' said the other, 'that if Miss Malcolm refuses after all to marry Langport, it is all up with him?'—'All up entirely. Why, all his estates have been sold by private contract to pay off the mortgages; he has got executions in his little property of Hendon Court; and he is so overwhelmed with debts at Berlin, Wurtemberg, and Turin, wherever indeed he has been in a diplomatic capacity, that if he cannot liquidate them immediately, he must give up his embassy. It is all this that worried him so terribly and made him ill, and brought him down to Genoa to seek for health; when as good luck would have it, who the deuce should arrive at the same time but Miss Malcolm?'—'So it really does look,' observed the other gentleman, 'as if the two were destined for each other, and fate throws them together in this way?'—'Well,' proceeded the other individual, 'Langport has been playing an uncommon knowing game, and he deserves to win her. I hope he will.'—'But what,' interjected the other, 'if the lady really does happen to suspect that his lordship's circumstances are so desperate?'—'There is no fear of her suspecting

anything of the sort. Langport has sounded her two or three times when he has been making love to her; he has offered to settle all her own fortune on herself, and then he has narrowly watched her countenance to see what effect it would produce.'—'Well?' asked the former speaker.—'Well,' said the other, 'there has been nothing on the fair Mildred's part to indicate the faintest suspicion of any double-dealing on her noble suitor's side.'

"Here the conversation terminated; for the two gentlemen having finished their cigars, re-entered the hotel. I remained for some minutes in the arbour, pondering everything I had heard; and then abruptly quitting the place, I sought my own chamber. How completely the veil had fallen from my eyes! how rudely had it been thence snatched! 'What a villain is Langport!' I for a moment thought to myself; and then I mentally ejaculated, 'No! for there has been mutual deception!'—And now, would you believe it, all the love I had previously experienced for him suddenly became absorbed in my own immense, illimitable vanity? Might I not become Lady Langport? If so much adulation and flattery were offered in society to plain Miss Malcolm, how much greater the court that would be paid to Lady Langport? Ah! and to become the wife of an Ambassador—the *Ambassadress*, as I should be styled abroad! To have the passport within the limits of royal circles! to become the associate of queens and princesses! My silly head was again turning, if not with visions of love at least with ambition; and I slept serenely enough that night—perhaps far more so than those two English gentlemen could have suspected if they had happened to have discovered that their conversation had been overheard by me.

"On the following day I met Lord Langport according to appointment upon the quay. He immediately assumed a tender look and tone, and he said, 'Methinks, Mildred, that from the concluding part of our conversation yesterday, the interdiction laid upon me has ceased to exist, and that I may again mention the word *love* instead of *friendship*?'—'You doubtless understood from my manner,' I said, 'and from the terms on which we parted, that I should give you a decided answer to-day. I am now prepared to do so. You have often most generously suggested that my own fortune should be settled on me; but I could not think of rendering myself so thoroughly and completely independent of the man whom I may take as my husband. I therefore stipulate that one-half be secured by settlement on me, while I cheerfully abandon the other half to your disposal, confident that you will make an excellent use of it.'—I saw with how much intense anxiety Langport listened to the first part of my speech: I noticed how a slight shade of vexation passed over his countenance when I mentioned the settlement; and then I observed that his features altogether brightened up, as if he were struck by the reflection that the present arrangement was better than the loss of me and my fortune altogether. Our arrangements were quickly made: he on his side was anxious to secure me, and I on my part was solicitous to avoid as much as possible the endearments, whether feigned or real, which he might think it necessary to bestow upon me during the period of

courtship. I requested that the ceremony should be conducted with as little parade and pomp as possible; and it was therefore agreed that he should return in two or three days to Turin, that I should follow him in a week afterwards, and that the nuptials should be solemnized by his own chaplain at the Embassy. Let me pass over whatsoever reflections I made to myself during the interval; and let me proceed to state that everything was carried out according to agreement. I followed Lord Langport to Turin; and there, in as private a manner as possible, I became Lady Langport. On the Continent there is no departure of the happy couple to spend the honeymoon elsewhere; and English people, when sojourning abroad, usually follow in this respect the custom of the country where they may happen to be. The wedding-day is generally passed in festivity with the members of the two families whom the ceremony has united, as well as with the most intimate friends of both. But as neither Lord Langport nor myself had any relations to invite, a dinner was given to a select few of his acquaintances, including of course the ladies who had officiated in my train at the bridal ceremony.

"The banquet was over—the guests had departed—it was eleven o'clock at night: Lord Langport and I found ourselves alone together in the splendidly-furnished saloon at the Embassy. He looked tenderly upon me; and then I said to him calmly and mildly, 'The moment has come when all dissimulation must cease. You have been already by an accident fully unmasked to me; and I can no longer help unmasking myself to you. You wanted money; and by this marriage you have obtained it. I wanted a title, and by the same means I have secured it. You vowed that whatsoever might be the nature of the mystery attaching itself to me, you would not esteem me the less; and I hold you to your promise. On the other hand I did not pledge myself to esteem you just the same when the mask should fall from your countenance: but I will nevertheless act precisely as if I had made such a vow. When the word *love* was first mentioned between us, and when at Genoa we began to grow intimate, so that marriage might be naturally looked forward to as the result, I thought I was being wooed by an honourable and upright man, and you thought you were wooing a young lady of beauty. I did not bargain for a ruined spendthrift; nor you for a withered hag in her forty-third year, but as shrivelled and wretched as if she were sixty. Yet these are the facts. You are that man: I am this woman. You have half my fortune, wherewith to settle your debts, save your honour, and prevent yourself from being ignominiously recalled from your ambassadorial post: the remaining half will serve to produce a handsome income in addition to your salary. So long as you treat me with friendship and brotherly kindness, the income so produced shall be entirely at your own disposal: the instant you treat me otherwise, I leave you, taking that income with me. There has been dissimulation on each side: we need not blame each other. There are also secrets on both sides, which perhaps neither will think it worth while to reveal. Husband and wife in the presence of the world, brother and sister only in the privacy of our domestic life! Is all this a bargain?"

"I will not tell you how astounded, how bewildered Lord Langport looked when I first began to address him. Indeed, I would rather hurry over this scene, and bring my narrative to a conclusion with the least possible delay. Lord Langport listened in profound silence: he reflected when I had finished speaking; and then he said, 'Yes, it is a bargain.'—'Good night,' I answered; and shaking him by the hand, I took a taper and proceeded to the bridal chamber. There I remained alone; and he slept in another apartment.

"It was almost immediately after our marriage that the two portraits which hang in the dining-room down stairs were painted at Turin. As you may have observed, that portrait which is supposed to represent me, delineates my figure more slender than it seems now, and my cheeks fuller. Indeed my countenance still retained a marvellous plumpness, and it is only within the last four or five years that my cheeks have begun to sink. As for my figure, I gave it at the time when that portrait was painted, just such a symmetry—only slightly verging upon *embonpoint*—which Mildred would herself most probably have possessed if she had been alive. Her figure was inclined to a luxurious fullness; and as all who knew her in St. Petersburg must have remarked this circumstance, I was naturally careful to keep it continuously in view. For was I not personating my own daughter? Therefore, as year has succeeded year, and time has gone on, I have gradually given my own shape the appearance of a greater development; so that if I now happen to meet any one who knew Mildred at St. Petersburg, the impression to be made might thus be expressed in words if we suppose the individual ejaculating to himself, 'Ah! this is exactly the *embonpoint* at which Miss Malcolm always gave promise of arriving!"

"My married life—if such I may term it—with Lord Langport, lasted only a couple of years; and he went down into the tomb. We lived upon precisely the terms which I had specified on our bridal evening: he disposed of my income—he respected my secret—and he treated me with a sufficient degree of kindness. Of all his own former possessions, nothing but Hendon Court, with its petty domain, could be rescued from his creditors; and since his death I have for the most part resided here. I have grown weary of the Continent; and have now no other wish than to end my days in peace beneath this roof. If you feel inclined to ask me a certain question—namely, why I still maintain that cheat whereof I have made you the confidant?—you may read the answer in all the previous circumstances of my life. Vanity is still my failing. It is not now that vanity which makes me seek the admiration of the young; but it is the vanity which will not permit me to expose myself to the world—to tell how much of my life has been a fraud and a lie—or to draw down upon my head the contempt and ridicule of the universe by avowing that I am not Mildred the daughter, but neither more nor less than that same perished Mildred's mother!"



THE PRINCESS ROXANA.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A STRANGE MEETING.

WE shall not attempt to describe the varied feelings and emotions, the strange sensations and conflicting thoughts, which were excited in Ethel during her narration of this most marvellous history. Suffice it to say that when it was brought to a conclusion, she assured Lady Langport that it would effect no change in the devotion

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with which she was resolved to execute the duties of the office she had undertaken, but she could not of course promise that it would increase her esteem for her patroness—neither did Lady Langport endeavour to extort from her any such preposterous pledge.

And presently, when the house was all hushed in silence, and Lady Langport had retired to her couch, and Ethel stood in the dressing-room, contemplating the cosmetics and succedaneous auxiliaries which the drawers and the bureau furnished forth, she could not help mentally ejacu-

lating, "Good heavens! is it possible that so tremendous a sacrifice can be made to the shrine of Vanity?"

She was almost disposed to hate herself for remaining any longer in such a position: but when she sought her couch and strained her dear child to her bosom, she thought that she could do anything for her beloved little Alfred's sake; and it was with a thrilling heart that she remembered how Lady Langport had assured her that the future welfare of herself and her child should be her care. And thus serene was the slumber that presently stole upon the eyes of the beauteous Ethel, while the charming head of her cherished boy was pillowed upon her snowy bosom.

On the following day Lady Langport requested Ethel to go into London and purchase at the eminent perfumer's in Bond Street certain articles that were required for her ladyship's mysterious toilet. One of the carriage-horses had met with an accident: the carriage could not therefore be used. Lady Langport did not think it to make use of an omnibus; neither would she have asked Ethel to have recourse to this means of conveyance, if it were not that the young lady had expressed a desire to go into London shortly to make some purchases for herself. She required summer dresses, and likewise lighter clothing for her little boy; for it was now verging close towards the end of May.

As Ethel wished to be as expeditious as possible, and had several shops to visit, she did not take the child with her. Nor indeed was it necessary, inasmuch as a nursemaid had been provided to look after him: she therefore preferred leaving him with the girl, who was a very steady young person, to inhale the fresh air in the country. She accordingly proceeded alone on her business-visit; and with the least possible delay she made her purchases, not forgetting the commissions entrusted to her by Lady Langport. She was just issuing from the perfumer's shop in Bond-street, when she was suddenly struck by amazement on beholding a female hurrying past her, dressed in a plain style, if not with actual shabbiness, at all events in a manner which was sufficiently poor and humble to strike Ethel with astonishment.

"Is it possible? Lady Langport here, in this sort of disguise! hurrying along in this manner! passing me by, evidently without seeing me! Good heavens! what can it mean? what new mystery is this? Why should she have sent me into town, pretending that she purposed to remain at home?—and above all things, why that plain and sordid apparel, so different from the usual toilet of Lady Langport!"

Ethel asked herself all these questions as rapidly as if they were so many flashes of lightning darting in quick succession through her brain. She was transfixed to the spot with amazement: but suddenly resolving to clear up the mystery, she rushed after the object of all her curiosity and interest, along Old Burlington Street into Cork Street.

"Good heavens, my lady! what is the meaning of this?" cried Ethel, catching her by the folds of her meagre shawl. "has anything happened? I beseech your ladyship——"

"Ladyship? happened?" repeated the female whom she had thus accosted. "What on earth

does this signify? It must be a mistake!"—and breaking away from Ethel, she hurriedly pursued her way.

"A mistake? No! no!"—and in another instant Ethel was again by her side.

"What do you want, young lady?" asked the woman, stopping short, turning round, and fixing her eyes full upon Ethel.

"Ah!" said the latter: and now, as she was enabled to survey the female more attentively, she began to think that she must indeed have made a mistake; for this person's eyes were blue, whereas those of Lady Langport were much darker: the hair of this female was brown, while her ladyship wore her's dyed a deep glossy black. "I beg you a thousand pardons," faltered Ethel. "Yes—I now really perceive that I have made a mistake—But the likeness—the expression of countenance!—Good heavens!" cried the young lady, as a strange wild idea abruptly smote her; "is it possible? No! no! it cannot be! And yet—Oh! I conjure you to tell me who you are?"

The female now became excited with curiosity and interest in her turn; and she said, "Rather do you tell me in the first place, young lady, why you thus accosted me—for whom you at first took me, and whom you take me for now?"

"No, no—I cannot answer you!" replied Ethel quickly. "You must speak first! Good heavens! the more I look at you——"

"This is indeed very remarkable," said the woman, evidently growing more and more interested. "What on earth can you mean? But perhaps," she instantaneously added, her manner at the same moment changing into an expression of indifference, "it is a mistake—or a mere coincidence——"

"A coincidence?" repeated Ethel, vaguely and dubiously, for she was in a state of utter bewilderment: "a coincidence? It is possible. No—it is impossible! And yet——"

At this instant an ejaculation of mingled astonishment and terror burst from the lips of the woman, as her blue eyes suddenly became riveted in a particular direction. Ethel mechanically flung her own looks towards the same point; and it was almost a cry of alarm which started from her own tongue as she caught sight of the same object on whom the woman's regards were fixed. There, at a little distance—having just turned the corner of a neighbouring street—dressed with his usual fashionable elegance—his lips apart with a strange supercilious smile, and his white teeth gleaming in contrast with his glossy black moustache,—there stood Count Mandeville!

"Devil!" fiercely burst from the woman's lips as she suddenly accosted him: and Ethel—disenchanted from the spell-like impression which the woman's appearance had made upon her, and feeling only that she was in the presence of a man who had pursued her for infamous purposes—glided away from the spot.

Glancing over her shoulder at the corner of the street, she beheld the Count and the woman standing where she had left them, apparently in earnest conversation; and the young lady pursued her way. She was beginning to relax her pace and was recovering from the fright into which Mandeville's appearance had thrown her, when she felt a light touch upon the arm; and stopping short, she

found herself face to face with an individual of imposing appearance.

He was a man whose age could not possibly have been less than seventy-five: he was tall, and stooped slightly: his countenance was expressive of intelligence—age had not dimmed the mental fire in the eyes that gazed so steadily; and there was an air about him which bespoke firmness of character, severity of disposition, and a certain degree of haughtiness, the combined effects of which were more or less subdued by that gloss which a polished manner and a distinguished look threw over all. He was dressed in a complete suit of black, with a single-breasted surtout coat buttoned nearly up to the neck, but the upper part being just sufficiently open to display a diamond pin evidently of immense value. There was nothing of the old *beau* about this personage; but yet his entire toilet—the well-brushed hat, the gloves fitting with precision, the well-shaped polished boots, without a speck of dust upon them, and the admirably cut garments—all denoted an individual of refined tastes. We should add that he wore a thick grey moustache; but the hair of his head was quite white and so thin that the flesh could be seen through, or rather beneath it.

Such was the personage who stopped Ethel in the manner already described; and as the young lady was too unsophisticated and pure-minded to be ever ready to jump at unfavourable conclusions, as so many people are, she did not at once resent the circumstance before it was explained. It was therefore only with mingled curiosity and respect that she looked at the stranger, who on his own side was for the moment contemplating her with attention.

“You will pardon me, young lady,” he said, now raising his hat and bowing with what may be described as a dignified politeness—somewhat cold and lofty perhaps, but on the other hand utterly without the semblance of a libertine superciliousness,—“you will pardon me, young lady, for the liberty I have taken in stopping you, but I should very much like to have a few minutes’ conversation with you on a subject that to me—and to others—is of the utmost importance.”

This distinguished-looking personage spoke English with a perfect accuracy, but with a foreign accent. Indeed he was evidently a foreigner.

“Surely, sir, there must be some mistake?” said Ethel; “it is impossible there can be any subject of such importance wherein I can either be interested or enabled to give you any information.”

“Pardon me,” interrupted the stranger. “I know not whether you may be inclined to deal candidly on the subject—I know not even on what terms you may be with certain persons whose images are now uppermost in my mind: but when I look at you—pardon me, young lady, for saying that there is something so candid and ingenious in the expression of your countenance—”

“Believe me, sir,” said Ethel, “that if there were really any topic of such importance whereon I might be enabled to speak, I should deal with it in a sincere and straightforward manner. In *this* you only do me justice. But you evidently mistake me, sir, for some one else.”

“It is true I know not who you are,” said the gentleman; “but let me prove to you in a few words that I am not speaking erroneously, nor at

random. You are acquainted with a person”—the stranger paused—corrected himself by substituting the term “a lady”—and then went on to say, “a lady who once bore the name of Malcolm. What she calls herself now I know not.”

Ethel started visibly; and her countenance, always so beautiful, became still more interesting and attractive as it suddenly grew animated with surprise and curiosity.

“Ah!” said the stranger—and a smile, though scarcely perceptible, for an instant wavered upon his thin lips,—“I thought that I should be enabled to convince you that I am not speaking wide of the purpose. And now let me add that you are also acquainted with a person who bears the name of Count Mandeville.”

Again Ethel started with evident surprise; and this time an exclamation burst from her lips.

“Yes, sir,” she cried: “it was only just this moment that I met—”

“I know it,” interrupted the stranger: and now the smile was more perceptible and more significant, as it wavered upon his thin lips. “But might I ask you to favour me with a brief interview?—for it is impossible we can continue to discourse here in the street.”

“Sir,” interrupted Ethel, drawing herself up with a becoming feminine dignity, “I have no place to which I can ask you to accompany me; and moreover, it is not probable that I can have anything of importance to communicate to you. With Count de Mandeville my acquaintance is very, very slight. With the other—the lady whom you describe as having once borne the name of Malcolm—”

“Do not be offended, madam,” interrupted the stranger, “at the request which I made, to the effect that you would grant me an interview elsewhere. I am incapable of insulting you—and all the more so, indeed, from the manner in which you have just vindicated your feminine dignity when for an instant you supposed it to be assailed. My carriage is close at hand—the Countess is seated in it—”

“The Countess?” repeated Ethel.

“Ah, I forgot,” said the old man, with another partial smile, “you do not know who I am:” then fixing his eyes with an earnest significance upon her, he inquired, “Do you ever happen to have heard mention made of the name of Count Olonetz?”

Ethel started. Here was a fresh surprise for her. To be sure! she had heard of Count Olonetz! Was not he the Russian Ambassador who upwards of fifteen years back had plotted so treacherously to carry off Lady Langport—or rather Miss Malcolm as she *then* called herself—from Constantinople? For a moment Ethel was smitten with an uneasy feeling in the presence of this man who produced upon her mind the impression of one who wielded great powers and used them unscrupulously.

“You *have* heard my name mentioned,” he said. “I am not surprised at it. And now will you grant me the favour I ask? My residence is at no great distance—indeed it is close at hand—in Grosvenor Square—and the Countess will give you a kind welcome; for it is impossible from your appearance to think otherwise than well of you.”

Ethel was on the point of giving a decided

negative in response: she was about to say that if Count Olonetz desired to converse with her he must call at Hendon Court for the purpose: but all in a moment her ideas totally changed, and she said, "Yes, my lord—I will accompany you."

They proceeded together into Bond Street; and indeed it was only a walk of some fifty yards which they had to take in order to reach a splendid equipage waiting at the door of a fashionable jeweller's shop. It was an open barouche, with immense armorial bearings painted on the panels: it was drawn by two magnificent iron grey horses, and was attended by domestics in gorgeous liveries of green and gold. In the carriage was seated a lady whose age might be about sixty, and who was elegantly-dressed, but with that good taste which was appropriate for one of her years, and which did not aim at the appearance of juvenility. She looked surprised for a moment when her husband appeared in the companionship of a young and beautiful lady—for the Count had only in the first instance strolled into the neighbouring streets without any particular object while his wife was engaged at the jeweller's. He rapidly spoke a few words to her in their own native tongue; whereupon her ladyship bestowed on Ethel a bow sufficiently affable though somewhat condescending, and motioned her to take a place by her side in the carriage. The Count then entered it also—the equipage drove away—and in a few minutes it stopped in front of one of the handsomest houses in Grosvenor Square. Meanwhile the Countess Olonetz had exchanged a few observations on general topics with Ethel; and we may observe that her ladyship spoke English with quite as much fluency as her husband.

But let us pause for a moment to explain why it was that Ethel so suddenly changed her mind, and instead of positively refusing to accompany the Count, she the next instant most readily assented. Her first impression was that she must look upon Olonetz as a secret enemy, for some reason or another, of her patroness Lady Langport—and that therefore she herself was bound to have nothing to do with him. But all in a moment it occurred to her that the time had come when the cause of the Count's conduct towards Lady Langport—or rather the Miss Malcolm of that period, fifteen years ago, at Constantinople—was no longer to be shrouded in mystery; and Ethel said to herself, "Her ladyship will doubtless be pleased if I can fathom the secret!"

But still there was much surprise, bewilderment, and even confusion in Ethel's brain, as she rode along in the splendid equipage; for she thought of Lady Langport—of the woman in the mean attire whom for an instant she had taken for her ladyship—then of Count Mandeville—likewise of everything that had fallen from the lips of Count Olonetz; and she felt as if there were more mysteries than one to be unravelled and more than one strange secret to be cleared up.

The equipage stopped, we said, at one of the handsomest mansions in Grosvenor Square. The Count alighted, gave his hand to the Countess, and then assisted Ethel to descend. On entering the house, the Count said to Ethel, "Will you be kind enough to accompany the Countess? I will

rejoin you almost immediately. I am expecting a despatch of importance and must ascertain if it have arrived."

The Countess led the way up a magnificent staircase; and opening the door of an apartment on the first landing, she was about to enter, when she suddenly stopped short upon the threshold, as if surprised at finding some one already in that room. She curtsied with an air of the profoundest respect, and saying something (which Ethel could not understand, but which she fancied must be an apology for the intrusion) she was about to retreat. The lady however who was seated in that apartment, and of whom Ethel had caught a glimpse, now bounded forward, exclaiming first in French, and then repeating it in excellent English, "Who is this lady? why did you bring her? why were you going away with her again?"

The Countess, with a most respectful demeanour, as if speaking to one who was infinitely her superior, said something in her native tongue.

"Ah, you are an English lady?" cried the beautiful creature—for beautiful she indeed was—as she now turned again towards Ethel. "I thought so. 'Tis so easy to tell you English ladies! Heavens! how handsome you all are! But pray walk in. It will please me to converse with you for a little while."

The Countess looked serious, and even annoyed—we might almost say displeased—as she again said something in her own native tongue. Nothing could exceed the haughty dignity with which the young lady then suddenly drew herself up, as she said in English—emphasizing her words, and glancing towards Ethel,—"There is no improper unbending from one's rank in conversing with an English lady. If she were not a lady in every sense of the term, I should scarcely have found her in your company, Countess; and since I happened to be in this room—where you did not expect to find me—I shall now avail myself of the pleasure which accident has procured me—I mean that of conversing for a little while with the English lady."

The Countess evidently saw that the beautiful young creature was decided; and she dared not any further dispute her will. She therefore turned to Ethel, saying, "Her Highness expresses a desire that you should remain here for a few minutes."

Ethel saluted the young Princess—for such she thus discovered her to be; and her Highness exclaimed in a most affable manner, "Come and sit next to me on this sofa. There! and do not be embarrassed—make yourself quite at home—which is a true English phrase," she added, laughing; "and let us converse without restraint. I am very fond of the English. I was for two or three years in England when a young girl—I had an English governess—and you see, my dear madam, I do not speak your language very indifferently."

But before we continue our description of the present scene, let us pause to say a few words in reference to the personal appearance of the Princess. She was beautiful—not strikingly so, but sweetly beautiful. Her features were delicately formed and of faultless regularity. Her hair was of a light brown—almost of a chestnut hue: her eyes were of a soft limpid blue—and they were

fringed with long lashes which were dark at the roots but grew lighter towards the points, as if the auburn beams of a sunny reflection tipped them goldenly. She was not tall: her figure was slightly formed, and exquisitely symmetrical. There was an expression of angelic innocence in her countenance—an air of fairy lightness about her form. She seemed to be about seventeen or eighteen years of age; and she had that silvery joyousness of voice, those gushing spirits, and that look of artlessness and candour which made her appear as if she were yet in all the freshness of girlhood's still earlier period of fifteen or sixteen. We should add that she was dressed with mingled richness and elegance, in that species of Russian toilet which borrows something from the French, something from the Italian, and something from the Spanish. Thus, for instance, her *robe* was of the most exquisite Parisian fashion: but she wore a high comb at the back of her head, to which a long flowing black veil was fastened—so that if she had possessed an olive complexion instead of the one that seemed formed of milk and roses, and with hair and eyes to correspond, she might have been taken for a daughter of the sunny South on account of that portion of the toilet. But the veil was not drawn over the beautiful face; and as she threw herself loungingly on the sofa by Ethel's side, it formed a vast sable back-ground to show forth her sweet face and sylphid figure in most advantageous relief.

As the reader may have perceived, the Princess instantaneously began conversing familiarly with Ethel—but it was that lady-like, polished, and well-bred familiarity which springs from a kind heart, gushing with the most generous feelings, and yearning towards any one of the same age who may seem fitted to become a companion. Countess Olonetz seated herself at a little distance; and though she was too well-bred, and perhaps too discreet, to continue to display either annoyance or uneasiness at this proceeding on the part of the good-natured, artless, but self-willed Princess, she could not altogether conceal a certain impatience and a desire that the interview should be as short as possible.

"So you see," continued her Highness, "being very fond of the English people, and liking to have an opportunity of speaking your language, I am quite glad that accident should have thrown you in my way. I have only been in London a few days—I mean on this present occasion. I have scarcely yet seen a soul—and I was getting tired of being cooped up in this house just as if it were a cage!"

"I offered to take your Highness in the carriage just now," said the Countess Olonetz.

"Ah, but that was to go shopping!" cried the Princess; "and nothing is more tedious. Pray tell me, my dear madam," she continued, turning towards Ethel, "by what name I may address you?"

Ethel named herself as Mrs. Trevor; and the Princess, gazing upon her with an air of even affectionate interest, exclaimed, "Ah, you are married, then?"

A rapid change took place in Ethel's looks; and the Princess, grasping her hand, said in a tone that was full of tenderness, "Ah, I fear that I may have inadvertently said something to grieve and afflict you! Perhaps—perhaps—your

husband is no more? Ah, forgive me! I see that it is so! And now tell me," pursued the Princess, throwing cheerfulness into her voice and making her countenance brighten up as if it were an invitation to her companion to start away from a melancholy topic,—“tell me what is your Christian name?”

Ethel could not help smiling at the artless good-nature, and unsophisticated familiarity of the youthful Princess: but she at once mentioned her Christian name.

"Ethel! what a beautiful name!" cried the Princess. "Oh, what a beautiful name!"—and she literally clapped her small white hands with all the joyousness of girlish approval. "I must now tell you my name; for I daresay that you do not already know it. It is Roxana——"

At this moment the door opened, and Count Olonetz made his appearance. He started and looked surprised for an instant—but only for an instant; and with a respectful bow towards the Princess, he said, "I am sorry to deprive your Highness of the companionship of the young lady with whom you are conversing; but I happen to know that her time is precious:—and he evidently said these words in English that Ethel might profit by the hint.

"Oh, you must not take her away from me!" cried the Princess, seizing Ethel by both hands. "We have only this instant become acquainted!"

"Indeed, I fear," said Ethel, who was affected almost to tears by the friendship displayed towards her by the youthful Princess,—“I fear that I must leave your Highness.”

"Then you will come and see me again?" exclaimed Roxana, her beautiful countenance lighting up with the idea that had just struck her that they might meet again.

Ethel glanced in an embarrassed manner towards the Count and Countess: she naturally felt that her position was an awkward one.

"To be sure!" said the Count, with the utmost self-possession, "this young lady——"

"Mrs. Trevor!" ejaculated the Princess. "Oh, you see I know her name! Ethel Trevor! But I told her that mine is Roxana Mildreda——"

Ejaculations burst from the lips of both the Count and the Countess,—ejaculations which seemed to be full of mingled alarm and annoyance—nay, almost of affright. There was likewise a cry from the lips of Ethel; for that name of *Mildreda* naturally struck her as strange,—strange when associated with all the incidents that were uppermost in her mind—strange when suddenly flung at her as it were from the midst of the cloud of mysteries that enveloped all the purposes for which she had been brought thither!

"Ah, I forgot," said the Princess, suddenly turning pale, and for a moment looking terrified,—“I forgot that injunction which has been more than once so solemnly repeated——"

"Enough, Princess——*dear* Princess!" interjected the Countess Olonetz, earnestly and entreatingly.

"But why, my dear Mrs. Trevor," ejaculated the volatile Roxana, "should *you* also have cried out as you did when I happened to let slip——"

"I beg your Highness a thousand pardons," said the Count, in a firm and decisive tone: "but Mrs. Trevor's time is precious——"

"Mrs. Trevor did not say so for her herself,"

cried Roxana, with all the petulance of a self-willed child—yet a child that was also innocent and good, with every intention well-meant, and with no sinister thought kept in the back-ground. "I daresay if I were to ask Mrs. Trevor to remain a little while longer with me—"

"Indeed, your Highness," said Ethel, who felt that it was her duty to put an immediate end to a scene so awkward and embarrassing for the Count and Countess as well as for her own self, "nothing would afford me greater pleasure than to prolong the honour which I am experiencing by the condescension of your Highness in favouring me with your notice—"

"Oh, these formal terms! these ceremonial expressions!" cried Roxana, with an air of unmistakable impatience bordering even on disgust. "They are not natural! I hate them! And you who look so frank and candid—so guileless and ingenuous, as if you could not for an instant dissemble—"

"Well then," said Ethel, with her sweetest smile, "let me assure your Highness in all genuine sincerity that I wish I might remain a little longer with you—but I really cannot now."

"You will come again?" asked Roxana, her large liquid blue eyes looking entreatingly upon Ethel.

"Yes," hastily interjected the Countess, "Mrs. Trevor will do herself the honour of again paying her respects to your Highness."

Roxana made another movement of impatience at those ceremonial terms: then taking Ethel's hand, she said emphatically, "There shall be no paying of respects in the case; but you shall come and see me in friendship and as an equal—and it will be with the arms of friendship also that I will receive you."

She then suffered Ethel to leave the apartment, in company with the Count, who hastened to conduct Mrs. Trevor to another room, the door of which he closed—and they were now at length alone together.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

COUNT OLONETZ.

IF Ethel had entered that house with a feeling of considerable curiosity and interest, this sentiment had now become immensely enhanced by the interview with that fair young creature whose appearance, whose manners, and whose discourse were of themselves so well calculated to make an impression upon even the least sensitive mind. But when to these circumstances of interest was superadded the mysterious fact that she bore the name of *Mildreda*—that she had evidently been enjoined not to mention this name—and that both the Count and Countess were vexed and alarmed when in a sort of artless inadvertence and girlish carelessness she had let it fall from her tongue,—Ethel was lost in a perfect maze of wonderment, marvelling what could be the issue from the bewildering labyrinth, and whether the mystery was now to be cleared up during her interview with Count Olonetz.

On the other hand, the Count himself seemed

to feel as if he were placed more or less in a perplexing and embarrassing position,—as if he knew not precisely how to commence the conversation anew, or whether he ought to begin by seeking or giving explanations. Having very courteously motioned Ethel to be seated, he reflected for a minute or two—and then said, "Mrs. Trevor—for by an accident I have learnt your name—you cannot have lost sight of the object for which I requested you to come hither."

"No, my lord," she replied. "I have not forgotten the discourse which just now took place between us."

"Permit me first of all to inquire," resumed the Count, "whether you know much—anything indeed of the person calling himself Count Mandeville?"

"I informed your lordship that my acquaintance with him was very slight."

"True, madam!—and I have not forgotten the observation. But an acquaintance with a person may be slight," he added, with a smile, "though there be a thorough knowledge of the individual's character and antecedents."

"I know scarcely anything of Count Mandeville," responded Ethel: "I never saw him but once before to-day—and to speak candidly, my lord, the little I have heard concerning him was not calculated to make me desire his acquaintance."

"Then perhaps you can tell me nothing of his present proceedings?" said the Count.

"Oh, no, my lord—nothing!" ejaculated Ethel, almost with surprise at the question: and then she immediately added, "Your lordship really seems to think that I have some greater knowledge—"

"We will say no more of Count Mandeville for the present," interrupted Olonetz. "Let us speak of the other."

"The other?" said Ethel, half dubiously; for she thought it was a somewhat supercilious way of alluding to a lady. "Do you mean—"

"I mean her who once bore the name of Malcolm. Of course you admit knowing her?"

"Yes—I have admitted it, my lord."

"Truly!" observed the Count, with a smile, "you could not very well have helped admitting it."

"I scarcely understand your lordship. But Ah!" she abruptly ejaculated, "if you know so much as you apparently do, why put these questions to me? In short, my lord, I know not even whether I am right to remain here to suffer myself to be interrogated—"

"Mrs. Trevor," said Olonetz, fixing a cold severe regard upon her, "I had formed a very favourable opinion concerning you. I am not a man accustomed to judge hastily—and perhaps not half a dozen times in my life have I put faith in first appearances. But in your case I certainly did so. I took you to be sincere and straightforward—in capable of dissimulation or evasiveness; and it was to your supposed uprightness that I meant to appeal when I requested you to accompany me to this house."

"Are all these reproaches addressed to me, my lord," asked Ethel, with ill-concealed indignation, "because I reserve to myself the right of fixing on those questions which I may choose to answer, and those which I decline to notice?"

"I really cannot altogether understand you, Mrs. Trevor," said the Count. "It struck me that only a few moments ago you were inclined to throw a veil of doubt and mystery around your acquaintance with her who once bore the name of Malcolm."

"Let me ask, my lord, why you invariably speak of her in this manner?"

"I told you just now that I did not know what name she now bears. How, then, am I to speak of her otherwise than I do?"

"But—but, my lord," continued Ethel, having a thousand conflicting ideas in her brain, but scarcely knowing how to give expression to them, "there is a superciliousness—a contemptuousness in your tone and manner, when referring to that lady—"

"Ah, then," said the Count drily—and he fixed a peculiar look upon Ethel—"you must know very little indeed of that person if you think that I ought to speak of her in other or more honourable terms."

Ethel coloured and looked confused, as she murmured to herself, "Good heavens! can he know Lady Langport's secret?"

"Ah!" said the Count, who caught those evidences of emotion; "you *do* know something, then, concerning the object of our discourse—and you are *not* surprised that I should speak of her in terms of contempt and disgust—aye, almost with aversion. Pray might I ask how long you have known her?"

"But a very, very short time," answered Ethel, trembling with emotion,—"only little more than a fortnight."

"Ah! then perhaps you do not know how long she has been in England?" said the Count.

"Really, my lord," cried Ethel, frightened, "I ought to ask why you put all these questions? She could have done you no harm—"

"In one word, Mrs. Trevor," interrupted Olonetz, "will you tell me where she lives, or where I may find her, and our interview need not last another minute. I shall thank you. My carriage—which I have ordered to wait on purpose—shall take you whithersoever you think fit; and if you would permit me—an old man—old enough to be your grandfather—to offer you this testimonial of gratitude, I shall still consider myself your debtor. Now then, the address of that woman—where is it?"—and as he put this question, the Count drew a splendid diamond ring from his finger.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Ethel, again starting up from the seat which she had a few minutes back resumed, "do you think me capable, my lord, of betraying one who, no matter what she may be, has demonstrated naught but kindness towards myself? For what do you take me?—a traitress—a spy? Oh! are you still bent upon pursuing that unfortunate lady with your dark mysterious vengeance? But, remember, my lord this is London—it is not Constantinople! You may have your steam-ship moored in the Thames—but lift your finger, if you dare, to carry off an English subject! Ah, I told you that your name was not unknown to me!—and now you comprehend in what sense I became acquainted with it?"

"By heaven, this is more and more bewildering!" exclaimed Olonetz, who, though ordinarily

the calmest and most phlegmatic diplomatist in the world, now stamped his foot with veritable rage and impatience. "When I just now said that my name must be known to you, it was not in reference to *that* subject; for how in the name of heaven this affair which you have just mentioned, ever transpired to Miss Malcolm's knowledge, I cannot guess. But let it pass. It is simply ridiculous to suppose that here in England I could think of attempting a mischief to one who may possibly claim the rights of a British subject. No! And here again I am perplexed and bewildered; for you seem to know some things and to be entirely ignorant of others, as if it were only by the veriest fits and starts that she—call her what you will—could have ever given you any insight into her antecedents. Now the fact is, it may be to her interest to communicate with me. I have certain proposals to make; and if you do not choose to tell me where she lives or where I may find her, at least tell her that Count Olonetz, who arrived three days ago in London, and who has seen her, as she knows—"

"Seen her?" echoed Ethel.

The Count made a gesture of disgust and impatience as he rose from his seat, adding coldly, "Yes, madam—after all I am deceived in you! You are trifling with me—you are playing with evasions and dissimulations—heaven only knows for what purpose!—and in the same unaccountable manner you are even going so far as to strive to make me doubt the evidence of my own senses!"

Again Ethel looked bewildered: she pressed her hand to her brow; for strange thoughts were again creeping into her brain—strange mysterious ideas which were growing a trifle stronger than at first, though still vague and indefinite.

"Madam," cried the Count, with a certain degree of eagerness, as if snatching at a thought which had just occurred to him—"more than once during this interview has it struck me that we were playing at cross purposes—of course unintentionally and ignorantly,—that we were pursuing lines of thought which though they sometimes seemed to meet and combine, were in reality different and separate; and nothing could afford me greater pleasure than to be enabled to recall the harsh expressions to which I just now gave utterance concerning you."

"Ah, my lord," said Ethel, with tears in her eyes, "if you only knew how incapable I am of prevarication and duplicity, you would indeed give me credit for the most genuine sincerity in the present case!"

"By heaven, it must be so!" said Olonetz emphatically: then, as he regarded that beautiful face with earnest interest, and looked into the depths of those hazel eyes, so soft and candid in their expression—as he regarded the exquisitely cut lips on which it seemed impossible that guile could ever linger—he went on to say, "For forty-five years have I been in the schools of diplomacy and it has been my business to look deep down into the human heart through the mirror of the countenance. If ever the hand of an angel traced the purest thoughts upon a mortal brow, it is here! it is here!"

The stern severe diplomatist was almost affected by the direction which his thoughts were thus taking, as he continued to gaze upon that beauti-

ful face—but only as a father might gaze upon the face of a beloved daughter; and with a kind smile he said, "Now let us sit down once more, and see if we can understand each other. Do you mind trying?"

"No, my lord," answered Ethel, touched by the old man's altered bearing towards her. "I do really think that there is something to be cleared up!"—and then, after a pause, and with a deep mysterious look, she added, hesitatingly and diffidently, "Think you, my lord, that we are both alluding to the same person?"

"Oh, as for that," cried the Count, with another smile, "it is impossible there can be any mistake!"

"And I should think so too, my lord," said Ethel, again renouncing as preposterous and ridiculous a certain idea which had floated vaguely and dimly in her brain.

"Even if you could have no certitude on the point," continued his lordship, "I myself am utterly beyond doubt. Now, listen! It seems that you know how Miss Malcolm and I met at Constantinople. Well, that was between fifteen and sixteen years ago. I never saw her again till yesterday——"

"Yesterday, my lord?" said Ethel dubiously.

"Yes—I repeat *yesterday*. I was in Regent Street—on foot at the time. I ran against Count de Mandeville—as he calls himself: we were speaking on certain matters, when all in a moment an exclamation burst from his lips. '*By heaven, there she is!*' he cried; and she was appearing round a corner as he spoke. There she stood, transfixed for nearly a minute; and thus I had a full opportunity of surveying her. I confess that I had somewhat forgotten her since we met in Constantinople: but sixteen years make differences in personal appearances as well as in memories. However, there she was! Mandeville pointed her out to me; and even after she had vanished as it were from our view, her image remained strongly imprinted on my mind. I ran after her—but she was nowhere to be seen. I must confess that for the first time in my life I was so completely taken aback by the suddenness of that unexpected appearance—I was so entirely riveted to the spot—that she escaped from me as it were before I even thought of accosting her. As for Mandeville, he had of course his own good reasons for not caring to meet her——"

"My lord," interrupted Ethel, who had hitherto listened with breathless attention: "that lady—that female whom you saw yesterday——"

"Well," ejaculated the Count, "was she not the same whom I again beheld to-day—just now—not an hour ago—in Cork Street—and yourself and Mandeville in her company?"

Ethel sank back in her chair, like one who was overpowered with consternation and dismay; and she gazed with a species of fearful, awe-felt, bewildered vacancy upon Olonez. That idea which had already undergone so many fluctuations—so many transitions from light to darkness, and from darkness to light—now appearing suddenly to flame up into a blaze potent enough to illumine the whole mystery.

"Good heaven, what ails you, madam?" asked the Count, frightened at her appearance. "You are ill!—I will summon assistance!"

"No, my lord—no," said Ethel. "I thank

you—I am better;" and she raised herself up in her seat again. "But that lady whom you saw at Constantinople, between fifteen and sixteen years ago——"

"Now I will tell you something strange, madam," interrupted the Count. "It *did* strike me that Miss Malcolm, when I knew her by that name at Constantinople, had dark eyes and hair—whereas this woman's hair and eyes are lighter. Ah! is it possible," he exclaimed, "that there can be any error—any mistake?" He looked bewildered for a moment—then he reflected profoundly—and then he said, "No, it is impossible! there is no mistake!"

At this moment the door opened; and a fine tall man, of very distinguished appearance, and whose age might be about forty, entered the room. He was fashionably dressed, but with perfect good taste; and he carried a riding-whip in his hand, as if he had just come from taking exercise on horseback. His hair was of light brown: his whiskers, of a vivid auburn at the roots, darkened towards the extremities: his moustache was lighter still than his whiskers, and had the points curled inward towards the corners of the lips. He had large blue eyes, a very high forehead, and well-arched brows. He was well made, and of a firmly knit frame, but with a perfect symmetry of proportions.

He entered the room without knocking, and without apology—moreover with only a slight inclination of the head, somewhat partaking of the off-hand condescending familiarity of a nod, in acknowledgment of the profoundly respectful salutation made to him by the Count. His eyes immediately settled upon Ethel, to whom he bowed most courteously, and whom he at once regarded with an air of unmistakable interest. Yet there was nothing bold nor insolent—much less of a libertine character in his looks; it was with a respectful interest and admiration that he contemplated her, and also as if he had previously heard her spoken of in a manner which had impressed him favourably with her.

"Your Imperial Highness," said Count Olonez, in a manner which was coldly significant, though perfectly respectful, "I am engaged at present——"

"Is this lady Mrs. Trevor?" asked the Grand Duke—for no less a personage was the individual whom we are now introducing to our readers; and it may be easily supposed that Ethel started when she thus abruptly and unexpectedly found herself the object of such an inquiry.

"Yes, my lord," responded Olonez, with another bow: "this lady is so named. Has your Highness any particular reason——"

"What? for asking who she is?" said the Duke. "Yes—certainly I have. Roxana——"

"Ah!"—and the ejaculation faintly escaped the Count's lips. It might be either an expression of relief experienced on account of some cause of apprehension being suddenly removed; or it might have been in surprise at the mention of the name of the youthful Princess, in connexion with the Duke's appearance there at the moment and his inquiries concerning Mrs. Trevor.

"Roxana," pursued the Grand Duke, not heeding that faintly uttered ejaculation from the Count's lips, "has just been telling me that she experienced very great pleasure from your society



ere now, Mrs. Trevor. She is as lively as a kitten, and full of whims and caprices. But I suppose she must be humoured. In a word, then——”

“My lord,” interrupted Count Olonetz, “Mrs. Trevor’s time is really precious——”

“Time?” echoed the Grand Duke, fixing a haughty regard upon Olonetz—and it was as if to demand who would dare to think of time at a moment when *he*, one of the Imperial Princes of Russia, chose to disregard it?

“I beg your Highness’s pardon,” said Olonetz, with a very profound bow.

Mrs. Trevor,” continued the Grand Duke, who spoke English almost as well as the Princess Roxana herself, “from what my daughter has told me, you are a widow. Of course you are well born and respectable? Your appearance indicates that much. Well, the next point is——”

“Really, my lord,” interrupted Olonetz, speak—
No. 23.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

ing in a whisper, which was however loud enough to be heard by Ethel, “you will offend this young lady. Remember, this is not Russia—it is England——”

“Ah, my lord!” interrupted the Grand Duke, with an accent of bitterness in his tone, and a strange flashing significance in his eye, “I know what England is, and what the English are, as well as your lordship—although you have twice before visited this country as Ambassador, and are now here on an extraordinary and special mission.—Mrs. Trevor,” proceeded the Prince, “I have only a very few words to say. My daughter, the Princess Roxana, has taken a fancy to you; and I am accustomed to humour her whims to the utmost of my power. I should like her to have a respectable well born English lady as her companion. Think of the matter! As for terms, you may name them:—or if you leave them to me, I have not the slightest doubt

I shall fix upon a sum four times as large as you would think of asking. You know who I am:—you will let me know who you are. Prove yourself a gentlewoman in *fact*, as you are in *appearance*—and the matter is settled."

Ethel listened in astonishment; while Count Olonetz looked on in mingled alarm and curiosity in respect to the manner in which this singular scene might end.

"I thank your Imperial Highness," said Ethel, at length recovering her self-possession: "I also desire to express my heartfelt gratitude for the favourable opinion entertained of me by the Princess; but I am so situated as to be beyond the necessity of accepting"—she hesitated, and then said, "at least for the present, the position which through so much good feeling has been offered me."

At this instant the door of the apartment again opened; and a footman entered, presenting a card upon a silver salver, and saying, "I told the lady that your Excellency was engaged; but her ladyship says that she will either wait, or call again to-morrow, according as your lordship may appoint."

The Russian Plenipotentiary took up the card—glanced at it—and muttered audibly, "I do not know the lady."

"I daresay your Excellency wishes to see her," said the Grand Duke, with a smile; "for you are very gallant towards the fair sex; and in the meantime Mrs. Trevor shall come and sit for half-an-hour with Roxana, who appears very anxious to see her again."

"Indeed, your Imperial Highness," said Olonetz, who was most anxious to continue with Ethel that discourse which had arrived at so interesting a point, "I know that Mrs. Trevor is even now kept much to her inconvenience—"

"Let Mrs. Trevor answer for herself," interrupted the Prince curtly. "Madam, I ask you as a favour to grant half-an-hour of your time to my pretty, whimsical, self-willed, and really amiable daughter; and I am sure you will not refuse her?"

Ethel felt all the magnitude of the compliment conveyed her—her society being thus earnestly solicited by this Grand Duke on behalf of that youthful Princess, utterly unknown although she was to them both, and with no other guarantee for her character and social position than having been accidentally brought thither by the Count and Countess Olonetz. With these considerations, therefore, she could not refuse; and there was an additional motive which induced her to give an assent—namely, that she on her own side had conceived no ordinary sentiment of interest and even of affection, if so strong a feeling could arise in so short a space, for the beautiful Roxana. Count Olonetz—a thorough man of the world—comprehended what was passing in Ethel's mind: he also perceived that the Grand Duke was bent upon having his daughter's whim gratified; and therefore, making a merit of the necessity, he said with a low bow, as he glanced at the card which he held in his hand, "Your Highness is right: I will see this lady who desires an interview with me; and perhaps you, Mrs. Trevor, will have the goodness to signify to me when you have concluded your present visit to the apartment of the Princess?"

"Good," said the Grand Duke. "In half-an-hour Mrs. Trevor shall return to you:" and he moved towards the door to open it.

Then Olonetz, hastily placing his finger upon his lips, whispered in rapid utterance to Ethel, "Not a syllable with regard to the subject of our late discourse!"

Mrs. Trevor bent upon him a look which was as much as to imply that she should scarcely think of betraying communications that were confidential; and she followed the Grand Duke from the apartment. His Highness led her to a different room from that in which she had first seen Roxana: it was larger, and, if possible, more sumptuously furnished. The youthful Princess was alone there when the door opened; and flinging down her book, she bounced from the sofa with a joyous cry, while her lovely countenance lighted up with a kindred feeling at the appearance of Ethel.

"Now, my dear child," said the Grand Duke, affectionately tapping his daughter's cheek, "I have brought this new friend of yours to see you for one short half-hour: but whether she will ultimately consent to the proposition which I have made her on your behalf, must depend upon your powers of persuasion—for mine have totally failed to accomplish the purpose."

"Ah, we shall see!" exclaimed Roxana, clapping her little hands joyfully. "At all events I have you here for half-an-hour, Mrs. Trevor!"—then as the Duke quitted the room, she added, "But I shall call you Ethel. It is such a sweet pretty name! You will not be offended—will you?"

"By no means," answered the young lady, who was irresistibly attracted towards that fairy-like, sylphid, unsophisticated young creature, in whom so many natural graces blended with such venial faults as self-will, caprice, and petulance, as if she were a spoilt child.

"Now come and sit down with me," continued Roxana, leading her new friend to the sofa. "I do not know how it is that I learnt to love you so dearly all in the space of a few minutes: but so it was! Perhaps it is because there is such softness in your looks—so much kindness—so much unmistakable goodness! But no matter! because the fact is as I tell you."

"You are very kind, my dear Princess," said Ethel; "and I feel very much flattered—"

"No compliments, my dear friend!" interrupted Roxana. "I am wearied—Oh, I am so wearied of those ceremonial expressions which make life one dreary cold formality!—yes, almost as cold as that horrible region in which I was born!"

"Do you speak thus, dear Princess, of your native Russia?"

"Russia? Ah, true! Siberia is a part of the Russian Empire."

"Siberia?" ejaculated Ethel. "Were you born in Siberia?"

"Oh, yes," ejaculated Roxana, as if the question surprised her. "But, Ah! I forgot! You of course can know nothing of all that! You do not know how many miles I have travelled, young as I am!—thousands and thousands of miles!"

"Indeed? you astonish me!" said Ethel. "But perhaps your imperial father held some high command in Siberia at the time?"

"Oh, no," exclaimed the Princess, shaking her beautiful head with a singular expression of countenance: "the circumstances were very different. I myself am not very rightly acquainted with them—I merely seem to have a dim notion thereof floating in my brain; for no one has ever given me the narrative in detail, and the little that I do know has been gleaned from certain mysterious hints which my female dependants have sometimes dropped in my hearing, or which I have otherwise heard whispered around me."

"Ah!" said Ethel, surveying the fair young creature with an additional interest, now that she learnt that there was a mystery of some kind or another attending upon her early being.

"Of course, you know, my dear Ethel," continued Roxana, "that Siberia is a place of exile?"

"You seem to shudder, dear Princess, when you think of it. Is the aspect of that dire wintry region so very awful that it has made such a powerful impression upon you?"

"Oh," exclaimed Roxana, smiling and opening her beautiful eyes quite wide, "you have misunderstood me, Ethel! I only know Siberia from what I have heard and read of it."

"I thought you said that you were born there?"

"And so I was: but when only a year old," continued the Princess, "I was borne away from Tobolsk along with my father and taken into Russia. So you see, my dear Ethel, that from actual experience I know no more of that fearful hyperborean region than you do yourself."

Ethel was on the very point of asking the Princess whether her mother was dead—and if so, how long a time had elapsed since her decease—but she feared lest it might prove delicate ground to touch upon; and she remained silent.

"You must know, my dear Ethel," continued the Princess, "that my poor mother was herself an exile—she had been banished into the wild Siberian clime!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mrs. Trevor, "do they banish duchesses and princesses in this manner in your country?"

"Ah! my mother was neither a duchess nor a princess when she was banished. Indeed, I know not to what family she belonged, nor what her position in life was: I have never heard. But I fancy she must have been of humble condition—which did not however prevent her from being exceedingly beautiful."

"So I should conceive," said Ethel, gazing with the most earnest interest upon Roxana.

"Oh, you must not judge by me!" exclaimed the young Princess, laughing: "for I have heard my dear father on one or two occasions observe that I by no means resemble my poor deceased mother. And an old nurse who brought me from Siberia, and who died some four or five years ago—she also used to look at me attentively sometimes and declare that I did not take much after my maternal parent. But let me go back to what I was saying. Where was I?"

"You were telling me, dear Princess, that your mother was not in a very high social position—"

"On the contrary—methinks she must have been in a very humble one; and this was most probably the reason they exiled her into Siberia—because she had the misfortune—or shall I call

it the good fortune?—I know not which—Alas, poor mother!—to win the heart of a Prince of the Imperial House of Russia. You see, my dear Ethel," pursued Roxana, wiping away a tear from her eye, "the tale is quite a romance—at least so much as I know of it."

"It is indeed a romance," said Ethel; "for I now foresee you are about to tell me that this illustrious Prince—who of course is none other than your father—followed the obscure young lady into her far-off place of exile and there married her!"

"Yes—it was so," rejoined the princess. "Ah, what devotion on the part of my father!—was it not? But from all that I have learnt, an interval of at least two or three years must have occurred between the time when the object of this tender love was sent into exile, and the period when my father was enabled to find an opportunity and take measures to follow her. So you see, Ethel, that having once loved her, he retained her image deeply impressed upon his heart—he remained faithful and constant—and absence and separation impaired not the first freshness of the passion he had conceived for her!"

"The history of Love's deeds, and sacrifices, and incidents of noble daring, does not contain a finer episode than that which you are reciting to me, dear Princess;"—and Ethel sighed, but inwardly and inaudibly, as she thought of her own devoted love and what cruel misadventures it had experienced.

"And yet," continued Roxana, "it was almost impossible that a history so romantic could be without its tragedy. My father had managed to conceal his princely rank at the time when he penetrated into Siberia—he had revealed it only to the venerable Greek priest, who was induced by the spectacle of so much devoted love to pronounce the nuptial blessing—and in addition to that priest, to three witnesses or confidants, one of whom was the old nurse that I just now told you of—"

"But I suppose the secret could not be very long kept?" said Ethel, deeply interested in the narrative.

"No," responded Roxana,—"barely two years. When I was a twelvemonth old, guards suddenly surrounded the humble tenement where we dwelt—they seized upon my father—tore him away from his wife—yes, tore him away from my poor mother! Ah, it is a sad history!—and—and he was brought back to St. Petersburg."

The Princess paused, wiped away a tear from her eye, and then proceeded as follows:—

"I believe—but I am not sure—it is only one of the whispers which at one time I heard circulating about me—that those wretches of soldiers would not at first accede to my father's earnest entreaty that he might be allowed to take me, his infant child, with him: but at length they yielded—"

"I should have thought, dear Princess," said Ethel, gently, "that at your tender age—at that time only a year old—it would have been deemed more prudent to leave you with your mother?"

The Princess seemed struck by the observation: she reflected for a few moments—and then she said, "I never thought of this before!"

"However," interjected Ethel hastily—for she did not wish to leave the young and delicate

mind of the Princess brooding upon any particular point to which she herself had directed her attention;—"the fact is as you have stated it; and thus at that tender age of only a twelvemonth, you were borne amidst the eternal snows of Siberia, for thousands of miles, to the Russian capital?"

"Yes. And now, dear Ethel," proceeded the Princess, in a low soft melancholy voice, "you would doubtless ask me of my poor mother? Think you that she could survive the terrible blow which she had sustained? Her husband torn from her, and separated from her child! No—she sank under the weight of these calamities! It is however a consolation to know that she was not persecuted during the short time that she did survive those fearful incidents. She was taken into the house of the Governor of Tobolsk; and there she was treated with all possible consideration. There too she died!"

"You have given me a most interesting narrative, dear Princess," said Ethel: "it is also a longer one—more collected in its form, and more consecutive in its details, than I could have expected at the outset, when you began by informing me that you knew so little, and that the vague ideas which you did possess concerning the past were merely the results of whispers that had floated around you."

"Oh! can you not understand," exclaimed Roxana, "that to my mind the history is a meagre and disjointed one—lacking a thousand details of interest?—a mere skeleton which it would require so much in the form of substantial explanation to fill up! The history of so much love and so much misfortune belonging to one's parents, must naturally possess a vivid interest for the child! And that interest involves an ardent curiosity to know everything. But with me this curiosity is not permitted to be gratified. For instance, fain would I learn to what family my poor mother belonged. Perhaps that family may be in distress; and I, who am rich, might alleviate their affliction. But no! not even the name of that family has come within the scope of my knowledge! Ah, and what is more—I am not permitted to speak of the past!"—and then sinking her voice to the lowest whisper, the Princess added, "Although I was christened Roxana Mildreda, I am only permitted to sign *one name*, Roxana."

"Then, I suppose, Princess," said Ethel, in a subdued tone—for it was a deep mysterious confidence which appeared to be establishing itself between herself and the beautiful Roxana—"I presume that Mildreda was the Christian name of your mother?"

"Yes," answered the Princess. "But I have no doubt that because my poor mother was of a humble family and of obscure position, and because it was held that she had no right to marry a scion of the Imperial House of Romanoff—it was for this reason, no doubt, that anything which was in any way connected with her must be suppressed, exterminated, cast into oblivion, buried in profound silence, annihilated if possible! And therefore, you saw just now how angry and how frightened the old Count and Countess were when in a moment of inadvertence I mentioned the forbidden name."

"Yes—I noticed it," said Ethel. "Is—is——"

and she half hesitated to put the question,—“is Mildreda a veritable Russian name? is it common in your country?”

"Ah, I do not know," cried the Princess: and then she reflected for nearly a minute. "Well, now you mention it, I do not think I ever heard the name breathed from the lips except in connexion with my poor mother or myself."

"In English we call the name Mildred," said Ethel: "but even with us it is by no means a common one."

"No more is that of Ethel either," interjected Roxana. "But Ah, my dear friend! when I think of it," she continued, with a half supplicating, half frightened look, "you must be sure and keep silent, with regard to all these things I have been telling you. My dear father never speaks to me of the past: from *his* lips I have never learnt any of these details. Indeed I am convinced he does not suspect I know even as much as I really do. As for the old Count and Countess, they have no idea that I have picked up so many facts concerning my past history; and they would be excessively angry and annoyed if they thought that I touched upon the subject at all."

"You may rely upon my discretion, dear Princess," answered Ethel.

"Oh, I knew that I could fully trust you!" exclaimed Roxana: "your looks tell me so!"

"Have you dwelt long," asked Ethel, "with the Count and Countess of Olonetz?"

"Oh, they were for a long time my guardians, so to speak," replied Roxana. "I will tell you how it was. After my father returned from Siberia in the custody of the Imperial Guards, bearing me with him, he naturally found himself in disgrace at Court, and he was ordered to go and take the command of a division of the army at Moscow. That was really a punishment, and also a prisonage—although the Emperor did not of course choose to brand a scion of his family with a disgrace more signal or a chastisement more flagrant. But that punishment lasted for some years—during which I was placed under the guardianship of Count and Countess Olonetz, who had just returned from the Embassy at Constantinople. Then the Count was appointed to the ministry of Foreign Affairs, so that he fixed his abode at St. Petersburg; and thus for a few years I was brought up in the capital. Afterwards he came as Ambassador to England. Then it was that I visited England also; and for three years my education was principally superintended by English governesses. On our return to St. Petersburg, my father, having in the meanwhile been restored to the Imperial favour, took me to live with him. Thus a few more years passed away—which brings down my narrative to the present period. I need only add that Count Olonetz was charged the other day with a special and secret mission to the British Court; and it was deemed advisable—I know not exactly for what diplomatic reason—that an Imperial Prince should accompany him. My father was fixed upon for this particular service. But he does not come with the state and pomp of a Russian Grand Duke: he is here under the *incognito* of Count Simarova; and I, my dear Ethel," added the Princess, laughing, "ought according to the strictest rules of etiquette to be only known to you as the Viscountess Roxana."

"And were you well pleased to revisit England on the present occasion?" asked Ethel.

"Oh, yes! I have already told you that I entertained the most pleasing reminiscences of my former sojourn in this country—I am very fond of England and of the English people: I like them much better," she added, in a lower tone and with a more serious look, "than such cold, formal, ceremonial, stately people as the old Count and Countess. They seem to worship me as a goddess at one moment, and to do all they can to coerce and annoy me the next. Only think! I cannot go to the English Court—I must not receive visits openly—because I am here under an *incognito*! This is diplomatic etiquette!" added Roxana, with a look of contempt and disgust as she pouted her beautiful coral lips. "But never mind!" she added, smiling, and thus unconsciously displaying two rows of pearly teeth which embellished that sweet mouth of youthful freshness; "I have made your acquaintance—I ought to say I have formed your friendship—and I do not now care if no other English lady comes near me."

"You are very kind, dear Princess, to say so."

"Do not say *kind*! I only tell you what I feel. I dare say you think me a strange, wild, impulsive creature: and perhaps you wonder how I can be so giddy, and laugh, and show so much cheerfulness, when it might be supposed that all I know of the sorrowful past ought to be hanging as a dark cloud upon my mind? But no doubt I was naturally from the very first of a gay and lively disposition; and then too, my mind and temper were formed, so to speak, before I was old enough to catch up any of those whispers which floated around me and which gave me an insight into the past. Moreover, let it be borne in recollection that such little knowledge as I do possess on those subjects, came to me gradually—never with a shock: the details stole into my comprehension by degrees; and thus the natural liveliness of my disposition has survived the ordeal."

"Oh, this is easily to be understood," said Ethel. "And God grant, my dear Princess," she added solemnly, "that naught will ever occur to mar this innocent cheerfulness on your part; nor to sadden a disposition which heaven itself has imbued with the pure and ingenuous bliss that angels themselves enjoy!"

Roxana seized Ethel's hand and carried it to her lips. There was a pause, during which the young lady and the youthful Princess contemplated each other with that affectionate earnestness which belonged to a friendship that was already sincere though of such recent growth. At length, Roxana, bending her beauteous head towards Ethel, and speaking in a very low voice, said, "I see that you already love me very much—as I also love you! It appears to me as if we had known each other for a long—long time! I have told you all my secrets except one—"

"Except *one*?" repeated Ethel, with a smile and a look expressive of renewed interest.

"Yes—I have one more secret—the greatest of all!" continued Roxana, with an air of such artless, sweet ingenuous confidence that she looked more irresistibly interesting than ever. "Not even my father entertains the remotest idea that

I am in possession of this secret! As for the old Count and Countess—heaven help me if they were to know it! I should never hear the last of it!"

"Then this secret must be a very important one," said Ethel. "Pray do not think of revealing it to me, dear Princess, without the calmest deliberation and forethought."

"Not reveal it to you? Why, you would not betray it!"

"Betray it? Heaven forbid! Nothing that ever comes in sweet confidence from those lips of your's, dear Princess, shall be revealed by me!"

"I knew that such was your disposition," said Roxana. "And now listen to me, my dear friend. You know I have two or three times mentioned an old nurse—Dame Ladoiska as she was called—"

"The one who brought you in her arms from Siberia," interjected Ethel.

"The same. Well," pursued the Princess, "this good nurse died between four or five years ago—that was soon after I left the Count and Countess and went to live with my father, at the time when he was restored to the Imperial favour. When on her death-bed, the worthy Ladoiska took an opportunity of saying something particular to me. She told me that she had brought away with her from Siberia, and had ever since preserved, a miniature portrait of my poor mother—"

"A portrait of your mother?" ejaculated Ethel, with increasing curiosity.

"Yes—a portrait of my poor mother," resumed Roxana. "The good dame said that she had all along intended to bequeath it into my keeping—but that I must treasure it in secret—I must never let my father, nor indeed any one know that I possessed it—"

"And yet you are telling me this great secret, dear Princess?"

"Oh! because I feel as if I could have no secrets from you! No—I will conceal nothing from you! I long to possess your friendship! There is something—I know not what—which attracts me towards you. But, Ah! I have already conjectured it must be your sweet looks and the goodness which shines in your eyes! In your bosom therefore, dear Ethel, all my thoughts shall be poured forth. And now let me give you the crowning proof of this friendship—this love of mine. Stay one moment!"

The volatile young Princess sprang up from her seat by Ethel's side; and she bounded across the room—light as a fawn—graceful as a fairy—her well-shaped feet and beautifully rounded ankles moving glancingly as it were over the thick carpet which her steps scarcely seemed to touch. A door at the extremity shut her out from the view of Ethel for a few instants: but during those few instants Mrs. Trevor experienced a strange agitation—a feeling that resembled a presentiment—a forecasting of something important or wildly romantic. She felt indeed as if she were standing on the threshold of some stupendous revelation.

The door at the extremity again opened; and the youthful Princess came bounding forward, with something in her hand. It was a miniature portrait, beautifully painted in water colours, and so well preserved in the frame and glass that enclosed it that none of the vividness of that colouring was dim.

"Here, dear Ethel," said the Princess, "is the portrait of my mother."

One glance—yes, one glance was sufficient; and then from Ethel's lips started the ejaculation—"Mildred!" and she gazed up in a kind of vacant wonderment into the countenance of the astonished and almost affrighted Princess.

At that very instant the door opened, and the Grand Duke made his appearance.

"My father!" exclaimed Roxana: and she snatched at the portrait in order to conceal it about her person.

But it dropped upon the carpet: the Grand Duke—who had at once perceived that there was something strange on the part of his daughter and Mrs. Trevor—sprang forward, and caught the miniature from Roxana's hand just as she had picked it up again.

"Good God!—Mildred!" exclaimed the Grand Duke; and with a countenance suddenly smitten by a haggard and ghastly expression, he staggered back and sank upon a chair, while ejaculations of terror and dismay burst from the lips of Ethel and the Princess.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE AMBASSADOR'S VISITRESS.

We must now return to Count Olonetz, whom we left at the moment when he was about to receive the lady whose card had been sent up and duly handed to him by the footman.

"Lady Langport," muttered the Count to himself, as he again glanced at the card, after the Grand Duke had conducted Ethel away from the apartment, and while a footman was gone to escort the visitress thither. "Now that I bethink me, this name of Langport is not altogether unfamiliar to me. There was an English diplomatist of this name. To be sure! Lord Langport! I met him somewhere a great many years ago—"

At this moment the door opened; and the footman announced Lady Langport.

Count Olonetz advanced a pace or two in order to salute his visitress with becoming courtesy: but he suddenly stopped short—started—passed his hand rapidly across his eyes—and then looked at her again with a strange, wildly wondering and bewildered expression of countenance.

"I see that your Excellency has a recollection of me," said Lady Langport, advancing with a smile upon her countenance—and there was something more or less significant or malicious in that smile: "but you cannot quite call to mind where you have seen me before; and therefore I will refresh your memory."

"My memory?" repeated Olonetz, as if mechanically; and he looked bewildered—confounded.

"You need not think, my lord," continued Lady Langport, with a more marked expansion of that smile of malicious significance, "that I am come to pick a quarrel with you or cover you with upbraiding; for I see that your conscience is unpleasantly reminding you that it is not altogether clear in respect to myself—though even

yet I scarcely think you rightly know who I am, or that your memory serves you with a faithful accuracy."

"But how—where—when"—faltered out the Russian plenipotentiary, more and more bewildered and perplexed.

"I will come to your assistance," interjected Lady Langport: then fixing her black eyes, so vividly brightened by *Kahol*, upon the Ambassador, she said with peculiar significance, "Your Excellency will remember a certain Miss Malcolm who was introduced to your lordship at the British Embassy at Constantinople, and whom you subsequently intended to have carried off in your steamship."

Count Olonetz stared as never before that accomplished diplomatist and polite courtier had stared upon a human being. Never until then had he so completely lost his self-possession!—never had he shown himself so utterly at fault!—never had he so completely betrayed the fact of being surprised in a manner that was astounding, almost overwhelming.

"You see, my lord," continued Lady Langport, "I have rightly accused you. Your conscience pricks you."

"And you—and you," he faltered out, "are—Miss Malcolm?"

"The Miss Malcolm of that time," rejoined the visitress; "but Lady Langport now. Indeed I became Lady Langport a very few weeks after I had the honour of meeting you at Constantinople—and when," she continued, in an ironical tone, "you entertained such pleasant and agreeable designs concerning me."

While Lady Langport was thus speaking, Count Olonetz was recovering his self-possession and his faculty of deliberation—though, if possible, he grew more and more bewildered as he gave way to his reflections and as he gazed on the lady before him.

"Ah!" thought he to himself, "there is indeed a difference! my memory had not failed me! Here we have dark hair and eyes—and this is assuredly the same whom I knew as Miss Malcolm at Constantinople. She then seemed to be about four or five and twenty—that was fifteen or sixteen years ago—and now she seems to be approaching forty. So it *is* the same! But good God! that *other!*"—and again all the Count's ideas were lost in a bewildering fog, and in a mist which it appeared impossible for reason or discrimination to penetrate.

"You evidently take very much to heart, my lord," resumed Lady Langport, utterly ignorant of what was really passing in his mind, "the conduct of which you were guilty—or rather, I should say, which you sought to practise towards me fifteen or sixteen years ago at Constantinople. But pray be at your ease. I will forgive you on one condition—and that condition is that you will be candid with me."

"Candid with you?" repeated Olonetz, motioning for her ladyship to be seated, while he himself sank into a chair; and that politeness to his visitress was mechanical rather than deliberate and intentional at the moment.

"Yes—I will explain myself," said her ladyship, accepting the chair which was proffered her. "But in the first instance I should inform your lordship that I only just now heard of your

arrival in London. A friend of mine—Lady Belgrave—called upon me this afternoon; and in the course of conversation she happened to mention the fact that a Russian Plenipotentiary Extraordinary arrived three or four days ago on a special mission. I asked the name, little thinking that it would prove to be one so familiar to my ears. Conceive my astonishment when the Countess of Belgrave mentioned the name of Count Olonetz. I was at once seized with a curiosity that could not rest until it gratified itself: I determined to call without delay upon your Excellency. I besought Lady Belgrave to bring me into London in her carriage—for I live a little way in the country: she assented—and I am here."

Count Olonetz bowed. He was still lost in thought: but he had nevertheless so far regained his self-possession as to decide upon remaining a listener for the present, so long as her ladyship chose to speak and be explanatory.

"A nobleman of your keen perception," resumed Lady Langport, "can scarcely fail to comprehend in what sense my curiosity is excited. We are in England, my lord: and *here*," she added, with a smile, "you are no longer dangerous. Our laws rob the fiercest foreign lions of their claws when they come amongst us. Indeed, I knew that you were in England some few years ago as Russian Ambassador: but *then* I did not perhaps possess quite so much courage as I do now—I thought you might still be formidable—and therefore I came not near you. But *now* I have grown braver. Indeed, my lord, I should not hesitate to appeal to the Home Secretary for protection against you if I thought you had the slightest intention of renewing the treacherous design which you harboured against me at Constantinople in the year 1831."

Again the Count bowed: but he remained silent; and Lady Langport continued in the ensuing strain:—

"What I wish you to tell me, my lord, is why you conceived that treacherous plot to which I have just alluded? What was your motive for making me the object of so dark and bitter a persecution? How had I been unfortunate enough to offend your Excellency? or how had I incurred the displeasure of the Russian Government, supposing that you were merely the instrument of its vindictive wrath at the time? The mystery was to me impenetrable then: it has remained so ever since. Heaven be thanked! your dire intent oozed out by certain means, which I shall assuredly never betray; and I was warned in time to enable me to escape from the hideous danger that threatened me. Now, my lord, you understand wherefore I have called upon you, and the nature of the explanations which I expect from the lips of your Excellency."

"Madam," replied the Count, "there is indeed a grave mystery—but it is one into which I myself scarcely know how to penetrate. Let me however take some steps towards unravelling the skein of difficulties, embarrassments, and complications. You are assuredly the Miss Malcolm to whom I was presented at the British Embassy at Constantinople. That is beyond a doubt. But now permit me to ask whether you really told me the truth when on that particular evening—you see I have a good memory—you suffered me to understand that you were the only daughter of the

deceased Mr. Malcolm, merchant of St. Petersburg?"

Lady Langport started—an uneasy feeling seized upon her—it was her turn to become bewildered: but regaining her self-possession she said, "Why do you ask this question, my lord?"

"Will your ladyship allow me to inquire," continued the Count, "whether your father left *two* daughters behind him?"

Lady Langport was astonished at the question, and painfully perplexed, inasmuch as she always dreaded that anything which she could not precisely comprehend at the moment, must bear reference to the stupendous secret which she cherished and concealed. She did not immediately reply: but after a minute's reflection, she fancied there could be no possible harm in saying, "My father left but *one* daughter behind him."

"And you mean me to understand," said the Count, "that *you* are this daughter?"

Lady Langport looked aghast for a moment: and then she hurriedly said, "Yes, yes!—you know that I must be! I told you so at Constantinople! Why should you doubt it?"

"Ah! and you told me other things at Constantinople," pursued Olonetz. "You said that you had travelled many thousands of miles in your time—"

"And it was the truth that I told you," interjected Lady Langport.

"And yet it was that very observation on your part," rejoined the Count, "which served to convince me that you were—But no matter! There is a mistake, madam!" he added vehemently; "and you evidently are *not* the person for whom I took you!"

It was almost a scream which burst from Lady Langport's lips, as the terrible thought struck her that her secret was at length known—even if it had not previously been—to Count Olonetz, and that the conviction had burst upon him that she, the mother of Mildred, had for years been playing the part of Mildred herself!

"Madam," resumed Count Olonetz, "if you were not the Miss Malcolm for whom I took you—and it is now quite clear that you were *not*—a fearful mistake would have been committed if you had been stealthily carried off that time from Constantinople. Now that I have given you this assurance, you can all the more readily believe me when I declare that I harbour no sinister design against you. You need not appeal to your Home Minister: I pledge you the word of a nobleman and a gentleman that even if I had the power to effect your extradition from this country, I would not do it. You are altogether the wrong person in one sense—and yet you are the Miss Malcolm of St. Petersburg!"

"This is most bewildering!" said Lady Langport, who began to breathe more freely, as the Count made no positive nor pointed allusion to her secret.

"Bewildering indeed!" he said, as he now mentally reviewed all that had previously taken place betwixt himself and Mrs. Trevor. "Again," he muttered to himself, "it seems to be a play of cross purposes! Madam," he continued, turning towards her ladyship, "it is a point on which I should like to set myself right."

"And I also," said Lady Langport; "for there

is evidently some strange mystery or misunderstanding between us."

"Well, then, madam," continued the Count, "let us endeavour to get upon the right track; and in order to do so, let us start from the beginning. The late Mr. Malcolm, of St. Petersburg, who died in the year 1824, left a daughter named Mildred behind him."

"He did," answered Lady Langport, somewhat faintly.

"And you tell me that you are that daughter?—that you were Mildred Malcolm?"

"The same," rejoined Lady Langport: but her tone grew fainter still.

"Then, madam, all I can say is," exclaimed Count Olonetz abruptly, "that there must have been *two* Mildred Malcolms!"

"Two Mildred Malcolms? What do you mean, my lord?"

"Yes—I mean *two*!—one with dark hair and eyes—and that is yourself: the other with brown hair and blue eyes—and that is the one whose proceedings in the world have commanded my attention."

"Two Mildreds? My God! what does this mean?" murmured Lady Langport, now quivering violently; so that her trembling was seen despite all the layers of corsets and casings of garments which enveloped her form. "Brown hair and blue eyes? Just heaven! But no! no! no! it is impossible! The Neva——"

"Ah! what say you?" cried the Count, catching at the word: "the Neva? Yes, to be sure! the accident on the Neva in the year 1825? That was the very time when——"

"When what? when what?" demanded Lady Langport. "But what is it that you can possibly mean?"

"What is it that *you* mean?" asked the Count, fixing his keen eyes scrutinizingly upon Lady Langport; for all her increasing trouble was discerned by him—not a single alteration of her countenance passed unnoticed. "So far as I myself," he continued, "can have any reference to make to that terrible accident on the Neva, is to mark it as the date when a particular arrest was effected. But now I bethink me, madam—I remember you told me at Constantinople that your mother perished on the occasion of the accident?"

"An arrest? What means your Excellency?"—and it was in a quick feverish tone that Lady Langport spoke.

The Count reflected for a few instants; and then he said, "Yes—I may as well be explicit to this little extent.—The arrest, madam, to which I allude, was that of a young lady, who was identified beyond all possibility of doubt, so that there could have been no mistake. Besides, subsequent circumstances corroborated the fact of that identity——"

"My God! what do you mean?" cried the wretched woman, in a broken voice; for she felt as if the glare of a tremendous light were about to burst upon her, with blinding, searing effect. "The arrest of a young lady?"

"Yes," answered Count Olonetz, steadily and decisively; "the arrest of a certain Mildred Malcolm, the daughter of the deceased merchant—no matter who you yourself might have been, or how you could have been a Mildred Malcolm also!"

The wretched woman now clasped her hands and sank back like one annihilated in her seat; for the glare of light had indeed blazed in upon her. It was like the flame of a volcano environing her: it was as one terrific glare of lightning, searing her eye-balls. Her daughter had not been swallowed up in the depths of the Neva: she had been arrested and carried off! Perhaps she yet lived!

It was a wonder that Lady Langport's senses did not abandon her: but no doubt that for the retention of her consciousness she was indebted somewhat to that habit of self-command which she had so long experienced, and to her constant state of mental preparation to receive any evil tidings without suffering them to have the effect of a shock. Thus, immense though the effect was which the Count's words produced upon her, it was still less than it might have been if she were less prepared by the habits of her strange life to encounter the blow.

"Madam," said Olonetz, "I have evidently told you something that affects you deeply. How will you now account to me for the fact that Mildred Malcolm was arrested on this particular occasion while you have persisted that you yourself were that same Mildred Malcolm?"

"For God's sake do not question me, my lord," moaned the unhappy woman: "do not question me, I implore you!—but tell me how this happened—why Mildred was arrested—whether she was home? Tell me, in short, everything that you know!"

"Madam," interrupted Count Olonetz, rising from his seat and speaking with severity, "I will tell you nothing more so long as you continue to envelope yourself in a mystery which begins to savour of a fraud—a cheat!—though heaven only knows for what earthly purpose!"

"Be not harsh—be not cruel with me!" cried Lady Langport, clasping her gloved hands entreatingly. "Oh you know not the agony of suspense which at this instant is rending my heart!"

"It may be so, madam," interrupted the Count coldly; "but I have placed a seal upon my lips. If I were to give utterance to another word on that topic, I might be trenching on State secrets."

"State secrets, my lord?" repeated the wretched woman, with an agonized and bewildered air.

"Yes—State secrets," repeated the Count. "Madam, my time is precious. It is sufficient for me to know that you are not—and never were—the Miss Malcolm who——But no matter!"

"I conjure your Excellency," cried Lady Langport, sinking upon her knees, "to have mercy on me, and give me some further explanations! Oh, I will be candid! I thought that Mildred was dead—that she was swallowed up in the waters of the Neva——"

"Ah, then, madam, you confess yourself to be an impostress?" said the Count sternly and severely. "Rise—rise, I command you! By heaven, I scarcely know whether the matter ought to end here: for now that I bethink me, I always heard that the Malcolms of St. Petersburg were very rich—and as we know that Mr. Malcolm assuredly died in 1824, and you have told me that the Widow Malcolm perished in the accident on the Neva in the following year—why, then,



it results that Mildred would be the heiress of all their wealth. And therefore," continued the Count, his looks becoming more and more ominous, "if you, madam, personated Mildred Malcolm after her disappearance, in order to get possession of her property, you have committed a cheat so stupendous——"

"No, no!" moaned the wretched Lady Langport, sinking back into a chair; "it is not so! I am incapable of such a crime!"—and she was appalled by the aspect of the perils which were gathering in around her—gulf after gulf appearing to open at her feet—chasm after chasm seeming to yawn in readiness to swallow her up!

"Then what am I to understand?" demanded the Count. "Ah!" he ejaculated, as a sudden idea struck him, reminding him of all the cross-purposes into which he had evidently been led with Ethel, and also of the fact that she had mentioned

the incident which had occurred at Constantinople between fifteen and sixteen years back: "do you happen to be acquainted with a young lady named Mrs. Trevor?"

Lady Langport started up to her feet; and for an instant a horrible idea of some treachery on the part of Ethel struck through her brain.

"Yes—I see that you know her," said the Count quickly. "Oh, ho! now then, indeed, there dawns a light of explanation upon what took place betwixt her and me."

"And your Excellency knows Mrs. Trevor?" said Lady Langport, gasping for breath; and she would have looked pale and ghastly as death, were it not for the exquisite art with which her cosmetics were applied.

"It is but justice to Mrs. Trevor," the Count hastened to say, "that I should lose no time in declaring how well she spoke of you. Yes: I

recollect she protested vehemently, when I questioned her, against being made a traitress and a spy in respect to your ladyship—”

“Ah, kind, good Ethel,” murmured Lady Langport: and amidst all the torturing sensations which were harrowing her, there was a feeling of relief to be derived from the source of Ethel’s goodness. “But how came Mrs. Trevor here?” she inquired.

“Accident—accident,” replied the Count impatiently: then, as he paced rapidly to and fro in the apartment, he mentally asked himself, “What can all this mean? This Lady Langport does not look like a base cheat. What mystery is at the bottom of her conduct? what part can she be playing?—Madam,” he suddenly demanded, stopping short and confronting her ladyship, “who inherited the property left by the deceased Edward Malcolm, of St. Petersburg?”

“Who inherited it?” she said, with a frightened look.

“Yes—who? The fact can be easily discovered; for there was a commercial branch of the house in London. Indeed, one of my secretaries would ascertain the point for us in the course of an hour or two:” and the Ambassador advanced towards the bell-pull.

“Stop, my lord!” cried Lady Langport; “why do you thus seek to push matters to an extreme?”

Olonetz fixed his keen piercing eyes upon the lady’s countenance; and in a peculiar tone he demanded, “What if the true Mildred Malcolm were to come forward and demand an account of that fortune which she never inherited?—aye, demand it of those who are bound to give such an account, be they who or what they may?”

“Good God! Mildred lives!” ejaculated Lady Langport, all the feelings of a mother suddenly getting the better of any other consideration:—then throwing herself upon her knees, she cried, “My lord, my lord! keep me not in suspense! If you know where she is, tell me! tell me!—that I may go and embrace my child!”

Olonetz started. The words which had just been uttered, constituted of themselves a complete revelation in one sense: but when he looked at this woman who knelt at his feet, how could he possibly believe that she was the mother of Mildred whom he knew to be forty-one years of age, and who indeed looked as old as this mother herself!

“You do not believe me, my lord?” cried Lady Langport passionately: “but it is the truth! Oh, spare me! spare me! It is a terrible secret which has been revealed to you!—a secret which for so many years I have kept!”—then rising from her suppliant posture she murmured in a hollow voice, “I am a wretched thing of vanity, my lord; and in this I take heaven to witness lies the only cheat that I have practised!—herein is the only imposture!”

Count Olonetz, beginning to comprehend the actual state of the case, said, “Then I am to suppose, madam, that the Widow Malcolm did not perish amidst the crashing ice of the Neva?”

“No, my lord—no, she lived: she is here! I am she! Yes—sixty years have I numbered; and if my Mildred be indeed alive, she will have just seen her forty-first birthday.”

The Count looked very, very hard at Lady

Langport—until he perceived that this survey was most disagreeable, most humiliating, most painful, because she understood why he was thus looking at her; and as she cast down her eyes, he hastened to say, “Pardon me, madam: I have no right to be rude towards you. But by heaven! you were nearly suffering severely for this freak which has made you personify your daughter; for if you had not fled from Constantinople on a certain occasion, you would assuredly have been sent thousands of miles into the interior of Siberia!”

A cry burst from Lady Langport’s lips; for the Count’s words seemed suddenly to afford her a horrible insight to what had been the fate of her unhappy daughter.

“I have no right to be rude to you,” continued the Count, who spoke with a tone and air which showed that he despised her very much and pitied her very little: “neither have I a right to keep you in suspense relative to your daughter. She lives—she has passed through a thousand vicissitudes—some of her own creating—some created for her, so to speak—”

“Where is she? Oh, tell me, my lord! tell me!” cried the wretched mother: “where is she, that I may fly to her?”

“She is in London, Lady Langport,” was the answer.

“Oh!”—and her ladyship was almost overcome with the idea of meeting her daughter after a separation of nearly twenty-two years.

“I knew not where she dwells—nor where she is to be found,” continued Olonetz; “but this will not prove difficult to be discovered. I myself wanted to see her:—perhaps the business which I should have sought to transact with her in a direct manner, can now be accomplished through your ladyship, her mother. Ah, by the bye!” added the Count, as he recollected that he had just now seen Mandeville with her, “I may perhaps be enabled presently to lay my hand upon a person who will tell us where your daughter is to be found: though, on second reflection, it is scarcely probable,” he muttered to himself, “that she will tell *him* where she lives.”

Lady Langport clasped her hands; and she could scarcely keep back her sobs or restrain her tears as she thought of the prospect of meeting that offspring whom for so many many years she had looked upon as one numbered with the dead.

“I do not exactly know whether it is my duty to inform your ladyship,” resumed Olonetz, after a pause; “but perhaps it were as well to prepare you for certain startling revelations. Listen. Let us go back to the year 1825. Your daughter at that time became engaged in a certain amatory intrigue. Your friends the Nevels were the secret go-betweens. You were ignorant of all that was passing; and thus, when the crisis came, the Government intended not to interfere with you.”

“Alas!” interjected Lady Langport, “I discovered that my poor girl had been seduced—I knew not by whom. It was only the day before the accident on the Neva that I had my eyes opened to the fact of her dishonour and ruin. Until this day I am still ignorant of the name of her seducer!”

“I may as well tell you the facts,” said the

Count, "because you will doubtless learn them from your daughter's lips when you meet. He whom Mildred's beauty fascinated, and who became infatuated with her to a degree that it was believed and feared he would commit the folly of privately marrying her—her lover—her seducer, as you have called him—was a personage of the highest distinction:—he was one of the Imperial Princes!"

"Ah!" ejaculated Lady Langport: "and it was for this, then, that my poor child was arrested?"

"Yes. The opportunity of the fancy-fair upon the Neva was seized upon," continued the Count, "because it was somehow or another ascertained by the police that she was to be there to meet her Imperial lover. From the information which I have received concerning the incident, I believe the arrest took place on one part of the frozen river while the accident occurred at another. Your daughter Mildred was dragged away from the arms of her paramour—hurried to a carriage—and carried off into Siberia."

Lady Langport groaned.

"The young Prince," continued Olonetz, "was borne a prisoner to the Winter Palace, where he was kept for some time; and when it was deemed that he had become reasonable and was cured of his foolish passion, he was suffered to go at large again, but always closely watched. Those incidents occurred, as I need scarcely remind you, in the year 1825. Between two and three years passed away; and then all of a sudden—I think it was in the middle of 1828—the young Prince disappeared. By some means he had ascertained to which part of the empire his Mildred had been borne: or else he set off at a venture, under a deep disguise, and a false name. But no matter how the fact may be; it is certain that in due time he reached a village in the neighbourhood of Tobolsk, where—"

"Your Excellency has forgotten to mention one thing," interposed Lady Langport, in a tone that was full of anguish; "for the unfortunate Mildred was in a way to become a mother when she was carried off from St. Petersburg—"

"Ah, I forgot!" said the Count. "She was prematurely confined on the way, in the midst of the wilds of Siberia—and the child was born dead."

"In the midst of the wilds of Siberia!" repeated Lady Langport, in a tone of affliction. "Alas, poor Mildred! My God! how much she must have suffered! But proceed, my lord. You were telling me how the Imperial Prince journeyed into Siberia, and how at a village in the neighbourhood of Tobolsk—"

"He found the object of his search," continued the Russian Ambassador. "I have already said that he was in a deep disguise and under a false name; and thus his presence was utterly unsuspected by the authorities. He married Mildred:—a priest of the Greek Church was bribed to perform the ceremony. A year elapsed, and a daughter was born."

"A daughter to Mildred!—a granddaughter to me!" murmured Lady Langport. "And that daughter, my lord—the child of that marriage—the offspring of so much devoted love?"

Olonetz reflected: and then said, "Your granddaughter lives, madam: but whether you will be

permitted to see her, even if it should suit your own circumstances to recognise her, is a point which at the present instant I cannot decide."

"Oh, yes, I will recognise her!" exclaimed Lady Langport wildly. "Farewell henceforth to all duplicities and hypocrisies!"

"Perhaps, my lady," interjected Olonetz curtly, "you would have done better if you had never adopted them. But that is your business—not mine."

"Proceed, my lord—proceed," said Lady Langport, deeply humiliated.

"I need not enter into particulars to show how the young Graud Duke, on disappearing from St. Petersburg to visit Siberia, had put his family on the wrong scent and had taken measures to baffle for a considerable period all the conjectures which they might possibly form in respect to his whereabouts. Such however was the fact," continued Olonetz. "At length—it must have been about a couple of years after that most inauspicious marriage, and therefore when the infant offspring thereof was about a twelvemonth old—the facts became known by some means to the Russian Government; the Prince was seized upon, and borne back to St. Petersburg."

"And his wife? his child?" exclaimed Lady Langport, with acutest suspense.

"The wife was left behind—as your own good sense, madam, ought to have suggested would have been the case: but the father was allowed to take his child with him. The marriage was then dissolved."

"Dissolved?" echoed Lady Langport. "Alas, poor Mildred! persecuted in every sense!"

"Wait, madam," interrupted Count Olonetz, with a slight smile of irony wavering upon his lips; "and see how much your daughter Mildred took her persecution to heart! But first let me observe that the Russian Government did not dispute the validity of the marriage while it existed: it only exercised its sovereign privilege of dissolving it. Thus it did not stamp the offspring thereof with the stigma of illegitimacy: but the child has been brought up with the title, the rank, and the consideration of a Princess. So that it is a Princess, madam, whom you may boast of as a granddaughter!"

There was again a certain tincture of irony and sarcasm on the part of Olonetz; but his contempt was directed only towards that wretched creature of conceit and vanity who was now in his presence, and was not reflected even with the slightest scintillation upon the beautiful young Princess Roxana.

"And now, madam," he said, after a brief pause, "I will tell you what effect the dissolution of that marriage produced upon your daughter Mildred. Out of consideration for all that she had endured on account of the circumstance of her being beloved by an Imperial Prince—for it was impossible that the Russian Government could blind itself to the fact that she was in reality a victim and not an offender, and ought to be pitied rather than persecuted—she was removed to the mansion of the Governor of Tobolsk and placed under the care of his Excellency's wife. Perhaps the generosity thus displayed her was coupled with a prudential motive; and in affording her an asylum beneath the roof of the Governor's palace, it was also sought to establish additional

guarantees against her escape and against the possibility of her reunion elsewhere with the Grand Duke. But it would seem as if the precaution was needless and that the imagos of the Imperial Prince was not very strongly impressed upon her mind; for scarcely had a twelvemonth elapsed after her separation from the Grand Duke and her child, when she fled—yes, she *did* manage to make her escape—but it was with the connivance—aye, and in the company too, of a handsome young fellow—an aide-de-camp of the Governor!"

Lady Langport started and gave vent to an ejaculation of dismay.

"What!" she cried: "Mildred a profligate? Mildred guilty of such flagrant wantonness? Oh, but perhaps you judged hastily, and the young man who accompanied her may have been inspired only by motives of a chivalrous generosity to succour one whom he beheld the victim of cruellest persecution!"

Again did a scornful smile play upon the thin lips of the Russian Ambassador, as he shook his head, saying, "It is pardonable in you as a mother to resist unto the very last against the evidences of your own daughter's profligacy: but you must disabuse yourself on the point, madam, and yield to conviction. Your daughter Mildred fled with a paramour—and no trace of either remained. At that time I was Ambassador at Constantinople; and as it happened that the Governor of Tobolsk was a nephew of mine, I received from him a full account of all the proceedings. Thus, madam, when at that period I was introduced to you at Constantinople, and when you told me that you were Miss Malcolm of St. Petersburg, I naturally concluded that you were the Miss Malcolm of Tobolsk also; and every detail of the conversation which took place tended to confirm the impression. Indeed, methought it was even with a sly covert irony that you spoke of having been a great traveller in your time, and that you had journeyed thousands and thousands of miles. And therefore, believing you to be the Miss Malcolm who had escaped from Tobolsk, I took prompt measures to capture you and send you off into the heart of Siberia. However, you fled:—and fortunate enough, as I have before declared, was it that you by some means or another received a timely warning. I think you told me, madam, that you married Lord Langport a very few weeks after you fled from Constantinople?"

"Yes" was the response.

"Ah!" said the Ambassador: "and thus, as the name of Miss Malcolm from that moment ceased to be heard of in Europe, I concluded that Mildred had sunk into the seclusion of utter profligacy with some new paramour. Then years passed away—and the incidents which I am now about to mention belong to 1838."

Lady Langport made a movement of increasing curiosity; and Count Olonetz continued as follows:—

"Yes—it was in the year 1838 that Mildred was next heard of. She was then in Australia. She was living in Sydney, with an Englishman whose name I do not now choose to mention. She accompanied that Englishman to India; and from something that transpired it became known to the Russian Consul at Bombay that Mildred was endeavouring to renew her correspondence with the Grand Duke. Indeed, she had written

a letter to his Imperial Highness: but it did not reach the post—for the person to whom she entrusted it handed it over to the Russian Consul. The person who betrayed her in this manner was none other than her paramour the Englishman. Thus profligacy prepared the way for its own punishment. The Russian Consul's measures were promptly taken in concert with the Englishman, who was in his pay. Mildred was seized—placed on board a vessel—conveyed up the Persian Gulf—borne through Asia Minor to the mountains of the Caucasus—and thence sent back to her old place of exile in Siberia!"

"Good God!" moaned Lady Langport, clasping her hands together: "wretched, wretched Mildred! Oh, how many thousands and thousands of miles must she have journeyed!"

"Many thousands and thousands," said Olonetz coolly. "Well, madam, do you know," he continued, again with a slight tincture of irony in his tone, "that this daughter of yours is a perfect heroine of endurance and perseverance; and if all her courage and astuteness—her bold daring—and her fearless encounter of perils which would appal even the minds of strong men,—if all these qualities, I say, had been displayed in some grand, righteous, and sacred cause she would have won immortal renown! I will explain myself. It was in 1839 that Mildred was borne back to Tobolsk: and would you believe it—in three or four years she managed to escape again!—and on this occasion I cannot say that it was in company with any handsome aide-de-camp. In the year 1845 I was Ambassador at the Court of Madrid; and behold! I was one day waited upon by an Englishman, who came to me with an air of mystery, and who after some circumlocution informed me that he was the person who had betrayed Mildred into the hands of the Russian Consul at Bombay. I asked what he required of me; and he proceeded to state that Mildred was at that moment in Madrid—he had seen her—he had recognised her—he had traced her to her lodgings; but he was not sure whether she had perceived him. Or receiving this communication I lost no time in sending an *attaché* to Mildred. He found that she *had* recognised the Englishman; and she knew therefore that it was he who now sought to betray her a second time into the hands of her Russian enemies. But she was in a state of destitution and unable to flee from Madrid: she was ill, desponding, and temporarily deprived of all the wondrous energy which had sustained her throughout so many trials and adventures. No wonder that such a reaction had taken place!"

"Alas, poor Mildred!" murmured Lady Langport.

"My *attaché* pitied her," resumed Count Olonetz; "and he at once gave her the assurance on my behalf that I would take no steps to send her back to Siberia. For, he said to her, 'the profligacy of your conduct is well known to him who was once your husband; and it will be utterly useless for you to seek, by means of correspondence or otherwise, to regain over that imperial heart a sway which is lost for ever. Your daughter,' continued the *attaché*, 'has been reared in the belief that you have long been dead, so that she may never have to blush on account of a mother's wantonness. Surely you will not

take any step that will prove to your innocent daughter that you still live, and lead her to make those inquiries which can only result in the full development of your shame and in the engendering of a source of sorrow and affliction for her?—It was thus that the *attaché* addressed himself to Mildred; and she seemed deeply affected by all that he said to her. In the course of the conversation which ensued, Mildred stated that she had heard of her mother having perished in the Neva at the time of the accident; and she added that as she had not a relative or a friend left on the face of the earth to whom she could apply for succour, she cared not whither she went nor what became of her. The *attaché*, who had full powers from me to act as he thought fit, but who was also instructed to take his measures promptly and at the moment, proposed that she should depart for the United States of America. She assented: ample funds were furnished her—and she disappeared from Madrid. On that occasion I did not see her: the negotiation was conducted entirely by means of my *attaché*; and thus I continued to believe that it was still the same Mildred whom I had seen at Constantinople. Just now, Lady Langport, when I was speaking to Mrs. Trevor, and some allusion was made to the fact that my name was familiar to her who was once known as Miss Malcolm, methought that reference only was intended to that negotiation at Madrid; and therefore you may conceive how I was astonished when I found from what Mrs. Trevor said, that the design I had formed at Constantinople in reference to the steamship had transpired and was indeed no secret."

Lady Langport was buried in deep thought, from which she abruptly awakened, ejaculating, "And thus poor Mildred disappeared from Madrid? and that, you tell me, was about two years ago—in 1845? Did she proceed to America?"

"I know not," rejoined Olonetz; "I never heard of her again until yesterday; and then she was pointed out to me in Regent Street. I had not the least idea that she was in England."

"And now, my lord," asked Lady Langport, "what are your intentions? what are your wishes? You said just now that perhaps the business which you were seeking to transact with her in a direct manner, might under the altered circumstances which at present exist, be accomplished by me as her mother?"

"Yes," said Count Olonetz: then, after a few moments' reflection he observed, "I see that it is necessary to tell you everything. Know, then, that the Grand Duke is beneath this roof—the Princess Roxana also is here—"

"My grandchild!" murmured Lady Langport, clasping her hands.

"Yes," continued Olonetz; "he who was once the husband of Mildred is here beneath this roof; but he does not know that Mildred is in England. I have kept that circumstance from his knowledge. Now then, madam, cannot you comprehend how it is my object—aye, my *immediate* object, to induce Mildred to depart hence—to flee away from a city where she might chance to encounter him who loved her in other times, but who loves her now no more? By such a meeting many painful feelings might be resuscitated—many old wounds opened; and then too, it were impossible—aye, *impossible*," added the Ambassador vehem-

ently, "that Mildred could be allowed to present herself to her child, even if she were mad enough and wicked enough to entertain the idea. Listen, madam! Any sum that your daughter Mildred may require—"

"She shall not want for wealth, my lord!" ejaculated Lady Langport. "All that I possess shall be her's!—or at least she shall share it with me! My arms shall be extended to welcome the unhappy wanderer home. I will soothe her for all her misfortunes—I will lead her into penitence for her frailties. She shall cease to be an object of fear or suspicion to the Russian Government."

"She has long ago ceased to be an object of fear," replied Olonetz, "because the Grand Duke entertains not the slightest doubt in reference to her profligacies. But I do not deny that it would be a matter of inconvenience and a subject of grievous scandal, if this woman should start from her obscurity and suddenly proclaim her past relations with a Prince of the Imperial family. Nay, more—it would be trying to the feelings of the young, artless, and amiable Princess Roxana to discover suddenly that her mother still lives, and to be initiated into the reasons which must ever maintain a wide gulf betwixt that profligate mother and this innocent young daughter! Lady Langport," added Count Olonetz, "I have spoken openly and candidly:—circumstances have compelled me to do so, even at the risk of wounding your feelings to an inordinate degree."

"Leave Mildred to me, my lord," cried Lady Langport; "and, Oh! I will answer on her account that everything shall take place as you can wish! You do not know where she lives?"

"No," replied Olonetz.

"But methinks you said," added her ladyship, "that you might possibly lay your hand upon a person who can tell you?"

"Count Mandeville," said the Ambassador, in a musing tone.

"I have heard of that gentleman," said Lady Langport: "he is a French nobleman lately arrived in this country—and he moves in the highest circles. What can he know of Mildred, or she of him?"

"At all events," said Olonetz evasively, "Mandeville does know something about her—and I will see whether he can ascertain her abode. But if not, I promise you, madam, that within three days I will discover it. If it were in any city upon the Continent, where they have a system of police spies and passports, I would ascertain the point in three hours. But here, in the British metropolis, where there are none of those auxiliaries, we are compelled to proceed differently. Favour me with your address, madam, and in due course I will communicate with you."

"I will now take my departure," said Lady Langport, as she placed her card upon the table.

"Your friend Mrs. Trevor is still here," answered the Ambassador, "and she shall follow you to your carriage."

Olonetz then bowed, with some slight demonstration of friendliness; and he rang the bell as Lady Langport issued from the room. A footman escorted her to the carriage which Lady Belgrave had lent her; and almost immediately afterwards Ethel was likewise conducted forth from the mansion. She had been already informed by Count Olonetz—who had conducted her down

the staircase—that Lady Langport had been there, and that the entire mystery was now cleared up; so that as she stepped into the carriage, she was not surprised at beholding the agitated appearance of her patroness.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

TWENTY THOUSAND POUNDS.

It was in the forenoon of the same day on which these incidents occurred, that a tall, handsome young man, about seven-and-twenty years of age, entered that narrow and obscure street behind Astley's Theatre, where Mademoiselle Imogene dwelt. He gave a short and subdued double-knock at the door; and when the summons was answered by the servant-woman Fanny, he asked, "Is Miss Hartland within?"

"Yes, sir—she is at home," was the reply.

"Is she alone?" asked the gentleman; "or can I see her?"

"Miss Hartland is alone, sir. I will inquire whether she will receive you, if you favour me with your name."

"It is of no consequence for me to give my name," rejoined the gentleman, somewhat impatiently. "Tell your mistress that I wish to see her for a few minutes, on business of some little importance."

Imogen was in her little parlour, absorbed in delicious meditation, her love for Launcelot being now the sole engrossing thought; and little Annie was, as usual, playing with some new toys which the capricious yet unmistakable fondness of the actress had provided for her. Imogen was aroused from her reverie by that subdued knock at the door: she knew it was not Launcelot's knock,—she thought it might be one of her theatrical friends, either Alice Denton or Mademoiselle Rose, paying her a visit: but when she heard a masculine voice, she listened to the colloquy which took place between her servant and the stranger. When it had reached the point whereat we broke it off, Imogen opened the parlour door and said to Fanny, "Let the gentleman walk in."

The stranger was accordingly ushered into the little parlour. For a moment his eyes settled upon the handsome countenance and brilliant figure of Imogen; and then they were almost instantaneously riveted upon the little girl, whose transcending infantile loveliness seemed to inspire him with a profound and even peculiar interest. Altogether there was something so respectful in the demeanour which he at the outset bore towards Imogen, and then so kind towards the child, that an impression was at once created in his favour. For upwards of a minute did he keep his eyes bent upon little Annie, as if he quite forgot that any one else was present: and then suddenly turning towards the actress, he said with a courteous bow, "And *you*, then, are Miss Hartland?"

Imogen inclined her head to express an affirmative; and at the same moment the visitor's eye caught sight of the portrait suspended over the sofa, and which represented Mademoiselle Imogene in the fantastic dress that constituted her favourite theatrical garb, and which set off the admirable symmetry of her shape to such striking advantage.

She herself was now attired in a plain morning-dress: but the stranger gave a slight smile of recognition as he glanced from her to the portrait, and then from the portrait back again to the original.

Imogen, having overheard the visitor say that it was upon important business he had called, experienced some little degree of suspense; for as all her ideas were absorbed in her love for Launcelot Osborne, she was led more or less to associate this visit therewith—and she fancied that the distinguished-looking young man now before her might possibly be a relation or friend of her lover's whom he had taken into his confidence, and who had brought her some message from him.

"Might I ask, sir," she said, with a glitter of suspense in her beautiful blue eyes, "to what circumstance I am indebted for the honour of this visit?"

"You do not know who I am, Miss Hartland?" he said inquiringly.

She answered in the negative; and again her looks were fixed suspensefully upon him.

"This beautiful little girl," he said, turning towards Annie, "interests me much."

"Ah!" ejaculated Imogen. "Then, pray, sir, who *may* you be?"

He reflected for a few instants: and then he said, "I had better tell you. It were more prudent to deal candidly with you. You know the Duchess of Ardleigh?"

"I—I—" stammered Imogen, a blush of confusion instantaneously seizing upon her handsome countenance: then immediately, recovering herself, she added with a smile, "How is it probable that a being so humble and obscure as I, can have any acquaintance with the Duchess of Ardleigh?"

"You are discreet, Miss Hartland—very discreet," said the visitor: "and I am all the more deeply indebted to you. Well then, learn who I am—I am the Duke of Ardleigh."

"You?"—and Imogen started back in affright.

"Yes—I," he answered quietly, and with a smile. "And I am here to express my gratitude in the first instance for the generosity with which you have maintained my wife's secret—"

"Your wife's secret?"—and Imogen affected to look amazed.

"Yes—the secret of the Duchess of Ardleigh."

"You bewilder me," said the actress; "because you are playing some part that I do not understand. You speak of a lady whom I do not know—and you announce yourself to be a personage whom it is utterly impossible for you to be."

"Indeed?" said the visitor, with another smile: and producing his card-case, he handed a card to Imogen, adding, "Permit me, Miss Hartland, to announce myself once again as the Duke of Ardleigh."

"Well," said the actress, "it certainly would be strange if you had obtained stealthy and illicit possession of this card-case for the purpose of playing out a particular part; but on the other hand it strikes me as still more strange that you should really be the Duke of Ardleigh."

"Pray believe that I am—and again let me thank you."

"You are thanking me for nothing," interjected Imogen.

"On the contrary, you have rendered my wife a most important service."

"You make a mistake, sir—or my lord—which ever I ought to call you. Even if you be the Duke of Ardenleigh, I know nothing of the Duchess."

"Miss Hartland," hastily whispered Herbert, "you are generosity personified! That child is my wife's child—and you know it!"

"Your wife's child?"—and Imogen opened her blue eyes wide as if with the uttermost amazement. "Little Annie is my child."

"I know that you have hitherto borne the shame and the disgrace as if it were your own child," responded the Duke: "I know likewise that even if you were veritably that child's mother, you could not have behaved more kindly towards it. The Duchess has told me all this."

"It is very wicked for you, my lord," said Imogen, with an air of indignation, "to come and invent such dreadful tales in reference to your own wife. If you are tired of her and want to get rid of her, adopt some manly and straightforward course: but do not try to amass a number of falsehoods to bear against her, and likewise seek to involve me in the conspiracy. I tell you plainly, my lord, that if you call me forward as a witness, I will swear that the child is my own. Yes!—and if I hear that you venture any further with these iniquitous proceedings and endeavour to do *without* me as a witness, I will thrust myself in advance, and I will defend the Duchess against your base imputations."

It was with an increasing admiration that the Duke of Ardenleigh surveyed the actress as she thus spoke. Deeper grew the crimson flush upon her countenance so beautifully clear and transparent: lightnings flashed from her blue eyes—her ivory teeth gleamed between the lips which expressed scorn and menace—and her form seemed to dilate as if with the inspiration of a goddess while she gave vent to that vehement language.

"Admirable Imogen!" exclaimed the Duke, "you are indeed to be trusted with a secret! But I will show you that I am acquainted with the entire mystery, and that my intentions are not evil. The Duchess has visited you here—and I will name one particular evening. The 8th of May."

Imogen started: for it was on that very same evening that she led the young Duchess into a discourse which made known her secret to Launcelot Osborne. She did not think Launcelot had betrayed it: she had every confidence in his honour: but still she felt that she herself had acted treacherously on that particular evening—her conscience was smiting her—and in the vague fears which it conjured up she could not help associating the present visit of the Duke with the perfidious part she had played towards his Duchess on that particular occasion.

"Yes—the 8th of May," he repeated; "and you see therefore that I am well informed. The Duchess herself told me that she came hither. And what is more, I have all along been cognizant of the fact that she was a mother before she became my wife; but it was only a few days ago that I knew where her child had been placed and where it was being reared. Now will you believe me? will you give me credit for sincerity?"

Imogen shook her head, saying, "You have

all along been speaking in enigmas, and I do not understand them. I tell you that child is mine; and if need be I will maintain it before all the world."

"And do you deny that the Duchess of Ardenleigh has ever been to this house?" inquired the Duke.

"Deny it?" ejaculated Imogen. "Of course I do! The Duchess of Ardenleigh here?"—and she affected to laugh in mockery at the idea.

"Again I say, Admirable Imogen!" cried the Duke. "You think I am playing a trick, and you will not afford me a chance. It is impossible that the secret of the Duchess could be in better keeping! But look you, Imogen—I am her husband: and as you are the guardian of her honour, you are the guardian of mine likewise. You will permit me to thank and to reward you?"

"I have already told you, my lord, you have nothing to thank me for—"

"I shall both thank and reward you," persisted the Duke. "Here, Imogen, are bank-notes to a considerable amount: they are all yours—accept them, I beseech you."

Imogen repulsed the hand which held the notes, saying with an air of indignation, "My lord, I am not to be bribed. Did you place all the treasures of the world at my feet, you would not induce me to utter a syllable prejudicial to the character or interests of the Duchess of Ardenleigh. As for this dear child, she is mine!"—and snatching up little Annie, she pressed her to her bosom.

Annie, who had first stared very hard at the Duke, as children are accustomed to stare upon a stranger, had gone on playing with her toys unmindful of the scene which was taking place. She now threw her arms about the neck of the actress, on whose countenance she bestowed her innocent caresses as if it were indeed a daughter fondling its mother.

"And you refuse to accept a sum which will so much ameliorate your position?" said the Duke, after a long pause.

"I am not to be bribed, my lord," responded Imogen. "Were I starving I would tell you the same thing."

"But you know not how large a sum is here."

"Oh, I have no doubt your Grace is very rich!" exclaimed Miss Hartland, contemptuously: "but if you were a King—which is higher than a Duke—you would not be able to buy me over to your iniquitous views."

"Miss Hartland," said Herbert, impressively; "these bank-notes amount to twenty thousand pounds. Take them, I beseech you: they are yours."

"Once for all, *No*, my lord! And now may I request you to depart?"

Herbert moved towards the door: he placed his fingers upon the handle—he locked back. Imogen was still playing with the child, and made not a motion for him to remain, nor even so much as bent upon him a look expressive of regret that he should thus take his departure. It was evident she meant to let him go with his twenty thousand pounds.

"For the third time, I repeat, Admirable Imogen!" cried the Duke, turning away from the door and hastening to accost her once more. "I have put you fully to the test, and you have well stood it. Read this."

He produced a billet, which he handed to the actress; and Imogen took it after a moment's hesitation. She opened it, and read these lines:—

"May 27, 1847.

"Dearest Imogen,

"The Duke will become the bearer of this. He knows all; he is full of generosity and kindness: he insists upon expressing his gratitude in person and displaying it substantially. The last time we met I offered you a thousand pounds—but you refused all pecuniary succour at my hands. You will not perhaps deal with an equal rigour towards my husband; for he is anxious to place you in a position that may enable you not merely to procure bread, but likewise luxuries for that little Annie to whom you are so devotedly attached.

"Believe me, dear Imogen,

"With eternal gratitude,

"Your sincere friend,

"MARY, DUCHESS OF ARDLEIGH."

"Now do you believe that my intentions are honest and sincere?" asked the Duke.

"Yes," replied Miss Hartland.

"And you held out so long!"

"Because I thought it might be a snare and that your Grace was dexterously spreading a net."

"Your conduct is admirable, Miss Hartland!" said the Duke, again addressing her with a certain degree of respectful formality, for fear lest she should fancy that he had some libertine intent when calling her by her Christian name of Imogen. "I have now no fear that my wife's secret is safe in your possession."

"I think that I should commit suicide, my lord," she answered with vehemence, "if through either wickedness or inadvertence I were to compromise it irretrievably."

"And you love that child?" said the Duke, again suffering his eyes to rest upon little Annie, who had once more retreated with her toys into a corner of the room.

"Yes—as if she were my own child."

"I need not therefore ask," continued the Duke, "whether you would like the child to be removed elsewhere?—whether by so doing, it would be relieving you from a burden?"

"Burden? Heaven forbid that I should regard Annie as such!"—and Imogen's eyes flung looks of most undoubted affection upon the fair young creature.

"And now," said the Duke, "since you have determined to keep the child, you must permit me to fulfil the promise which I spontaneously gave to my wife. I will tell you candidly that the other day she asked for a cheque for twenty thousand pounds; it was about a fortnight ago—but I was enabled to save her this sum of twenty thousand pounds—or rather it has been saved to her by certain circumstances."

"Well, my lord?" said Imogen, with a look that was as much as to ask how this incident regarded herself.

"The twenty thousand pounds," continued the Duke, "were saved from being laid out in a manner but little agreeable to the Duchess or myself; and now we purpose to lay that sum out in a manner that *will* be agreeable to us—I mean by its bestowal upon you."

Imogen shook her head; and yet there was a certain expression of thoughtfulness, if not of actual hesitation, in her countenance.

"Yes—you will accept this amount," continued the Duke. "Here it is in bank-notes; and no one need know how it came into your possession. Take a handsome house—leave the stage—surround yourself with comforts and luxuries—buy the finest clothes for that darling object of your generous affection—"

"No," said Imogen; "no!" she repeated most vehemently: "I will not do this. The child is well dressed enough—"

"She is even beautifully dressed," said the Duke: and such was indeed the case.

"Therefore she needs no better apparel," rejoined Imogen. "As for luxuries, it were better that she should not be brought up with the knowledge of them. As for comforts, she has all she wants. Then in reference to myself, I am contented with my position—at least for the present—and as long as—"

But Imogen stopped short, while a slight blush suffused her countenance. The Duke noticed it, and immediately suspected that she was making a reservation on behalf of some other person who exercised an influence over her mind.

"Well," he hastened to exclaim, "if not for yourself, nor yet for that child—at least for any one else who may be dear to you, may you accept this amount. Ah, I recollect! the Duchess told me you had a brother who has gone to sea—"

"And who is too high-minded," interjected Imogen, "to avail himself of such succour as this, unless the fullest possible explanations, word for word and detail for detail, were given—and this, my lord, could not be done, because not even to my own brother would I whisper the secret which should compromise the Duchess of Ardleigh!"

Again the Duke gazed with respectful admiration upon the actress; and then he said, "But perhaps, Miss Hartland, there may be some one in whom you are likewise interested—excuse me—but a young lady of your personal appearance must have made an impression on some heart—In short, you may have an admirer—a suitor—he may perhaps be humble and struggling—he may be poor—"

"Then if I accept your Grace's bounty," suddenly ejaculated Imogen, on whose cheeks the blushes had gone on deepening and deepening while the Duke spoke,—“if I accept this bounty on the part of your lordship and the Duchess, it is without reserve or compromise—that I may do with it as I think fit—"

"Precisely so," interrupted the Duke, rejoiced at the prospect of the actress accepting his bounty at last. "Do with that money as you think fit! No one can ever demand an account of it; and even if a week hence you were to send to me for more, I swear to you, Miss Hartland, that neither the Duchess nor myself would pause to inquire what you had done with these bank-notes!"

Imogen reflected for a few moments, and a smile of satisfaction expanded upon her beautiful face.

"On that condition, my lord," she said, "I accept your bounty; and I pray you give the assurance of my most heartfelt gratitude towards the Duchess."



"Not a word in reference to gratitude!" interrupted the Duke: "the obligation is still from us to you. Farewell, Miss Hartland!"—and pressing her hand for a moment, he disappeared from her presence, having bestowed another look upon the child.

The bank-notes lay upon the table; and as Imogen counted them over, she found that they precisely made up the sum of twenty thousand pounds. Twenty thousand pounds in the humble abode of an actress! twenty thousand pounds beneath that roof! What could she mean to do with the money?

Let us now shift the scene of our story to another part of London; and we must therefore direct the attention of our readers to Hatton Garden. There, in that room which he called his office, but which Mrs. Casey would always persist in denominating a study, sat Mr. Michael Casey.

No. 25.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

He was in his dressing-gown and slippers; and he was pacing to and fro with uneven steps, the infirmity of his limbs being enhanced by the agitation which influenced him. A newspaper lay upon the table; and a paragraph might be seen with a heading indicative of the sudden death of Sir Abel Kingston in Newgate.

Presently the door opened, and Sylvester made his appearance.

"Well, what news?" asked the father. "But of course it is only too true?—the fellow is dead, and it little matters to me whether he took poison, or died of disease of the heart, as the supposition is there:"—and he pointed to the newspaper.

"Well, I'm blown if it isn't a pretty caper!" said the son. "Only think of the chap taking it into his head to pop off just at the moment when——"

"Ah! just at the moment," interjected Mr.

Casey senior, "when he had opened negotiations for me to withdraw from the prosecution and let the matter be hushed up on certain conditions."

"And of course you would have agreed?" said Sylvester.

"Of course I should!" said the father. "What the deuce did I have the scoundrel arrested for but to bring him to book?"

"And a precious book you've brought him to!" interjected Sylvester. "Of course, if the poor devil had a disease of the heart, all this excitement was the very thing to make it prove fatal. However, the evil is done—and so I suppose you've lost a jolly lot of tin, governor?"

"Lost?" echoed the miser spitefully: "of course I have lost! Did I not advance him the money on his forged securities?"

"I think perhaps I had better tell you the truth at once, governor," interrupted Sylvester. "There's no use in blinking it—but the fact is the scoundrel Kingston got an acceptance out of me—"

"What!"—and Mr. Michael Casey's countenance became of a sallow ghastliness. "You don't mean to say, Sylvester—"

"I do mean to say, bother take the thing! that I was fool enough just to write my name across a slip of paper for a cool thousand."

"Fool! dolt! idiot!"—and Michael Casey ground his teeth with rage.

"Well, I knew you'd blow me up," said Sylvester; "and I felt myself a precious fool at the time. I was quite mad with myself!—and I remember that when I signed the bill I was so comfoundedly aggravated my hand shook to a degree that the writing didn't look like my own."

"Are you sure of that?" demanded his father eagerly.

"Of course I am," replied Sylvester. "But why do you look at me so hard?"

"Why? don't you see?" said his father, in a low half chuckling voice. "The acceptance to that bill—"

"Well, what's the caper now?"

"Why, it is not your signature at all!"

"Oh, that's the dodge—is it?" said Sylvester, assuming a very knowing look and winking at his sire.

"To be sure it is! You understand? That acceptance is as much a forgery as any of the others! The fellow's dead—and how the deuce can he ever prove that your signature was genuine?"

"How indeed?" exclaimed Sylvester; and with another knowing look he was passing out of the office, when his father called him back.

"Have you seen Launcelot Osborne?" inquired Mr. Casey senior.

"Not since the other evening. I told you we met at Astley's—"

"And this is the third day since then," resumed Mr. Casey, "and he comes not near the house. Never mind! this is the 27th—and on the 31st the bridal takes place. What does Selina say?"

"She does not speak to me on the subject," responded Sylvester; "and as the things all settled, I did not think it necessary to bother her, poor girl!"

"Poor girl indeed?" ejaculated Mr. Casey sharply: "why do you call her poor girl?"

"Because the match is a capital one for her, and yet she doesn't seem to like it; so I call her a poor girl because she appears to be so ignorant of what is good for her welfare."

"By the bye," said Mr. Casey senior, "tell Selina to come and speak to me."

"All right, governor!"—and the son issued from the room, having taken a first lesson in rascality from his delectable father—we mean in reference to the bill of exchange, his acceptance to which he was tutored to deny.

In a few minutes the door opened, and Selina made her appearance. She looked pale and somewhat thoughtful: but the general expression of her countenance was serene. She walked with a slow pace; and if there were not an actual coldness, there was at least a complete absence of filial warmth in the tone and manner in which she said, "You sent for me, father?"

"Yes: sit down, Selina. Come now, my child, three days have passed since I expressed my final wishes and intentions in reference to this match. You are prepared, I hope, to accompany Mr. Launcelot Osborne to the altar on the 31st?"

Selina remained silent.

"You do not answer me," exclaimed Mr. Casey sternly. "Do you mean to tell me that you do not love him?"

"I did not say so, father!" and a quick flush passed over the young lady's countenance.

"But love is out of the question," continued Casey. "I have said so before—and I was a fool to mention the word again. We will look upon it, if you will, as a marriage of interest. The Trenthams want money—and we want rank. I can give them the money by releasing them from the mortgages that I hold upon their estates—the bonds, the warrants-of-attorney, the cognovits, and heaven only knows what other securities!—and all these I intend, Selina, to give as your dower on the morning of the 31st. You ought to be happy, girl—and be proud likewise that you possess a father who is so well off. Ha, ha, Selina! I am perhaps richer than you fancied?"

"Much, father. You seem to have lent Lord Trentham a great deal of money?"

"Well, well—perhaps I did my business cleverly and acutely," resumed the miser, who could not help rubbing his hands at the idea of the several bargains he had made in reference to Lord Trentham's affairs. "Perhaps I bought up a bond here at fifty per cent.—and on the other hand discounted a bill with a profit of thirty per cent.—But after all, girl, you know nothing of such matters as these."

"Nothing whatsoever, father," answered Selina, in that same quiet level tone in which she had all along been speaking. "But when you told me just now that I ought to be happy at the prospect of receiving such a dower, I felt inclined to answer that I should be happier still if you would send for Launcelot Osborne and tell him that you demand no self-sacrifice on his part—while on the other hand you scorn the idea of bestowing your daughter upon one by whom she is not beloved—"

"Love again? Nonsense!"

"Well then," continued Selina, "say, father, that you will not thrust your daughter into a family where she cannot possibly be welcomed, and where she is already despised—"

"Despised?" exclaimed Casey starting with angry impatience.

"Yes—despised," repeated Selina firmly. "Do not the Trenthams look down upon us? have Lord and Lady Trentham or Miss Azaline called on us since the bridal day was fixed? has her ladyship ever set foot within these walls? has his lordship ever come hither except to see you, and you only, for purposes of business? am I as yet even so much as acquainted with those whom you wish to become my father-in-law, my mother-in-law, and my sister-in-law? I tell you we are contemned and despised by that family, father!" exclaimed Selina, with a sudden vehemence. "And now I demand of you for the last time whether you will sacrifice me, your daughter, in such a manner?"

"Ah! you think they despise us? Gold, my dear girl," continued the miser, with a strange sinister expression of countenance, "is better than titles now-a-days; and we shall yet see that haughty peer and peeress, with their children, humbling themselves unto us! Mark my words! It will be you and I who will triumph, Selina, when on the morning of the 31st, after the bridal ceremony, we shall present that proud family with the securities for eighty thousand pounds. Yes—eighty thousand pounds! Would you like to see them, Selina?"

"I have no curiosity on the point, father," was the response, given in a colder tone than she had yet adopted.

"But you shall see them!" exclaimed Casey. "At least I will show you deeds regarding the Trentham family for sixty thousand pounds! There are twenty thousand more at my lawyer's office. But look, Selina! sixty thousand I am going to show you—and all a portion of your dower!"

The miser rose from his seat and advanced towards a cupboard. Selina rose also: she became paler in the face—and her features at the same time acquired a colder and more rigid expression. Her father opened the cupboard, and took out a tin box, which he proceeded to unlock.

"Now, Selina, look! Deeds and documents—mortgages—and bonds, representing sixty thousand pounds!—no less than three-fourths of your dowry! Why, what is the matter with this lock? Ah, that's right! the key turns now——"

At this moment a loud cry of mingled rage and terror burst from the miser's lips; and the tin box fell upon the floor. It was empty: the deeds had disappeared!

"Perdition!" exclaimed Casey. "But no! it must be the wrong box! Yes, yes!" and he picked it up.

A terrible imprecation rang from his tongue as he saw that it was the right box: he dashed it upon the ground—and then stood looking at it with a ghastly, demented look.

And all this while Selina stood close by the table, on which her hand rested. And she was very pale—and her features were very rigid: but for one instant there was a quiver passing through her form as her sire gave vent to that terrible imprecation.

"This is unaccountable!" muttered Casey to himself: and staggering back, he sank into his arm-chair. "Who could have done it? How—how——"

But he gasped for breath. Selina rang the bell for assistance; and before it arrived her father sank back senseless in his seat. Then, as she raised his head and pillowed it upon her bosom, she let fall a shower of burning tears—and that bosom was convulsed with the most excruciating sobs.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MANDEVILLE AND MILDRED.

In order to render our narrative as complete as possible, we must go back to that point at which Ethel left Mildred and Count de Mandeville standing face to face in Cork Street. At the first instant an ejaculation of mingled astonishment and terror burst from the lips of Mildred; and then an expression of fiercest rage and hatred settled upon her countenance as she abruptly darted towards him. He the while was standing with an easy defiant air, a peculiar smile of mockery and intelligence upon his lips, and his eyes fixing themselves upon those of Mildred, after having for a moment flung a glance upon Ethel who was beating a precipitate retreat. Indeed, much as Count Mandeville was surprised to behold Ethel at the moment—and anxious though he were to encounter her again—yet all his thoughts were now concentrated in this meeting with Mildred, and he felt it to be more important that he should remain to converse with her than follow in pursuit of the retreating Ethel.

"Devil!" fiercely burst from Mildred's lips as she bent upon Mandeville those eyes which were usually full of a voluptuous languor, but which now flashed forth vivid lightnings.

"If you mean it to be war between us, I accept the challenge," said Mandeville, in a firm though quiet tone, and with a look that was self-possessed and defiant: "but perhaps a few instants' reflection will show you that it were better we should be at peace."

"Peace?" echoed Mildred, in a tone of bitter irony.

"Yes—peace," said Mandeville. "You saw that tall old gentleman with me yesterday in Regent Street? Look! you may see him again now! There, at the end of Burlington Street!"—and Mandeville pointed in that direction. "Ah, he has disappeared!"

"Well, who is that old gentleman?" asked Mildred, now watching Mandeville's countenance with a certain degree of anxiety.

"That is Count Olonetz, Russian Ambassador Extraordinary to the British Court."

"Count Olonetz?" ejaculated Mildred. "The same who negotiated with me by means of his *attaché*, at Madrid, when you—fiend that you are! were again seeking to sell me to the hands of my enemies."

"You do wrong to reproach me on that particular account," answered Mandeville calmly: "for methinks that if you will take the trouble to search your memory, you will find that on the particular occasion to which you are alluding, the *attaché* of Count Olonetz gave you money to enable you to leave Madrid."

"And that old gentleman is Count Olonetz?"

said Mildred thoughtfully. "Why were you with him yesterday?" she suddenly demanded.

"I met him by accident," responded Mandeville; "and scarcely had we begun to converse together when you appeared round the corner."

"Yes—and you may be well assured," said Mildred bitterly, "that this also was by accident."

"You stood transfixed to the spot," observed Mandeville.

"Yes—on beholding you. You are my evil genius!" added Mildred, with a tone and look of bitterest reproach. "Why are you haunting me now? and why is Count Olonetz likewise hanging about at the same time?"

"I will answer you candidly, Mildred," said Mandeville. "I wished to see you for one or two reasons, which I will explain presently. I should have spoken to you yesterday; but to tell you the truth, I also was seized with astonishment on beholding you; and then you disappeared so suddenly that I had not time to recover from my amazement ere you were gone. I was now walking about with the hope of meeting you again; and behold! we do meet. As for Olonetz, I pledge you my soul that he was not just now at the end of the street through any understanding with me. Besides, you saw that he did not come near us—but he almost instantaneously disappeared from our view."

Mildred reflected for a few moments; and then she said, "We were just now speaking of peace or war."

"Well?" interjected Mandeville inquiringly.

"And you," continued Mildred, "in recommending peace, threw at me the name of Count Olonetz as if it were a menace that you were thus hurling at my head."

"We were speaking of peace or war," said Mandeville, accentuating his words. "If you decide for war, the proclamation of hostilities will as a matter of course render me implacable: I should leave no stone unturned to overtake you with my vengeance. The Russian authorities know that they can rely upon me and that the information I give them is correct. Well then, a single word whispered by my lips in the ear of Count Olonetz, would prove fatal to you! You would be seized—aye, even in this free country!—seized, I tell you!—carried on board a Russian vessel—and," added Mandeville impressively, "the affair of Bombay would be enacted all over again in London! Now you understand why I just now significantly pointed out to you the person of Count Olonetz at the very instant when you appeared to be threatening me with warfare."

Mildred had quailed visibly before the threatening language which Mandeville addressed to her; but quickly regaining a complete self-possession, she said, "And what advantage shall I gain by consenting to terms of peace with you?"

"Every advantage," responded Mandeville. "Look at my conduct at Madrid a couple of years ago! I assured Olonetz that you were no longer dangerous—and he negotiated with you instead of persecuting you. You were in poverty—and he sent you gold. All that was through me. If I had breathed a different tale in his ear, his whole conduct towards you would have been utterly different. Now, therefore, you may comprehend what would be my policy here in London if you

and I proclaim articles of peace. I see that you are again poor," continued the Count, sweeping his dark eyes over Mildred's dress; "and I will induce Count Olonetz to negotiate again with you and replenish your purse."

Mildred reflected; and then as an ironical smile appeared upon her lips, she said, "I think that you have your own good reasons for preferring peace to war."

Mandeville slightly shrugged his shoulders, and then caressed his glossy moustache.

"I do not know what proceedings you may be embarked in at present, in the British metropolis," continued Mildred: "I do not even know what name you bear: but beholding you as I do, dressed in the extreme of fashion—daintily perfumed—embellished with costly jewellery—and evidently maintaining a certain appearance, I have no doubt that it is absolutely necessary for your interests that your antecedents should remain completely unknown."

"Well," said Mandeville, with a smile half bland, half mocking, "and what if I do not think it worth while to deny the truth of the conjectures you have just set forth?"

"You see, therefore," proceeded Mildred, "that it is in my power to take the bitterest revenge against you for your villanous conduct to me at Bombay."

"But you will not take that vengeance, Mildred," was the calmly given response.

"And why not?" she ejaculated. "Remember that this is England—and if I go before a magistrate and claim his protection against the Russian Ambassador, that protection will be granted!"

Mandeville smiled as if in a pitying manner, and said, "You are mistaken, Mildred. The magistrate would treat you as a lunatic, and Count Olonetz would not even be troubled with a message upon the point. But he would still remain potent to work you the most terrible mischief. You know that Russian power extends itself by various means over the entire world,—displaying itself openly where it is enabled to do so, or working in secrecy where stealthiness becomes expedient. Violence or intrigue!—those are the two phases of its tremendous policy. How, then, could you, poor weak fluttering bird, escape from the meshes of that fearful net if it were spread out to catch you?"

Again Mildred shuddered visibly:—and no wonder! for she thought of all the horrors of Siberia's eternal winter, and of the terrible sufferings to be endured by those who are hurried for thousands and thousands of miles through the hyperborean snows of that awful clime.

Mandeville saw his advantage, and said, "You know as well as I, Mildred, whether this picture of Russian power be true or exaggerated. As for myself, I shall accept warfare if you choose: but I shall not take the trouble to deny that I prefer peace. At the same time I will at once prove to you that I am no coward in the matter. Listen! Here in London I am Count de Mandeville. I am a French nobleman of ancient family and great wealth. Inquire at the French Embassy—and the Ambassador will not deny it. Go to my stockbroker, Mr. Warren, in the City—and he will unhesitatingly confirm the report relative to my fortune. Now you know what I am in England, Mildred. Perhaps you will tell me that

with a breath you can destroy this splendid fabric which I have built up? No doubt of it! But you will not do it."

He paused, and fixed his dark eyes searchingly upon Mildred's countenance.

"No—you will not do it," he continued, "because you dare not make me your enemy. You know that I would exhaust every energy that is mine to bring down the most fearful vengeance upon your head. And this would be easier than you fancy. For listen! The Grand Duke and the Princess Roxana are in London!"

"My husband and child!" cried Mildred, with a sudden start: and then trembling with emotions, she clasped her hands as if in obedience to the impulse of some strong inward agony.

"He who was your husband many long years ago," rejoined Mandeville; "and she who is forbidden to look upon you as a mother—or rather who has been taught to believe that you have long lain in the grave!"

"And they are in London?" murmured Mildred.

"Yes. They arrived with Count Olonetz three or four days ago."

"And I also arrived three or four days ago," said Mildred. "How strange the coincidence! But Ah! why did you suddenly inform me that they were in London also?"

"I will explain my object," resumed Mandeville. "I was warning you at the time that it would be more easy for me to avenge myself upon you if you made me your enemy—more easy, I repeat, than you might choose to acknowledge to yourself. And why? Because the accidental combination of circumstances enables me to whisper in the ear of Count Olonetz that you are in London because the Grand Duke and the Princess are in London also!—that you have come hither with a purpose—that you mean to advance certain pretensions and assert some supposed rights—in a word, that you have become dangerous again and that it is necessary to look after you. Well, Mildred, if I whisper these words in the ear of Count Olonetz, what, think you, would become of you?"

Mildred shuddered more visibly even than before; and she said, "There shall be peace between us, Count Mandeville."

"Good. And now on my side, Mildred, I promise to act as a negotiator between yourself and the Russian Ambassador."

"All I require," said Mildred, "is a sum of money. I am indeed poor—almost destitute. Procure me some accoutre, and I will disappear forthwith from London."

"I will see Count Olonetz this very day," answered Mandeville. "Where do you live? I will call upon you with his answer."

Mildred was about to name the address of her lodgings, when it struck her that some treachery might be meditated despite Mandeville's assurances—or that even if he himself were sincere in the present instance, Count Olonetz might act differently. Besides, she did not like the little circumstance of Olonetz having appeared just now at the end of the street at the moment when Mandeville accosted her.

"On second thoughts," she said, "I would rather that you should not come to me where I am residing. It is a respectable house—and evil

constructions might be put upon your visit. I will meet you here, on this very spot, to-morrow at noon punctually."

"Be it so," said Mandeville, with a smile which showed that he fully penetrated Mildred's meaning. "Surround yourself with precautions if you think fit—though when once I have pledged myself that no harm shall befall you, my word shall be kept. However, enough! We will meet here to-morrow at noon; and you will not be afraid to come, because I see very well that you have already argued in your own mind that there can be no such thing as a seizure and carrying off in the middle of the day and in the very heart of London.—Ah, by the bye, if you require immediate assistance, let me be your banker."

Thus speaking, Mandeville drew forth his pocket-book and displayed a number of bank-notes: but Mildred made a negative gesture with her hand, at the same time shaking her head and saying, "My need is not so pressing as all this."

Mandeville bit his lip for a moment: he comprehended that Mildred would sooner perish than become indebted to him for even a morsel of bread. But quickly recovering his wonted ease and self-possession, he said, "By the bye, Mildred, that young lady who was with you just now—how came you to know her?"

"I do not know her. But I ought to ask you concerning her; for she gave vent to a cry of alarm as she caught sight of you, and at once fled. I do not even know her name."

"Might I ask," said Mandeville, "why she accosted you?"

"The whole proceeding was most mysterious," replied Mildred. "She mistook me for some one else: she addressed me by the title of ladyship. She spoke of a likeness—she said something about the expression of my countenance—and then she looked bewildered. Methinks that the poor thing must be half crazy. But what do you know of her?"

"Her name is Mrs. Trevor," answered Mandeville. "She is very beautiful, as you may have observed. Well, I formed certain designs with regard to her—she must either have discovered or suspected them, for she fled from the place where she was staying at the time, and I have since lost sight of her. This is really all I know."

"Then in reference to me," said Mildred, "her conduct must have been the result of a mistake; while with regard to yourself it was produced by terror. And now, Count Mandeville, pursue your way—and remember that at noon to-morrow we are to meet here."

"I shall keep the appointment punctually," answered the Count: and with a courteous bow, as if he and Mildred were the best friends in the world, he passed along the street.

She watched him until he had turned the corner: then she hastened as far as that corner—she peeped round it, and looked after him again—and it was not until she had thus completely convinced herself that he was not dogging or watching her, that she bent her steps towards the place of her abode. As for Mandeville, he presently beheld the carriage of the Duchess of Arleigh standing at the door of a shop in Bond Street: he waited until her Grace issued forth—she was accompanied by her friends the Earl and Countess of Carshalton—and she invited the Count to accompany them

to some picture-gallery which they were about to visit. He assented; and thus it was not until a couple of hours later that he called upon Count Olonetz in Grosvenor Square. By that time Lady Langport and Ethel had taken their departure; and the wily diplomatist breathed not a single syllable to Mandeville in reference to all the startling incidents that had been occurring. He remained silent until the other had spoken.

"I have seen Mildred, my lord," said Count Mandeville.

"I know it," was the reply. "I happened to observe you from the end of the street. I thought it better to leave you in conference with her than to interfere at such a crisis. What have you to report?"

"She is reasonable, my lord," answered Mandeville: "she only requires a sum of money, and she will depart at once from the British metropolis. What I would advise, is that your Excellency should give her a few pounds to find her way to Liverpool and thence to New York, and that a larger sum should be made payable to her on her arrival in the States."

"The plan is a good one," said Olonetz. "I presume therefore that she has given you her address in order that you may see her again?"

"No my lord: she is full of suspicion," rejoined Mandeville. "She has made an appointment to meet me to-morrow."

"When and where?" demanded the Ambassador.

"In Cork Street, at noon, my lord."

"Good," said Olonetz: then taking from a pocket-book a bank-note of fifty pounds, he added, "You will be pleased to give her this, and tell her that if she should make up her mind to go to the United States, she can signify the same to me by some means or another, in which case I will make ample provision for her. But look you, Count Mandeville!" added Count Olonetz sternly. "When you meet Mildred, you will simply give her that bank-note and deliver this message: but you will not follow her, nor make any endeavour to discover the place of her abode—nor molest her in the slightest degree."

Mandeville bowed humbly, saying, "Your Excellency's order shall be obeyed. And my own secrets, my lord?"

"Did I not promise you yesterday, when we met," exclaimed Olonetz, somewhat disdainfully, "that those secrets should be kept?"

Again Mandeville bowed, and quitted the apartment. Count Olonetz then sat down and penned a note, to the effect that at one o'clock on the following day he should be enabled to communicate the address of Mildred to Lady Langport, if her ladyship would either call or send for that purpose. This note was addressed to Lady Langport, Hendon Court, and at once sent to the post.

On the ensuing day, precisely at the hour of noon, Mildred was at the place of appointment; and Count Mandeville was there likewise.

"What intelligence have you brought me?" asked Mildred.

"I have succeeded according to my promise. Here is a bank-note for fifty pounds; and within twenty-four hours you must be at Liverpool. Thence you will write a letter to Count Olonetz, in order to prove to him that you are actually there and about to embark for the United States. On

reaching New York, you will apply to the Russian Consul, and he will pay a considerable sum into your hands."

"Have you any further commands?" said Mildred, as she took the bank-notes: "for *commande* they really are!"

"I have nothing further to communicate," replied Mandeville,—“unless it be,” he added, in a mysterious whisper and with a significant look, “to advise you to follow implicitly and without delay the instructions of the Russian Ambassador. And now farewell, Mildred.”

She made no answer, but turned and walked rapidly away. She was convinced that no treachery was now intended her, but that the object alike of Olonetz and Mandeville was to get her away from England as soon as possible; and she resolved to follow the instructions that had been forwarded her. She retraced her way to her lodgings, which were situated in an obscure street in the neighbourhood of Golden Square.

A meanly dressed person, carrying a bundle, and looking like a journeyman tailor taking home his work, followed Mildred from Cork Street as far as the house in which she temporarily resided. Not satisfied with having traced her thither, the shabby-looking man made an inquiry at a shop opposite; and receiving the information he sought, he hurried away. He bent his steps towards Grosvenor Square—entered the mansion of the Russian Ambassador—quickly divested himself of his shabby suit—and assuming his proper apparel, stood in a few minutes in the presence of his superior; for he was none other than one of the *attachés*.

"Here is the address, my lord;" and he laid a piece of paper upon the table.

"A person named Lady Langport will either send or call at one o'clock," said Olonetz. "Be you on the look-out and give that address."

The *attaché* bowed and retired.

A few minutes before one a carriage drew up at the Ambassador's house; and the *attaché* hastened to speak to the lady who was inside the vehicle.

"Have I the honour of addressing Lady Langport?"

"No, sir," responded Ethel—for she was the occupant of the carriage: "her ladyship is indisposed, and has sent me."

"For what purpose, madam?" asked the *attaché*, with true diplomatic caution.

"For a particular address," rejoined Ethel. "You need not be afraid to give it to me: I am Mrs. Trevor—and Count Olonetz knows my name."

"Here is the address, madam:"—and the *attaché*, having handed the paper, bowed and withdrew.

Ethel ordered the carriage to drive into Golden Square, where she alighted, and thence proceeded on foot to the house indicated by the slip of paper. She knocked at the door, and inquired of the landlady, who answered in person, whether Mrs. Townsend was at home?—for it was by this name Mildred was passing, as the Russian *attaché* had ascertained by means of his inquiries at the opposite shop.

"Yes, ma'am," was the response. "Second floor, if you please."

To the second floor did Ethel accordingly as-

and; and she knocked at the door. No answer was returned. She knocked again; still there was no reply—and Ethel ventured to open the door gently. There, in a modestly furnished room—half reclining in an arm-chair, evidently plunged in the deepest reflectiön—was the object of her visit—Mildred—the same whom she had accosted in so singular a manner in Cork Street on the preceding day.

CHAPTER XL.

MILDRED.

Yes—Mildred was half reclining in a large arm-chair; and in this posture she bore a striking resemblance to her portrait which was preserved in her mother Lady Langport's Album. Ethel knew that Mildred was now forty-one years of age, and that therefore twenty-two years had elapsed since that portrait was taken in the blooming freshness of the youthful period of nineteen: but Mildred did not seem to be what she really was—namely, more than double the age when that portrait was taken. Indeed, considering the troubles and adversities through which she had passed, the many painful vicissitudes of her life, and the stupendous journeys and voyages which she had accomplished, she was a woman whose beauty was so well preserved as to constitute a positive marvel. There was not a wrinkle upon her countenance—there were no evidences of fatigue and jading about the eyes—and as for the hair, it was all of that same rich dark brown, wonderfully luxuriant, that was depicted in the portrait. She wore a tight-fitting bodice, or jacket, which delineated the swelling contours of her form and described the outlines of her shape which was perfectly asymmetrical in its rich proportions. If she had chosen to pass herself off as several years younger than she was, she might have done so—especially as when her lips parted, they displayed a set of teeth which were white as ivory, without stain or speck, and perfect in number.

Mildred was in a deep reverie as Ethel gently opened the door; and the young lady stopped for a few moments to contemplate her before she advanced farther into the room. At length she entered; and then Mildred, starting up from her reverie, turned her eyes upon Ethel.

"Ah!" she ejaculated; "*you*, Mrs. Trevor, again?"

"I see that you know my name," said Ethel.

"Yes: Count Mandeville mentioned it. You left us together yesterday."

A flush crossed Ethel's countenance as she said, "And so he spoke of me?"

"Yes, madam," rejoined Mildred,—"*but only in a way which was calculated to inspire me with respect towards you. You did right to avoid that man! I know him well—too well. But no matter! How did you find out that I lived here?*"—and Mildred put this question with almost as much rapidity of utterance as the thought itself flashed to her brain.

"I will tell you presently," responded Ethel; "for I have a great many things to talk to you about in the first instance."

"What meant your singular behaviour towards

me yesterday?" asked Mildred. "Did you mistake me for some one else?"

"For the first moment I did."

"And that was when you addressed me by the title of ladyship? For whom, then, did you take me?"

"For one whom you very much resemble," replied Ethel.

"Rather a poor ladyship then!" said Mildred, with a contemptuous pouting of her lips, as she glanced over her raiment. "Does the lady for whom you took me, dress in such sordid attire as this?"

"On the contrary," answered Ethel, "she is always dressed with the most exquisite taste."

"And who is this lady for whom you so strangely took me?"

"She is named Lady Langport," was the reply.

"I never heard of her," said Mildred.

"Perhaps not—most likely not," rejoined Ethel.

"But it was only for a moment that I took you to be Lady Langport: the next instant I was smitten by your resemblance to some one else."

"This is strange," said Mildred. "You are exciting my curiosity most acutely! Who was this second person for whom you took me?"

"I have seen a beautiful portrait in water colours—"

"A portrait?" ejaculated Mildred, with a sudden start. "Ah! there were two portraits of me once in existence."

"Yes—both in water colours," said Ethel,—"*one of the size of an Album page—the other a little miniature exquisitely framed.*"

"Mrs. Trevor," exclaimed Mildred, starting up from her seat and gazing with mingled surprise and terror upon Ethel, "who can you be that know these things? Is it some fresh plot—some new snare—some net thrown out to catch me?"

"Heaven forbid," interrupted Ethel, fervently, "that I should lend myself to anything so iniquitous! Let us speak of the portrait drawn for an Album."

"Well—and what of that?" demanded Mildred eagerly. "Oh, now I comprehend that you are advancing by a circuitous route to some extraordinary revelation! Do speak out, madam! I have seen enough in my lifetime—"

But here she checked herself; and Ethel said compassionately, "Yes—I know it. I am acquainted with your history."

"You? *you?*" cried Mildred: and then rage succeeding to astonishment, she exclaimed, "After all, you are in some plot with Mandeville!"

The colour glowed upon Ethel's cheeks—and then tears started forth from her eyes. That suspicion so terribly injurious, struck like a dagger into her heart.

"Ah, you may blush and weep," cried Mildred; "but I have seen too much of the world not to know that people can sometimes do both at will! Yes—I repeat that you *are* a creature and an accomplice of Maudevill's!—or else how could you possibly know anything about me?"

Ethel conquered her emotion: she made allowance for Mildred's intemperate conduct; and she said gently and deprecatingly, "You will soon be convinced how much you have wronged me, and then you will be sorry. Does Count Mandeville know anything in reference to those portraits to which I have alluded?"

Mildred reflected; and then she said, "I do not know:"—and still her look was bewildered.

"The larger portrait," resumed Ethel, "was painted when you were nineteen years of age, and the name of Mildred was underneath."

"True. But where could you have seen that portrait?"

"In an Album. The very same Album where it was placed at the time."

"But that was in St. Petersburg!" cried Mildred.

"I know it," rejoined Ethel. "But now the Album is in England. It has been well taken care of."

"It belonged to my mother," said Mildred. "Is it possible that she had any relations into whose possession it could have found its way? or did any friends take charge of it?"

"It is in the possession of that very same Lady Langport of whom I spoke to you just now."

"And whom you say that I resemble?" interjected Mildred.

"Yes," replied Ethel.

"Well, madam—and to what is all this to lead?" asked Mildred, after a pause.

"To a revelation, as you yourself just now suggested."

"Quick, quick! what is this revelation?" exclaimed Mildred. "Who is Lady Langport? why has she got the Album? how is it that I resemble her so much? and how came you to know any particulars relative to my history?"

"Let us go back to the year 1825," said Ethel, fixing a significant look upon her companion.

"The year 1825?"

"Yes. Let us look to the accident upon the Neva."

"Good God! what do you mean?" cried Mildred.

"Your mother——"

"Ah, yes! my mother perished on that occasion. Is it only this that you are going to tell me? Is this the wonderful revelation," pursued Mildred, contemptuously, "for which you have been preparing my mind with so much pains and trouble? I knew it long ago. I read in a newspaper—yes, in the midst of the wilds of Siberia—I read her name in the list of those who perished on that unfortunate occasion. So you see, Mrs. Trevor, that you have been heating about the bush to no purpose after all."

There seemed to be a certain callousness—an almost heartless indifference in the manner in which Mildred thus alluded to her mother; and Ethel was shocked and wounded at this absence of feeling on Mildred's part.

"So you see," resumed the latter, "that if you have come for no other purpose than to tell me of my mother's death, you might just as well have stopped away. It would have been different, perhaps," continued Mildred, with a light laugh and in a tone of levity, "if you had come for the purpose of telling me that my mother is *not* dead—that she did *not* go down with the rest into the depths of the Neva—and that the newspapers were *not* right in giving her name among the lost."

Ethel rose up from her seat with a solemn look, as in a kindred tone she said, "And it is to tell you all this that I am here!"

Mildred looked as if she were petrified with wonderment.

"Yes," continued Ethel, "such is the purpose for which I am here! Your mother did not perish by the breaking of the ice on the Neva! She is alive—she yearns to fold you in her arms—She is that Lady Langport of whom I have spoken!"

Mildred threw herself back in her chair gasping for breath; and then as a sudden idea seemed to strike her, she leant forward, looked with a strange earnestness in Ethel's face, and said with a peculiar tone, "So you wish me to go with you to my mother's?"

"Yes," replied Ethel.

"And is it out of London?"

"Only a few miles."

"Ah!—and I suppose that you have got a carriage in readiness?"

"Yes—it is close by. Come quick!"

"Thank you," said Mildred, in a strange—almost brutal tone: "I would rather not. And you, madam—the sooner you take yourself off from my apartments and get to your carriage the better!"

Ethel was confounded. She was transfixed to the spot—and she gazed on Mildred as if utterly at a loss to persuade herself that she could have heard aright or that such language had come from that female's lips.

"Ah!" cried Mildred, with a mocking laugh: "so you find yourself defeated—your plot has exploded—the trick has proved too grossly transparent for me to be deceived by it!"

"Trick!" murmured Ethel: "trick!" she repeated—and then she burst into tears.

"Will you depart?"—and Mildred stamped her foot with rage.

"Good heavens! for what do you take me?" cried Ethel, half in indignation and half in affliction.

"For what you are!—a base, treacherous, accomplice of the Russians!—the creature of Olonetz—a disgrace to the female sex!—one who beneath a lovely face conceals the blackest heart!"

"I know how severely you have suffered," said Ethel, "and therefore I can understand how you have become suspicious—and I can forgive you for settling your suspicions upon me. Listen, I entreat! Your mother lives—she married Lord Langport—she is now a widow. She is rich! Her abode is at Hendon, a few miles from London. Your portrait is preserved in her Album. Until yesterday she thought that you were dead—as you have hitherto believed that she had perished!"

Mildred's countenance gradually lost its expression of fierce disdainful ire: she reflected—and then she abruptly said, "But tell me how you found out my address?"

"If I answer the question, all your suspicions would revive again."

"Depart, madam! depart!" interrupted Mildred. "For your own sake, I conjure you to go—or else I shall be inclined to do you a mischief! I can be violent, I do assure you!"

"I must dare your violence," said Ethel—"but only in the hope of assuaging it. Again I ask you to listen. Your mother Lady Langport has seen the Russian Ambassador: I also have seen him: he is anxious that you should be restored to your mother's arms, so that in the enjoyment of a comfortable home and of all the luxuries wherewith wealth can surround you, you may



MILORD IN THE GARDEN.

cease to be an object of dread or annoyance in certain quarters. It is for this reason that Count Olonetz displayed so much readiness to discover your abode that your mother might communicate with you. I live with Lady Langport—she is my friend, my benefactress—and I am here to implore that you will lose no time in seeking the mother whose arms will be extended to welcome you."

Once more Mildred reflected: and then she said in accents that were again softened, "You spoke of two portraits?"

"Yes, I have told you where I saw one: it is in your mother's Album. The other——"

"Ah! the other?" said Mildred eagerly. "The miniature so beautifully framed?"

"I know not whether I ought to reveal this secret," said Ethel musingly. "And yet——"

"Speak!" interjected Mildred, "unless you would have all my suspicions revive again!"

"A mother has a right to know that her daughter sometimes thinks of her," continued Ethel, still musing audibly.

"Ah! what do you mean?" exclaimed Mildred.

"I mean that I yesterday beheld the miniature in the possession of your daughter, the Princess Roxana."

A gleam of joy flashed over Mildred's handsome countenance, as she exclaimed, "It is well! the old nurse fulfilled her promise! But Ah! my daughter has been taught to deem me dead!"

"But she cherishes the memory of her mother," said Ethel eagerly.

"It is a wonder," cried Mildred fiercely and savagely, "that they have not taught her to hate, loathe, and abominate me!"

"Calm yourself," said Ethel, "and let us return to the more important subject of our discourse. Have I now succeeded in convincing you that no treachery is intended, but all affectionate kindness?"

"If you had seen so much of the world's horrible perfidy, dissimulation, and duplicity as I have," interrupted Mildred, "you would be suspicious, and you would even now fail to be fully convinced! For treachery—especially when that treachery is *Russian*—can assume garbs which look so much like an honest vesture that the most experienced may be deceived!"

"I too have had my trials," said Ethel mildly and mournfully, as she thought of her false marriage; "and yet in the presence of all the testimony which I have adduced for your contemplation, I should have long ago been convinced!"

"I tell you," said Mildred, almost with the curtness of a retort, "I am not even convinced yet! But I shall accompany you."

She put on her bonnet and shawl, and followed Ethel downstairs. They issued from the house together; and Ethel led the way into Golden Square.

"There is the equipage," she said. "You can ask the coachman to whom it belongs."

Mildred smiled contemptuously, saying, "Do you think that if Russian treachery were at work, it would forget to put into the mouths of these lacqueys the particular words that ought to be repeated in case of any questions being addressed to them?"

The immediate vicinity of the carriage was

now reached; and ejaculations of wonder burst from the lips of the coachman and footman as their eyes settled upon Mildred's countenance.

"They see the likeness!" hastily whispered Ethel.

"Very likely," answered Mildred calmly. "I shall be better able to judge of all these things presently;"—and thus speaking, she at once entered the carriage.

Ethel placed herself by Mildred's side; and as the footman remained at the door waiting for orders, she simply said, "Home."

"Now, Mrs. Trevor," said Mildred, as the equipage drove rapidly through Golden Square, "if all this be true that you have told me and everything turns out to be straightforward and proper, I shall feel myself infinitely indebted to you. But if, on the other hand, I am once more to be rendered the victim of persecution and conspiracy, look out for yourself! At the very first evidence of treachery I will fly at you as if I were a tiger-cat—I will tear out one at least, if not both of those beautiful hazel eyes of yours—I will dash some of those pearls of teeth down your throat—and I will otherwise mar your beauty with seams and scars that you shall carry to your grave!"

"Good heavens, this is very dreadful!" murmured Ethel, with a cold shudder.

"Shall we stop at once, while I alight from the carriage?" asked Mildred.

"Why so?" cried Ethel.

"Because you have still a last chance, if it be really a conspiracy. Tell me the truth—let me go—and I will leave your beauty unspoilt."

"I have told you nothing but the truth," said Ethel firmly, and even warmly. "I must beg of you not to make use of such dreadful language."

"If you had been twice exiled to Tobolsk, and twice been compelled to make your escape," said Mildred,—"and if you had had to deal with the wretches whose perfidies twined their snake-like coils around me,—if you had encountered, I say, such monsters in human form as these, you would be suspicious, and suspicion would make you use dreadful language likewise!"

"Alas! it may be so!—it must be so!" said Ethel: and then a long silence ensued.

Mrs. Trevor reclined back in the carriage; but Mildred was all vivacity, restlessness, and watchfulness—her eyes were incessantly darting their glances out of the windows, or else concentrating their looks upon Ethel's countenance as if to fathom the uttermost depths of her soul. Thus the time passed on, and the outskirts of London were reached. Now Mildred began to look about even more intently and anxiously than before, if possible; but when her regards settled on Ethel's countenance, that beautiful face afforded not the slightest ground for strengthening her suspicions. The beginning of the lane leading down to Hendon Court was now reached; and Mildred, breaking a long silence, said, "This is a lonely neighbourhood."

"It is beautiful and picturesque," responded Ethel.

"What is this place?" demanded Mildred, as the mansion gradually revealed itself from amidst the trees that more than half embowered it.

"That is Hendon Court."

"What! and is it to that gloomy-looking mass of dingy red brick, with those prison-like win-

dows, and those sombre trees in front,—is it to that place I am going?"

"That is Hendon Court, I repeat," said Ethel; "and it is there that you are about to be received in the arms of a mother."

"It looks more like a lunatic asylum," said Mildred, "than a cheerful dwelling-place;"—and her eyes were now riveted with the keenest scrutiny upon her beautiful companion.

"Oh! I entreat you to believe," cried Ethel, in a tone that was full of feeling, "that within those walls a mother's arms are ready to open—a mother's bosom yearns to receive you!"

"By heaven, I believe it to be all false!" ejaculated Mildred fiercely, as the carriage rolled into the gloomy avenue. "Beware! 'tis now too late to repeat of your treachery!"—and Mildred looked as if she were on the very point of springing like a tiger-cat—as she herself had ere now expressed it—at Ethel.

"Look! your mother!" cried the young lady in a joyous tone: and as Mildred looked forth from the window, she beheld Lady Langport standing on the threshold of the front door, waiting to receive her.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Mildred; "that my mother? Yes, yes—it must be!—And yet—Why, it appears like a dream!—it seems as if I only parted from her yesterday! She looks no older!"

"Hush, hush!" hastily whispered Ethel: "speak not before the servants! You have many strange secrets to learn—and I know not yet upon what course of action, in a certain respect, your mother may have resolved!"

Mildred sprang out of the vehicle, and the next moment she was folded in her mother's arms. Ethel instantaneously followed into the hall, closing the front door behind her, so as to shut out that scene from the domestics belonging to the carriage.

Not a word was spoken by Lady Langport: her heart was too full to permit the utterance of a syllable from the lips. She was embracing a daughter whom for two-and-twenty years she had deemed to be numbered with the dead!—embracing that daughter whom for two-and-twenty years she had not seen! And Mildred also for a few minutes yielded to the strength of the emotions that were naturally conjured up by such peculiar circumstances; while Ethel withdrew, discreetly thinking that it was a scene on which a third person ought not to gaze, but that the mother and daughter being thus reunited ought to be left alone together.

At length Mildred disengaged herself somewhat abruptly from Lady Langport's arms, exclaiming, as she stared very hard at her, "Good heavens, mother! how young you look! Is it a dream? is it enchantment? or how have you managed? You look as young as I—and yet you must be sixty!"

Lady Langport was not offended—how could she possibly be offended with the daughter whom she had long deemed dead and who was only just restored to her? Besides, she was prepared for such questions as those at such a meeting. She could not however prevent herself feeling deeply humiliated, as she said in a low tone, "I have strange things to tell you, Mildred. I have confessions to make, which will constitute a well-

merited though terrible chastisement for all the wickedness of that wretched pride and miserable vanity which are personified in me!"

"I do not understand you, mother," said Mildred, who was surveying her parent with the most earnest and scrutinising attention.

"Come, my love," said Lady Langport; "come up-stairs to the drawing-room—and there we shall be alone together."

"It is a sad gloomy-looking house outside, mother," remarked Mildred, "and unless the interior is somewhat more cheerful——"

"Good heavens!" cried Lady Langport, now suddenly becoming distressed at the callousness of her daughter's manner, "ought not even the veriest dungeon to seem cheerful to us at this moment when we are reunited? Come to my arms once more, dearest Mildred!"

Mildred now suffered herself to be embraced, rather than shared the pleasure with her parent: she did not meet the affectionate demonstration half-way. The first emotions had subsided; and she even grew impatient of so much kissing, and fondling, and hugging. Besides, her mother's youthful appearance was still making its impression of wonderment upon her mind; and she longed for the explanation that might relieve her curiosity.

They ascended to the drawing-room; and then Mildred exclaimed, "Ah! this is indeed an improvement! I admire your taste, mother. I shall feel comfortable and happy enough here. Well, after all, I am glad I came."

"What?" cried Lady Langport, with a rending affliction in her accents. "Could you possibly have hesitated? Did you not speed to embrace your mother?"

"Hesitate, indeed!" answered Mildred. "I hesitated so much that I was very nearly not coming at all:"—then throwing off her faded shawl and old bonnet, she flung herself upon the cushions of a large arm-chair, lolling in precisely the posture in which Ethel had found her at her lodgings.

Be it recollected that this was the same posture in which she was represented in the Album; and Lady Langport was at once struck by it. She thought she saw her daughter before her just as she was two-and-twenty years ago, and just as that portrait had maintained the impression of Mildred's image on the mother's mind. Overcome by her emotions, Lady Langport sank into a seat opposite to Mildred; and long and earnestly did she contemplate her—that restored daughter! As for Mildred herself, she looked just for all the world as if she had been years instead of moments in the place,—with such an air of complacency and comfort had she settled herself down in the great arm-chair. The only thing which seemed to be inappropriate and out of keeping with all surrounding circumstances, was the shabbiness of her attire.

"And so you have hesitated to come, my dear child?" said Lady Langport.

"Of course I did, mother. What could I suppose except that it was a snare?"

"A snare! What! and did not the sweet looks of my young friend Ethel at once convince you?"

Mildred gave vent to a loud mocking laugh; and then she contemptuously said, "Sweet looks, indeed! Catch me being such a fool as to be

taken by anybody's looks! However, as it is not a trick, after all, your Ethel has saved her eyes and her teeth—for I would have torn out the former and dashed out the latter."

Lady Langport was frightened at this language; but recollecting her daughter's history, she said, "Ah, my poor child! you have indeed suffered very much—and it has produced an impression upon you—"

"Never mind pitying me at present, mother," interrupted Mildred; "but let us speak of yourself. How on earth do you contrive to make yourself look like forty when you are sixty?"

"Mildred, do not humiliate me! I thought I should have strength enough to tell the tale from my own lips—but I find that I cannot—"

"Humiliate you, indeed?" ejaculated Mildred. "That is a strange thing to say! Why, I was complimenting you—"

"Mildred! Mildred!"

"What nonsense is this, mother? I wish you would tell me your secret. When I grow old I shall like to make use of it. Your hair is black—and yet it does not look as if it were dyed—"

"Mildred!"

"No—the gloss is too natural. And then your teeth are as white and as perfect as my own;—and I rather pride myself on mine," continued Mildred, smiling to show the whiteness of those teeth, and then clashing the two rows together to prove their strength and firmness. "As for your complexion, it is brilliant!"

"Mildred!"

"Then your figure, it is symmetry itself. On my word, dear mother, you have the well-rounded proportions and *embonpoint* of a buxom widow of forty!"

"Mildred, you are killing me!"

"What!—with compliments?" cried the daughter, laughing. "Oh, my dear mother, if you take so much pains with yourself as all this, and if nature has likewise been so bountiful towards you and preserved your charms so well, you must expect to be flattered!"

"Mildred!"—and it was now a scream which burst from the lips of Lady Langport: then for a moment a sensation of faintness came over her—but the next instant exercising that power of self-control which from circumstances she had attained, she arose from her seat, patted her daughter's cheek gently with her gloved hand, and said, "I will send Ethel to you, who shall explain everything."

She then quitted the room—while Mildred, throwing herself back in her chair, mentally exclaimed, "It is as yet all incomprehensible! What on earth can it mean? The only thing that seems certain and intelligible is that I am comfortably housed here—that is to say, if my Russian enemies will leave me in peace."

CHAPTER XLI.

MILDRED AT HOME.

It was in order to banish the disagreeable reflection which had just arisen in her mind, and abstract her thoughts from unpleasant topics, that Mildred now rose from her seat and began to

examine the handsome suite of drawing-rooms, with their appointment, alike so luxurious and so elegant. She beheld beautiful statuettes—superb vases—mantel ornaments of the most attractive description—costly nick-nacks—curiosities—and interesting objects of vertu. On the tables there were several books, superbly bound; and as Mildred casually glanced at them, she perceived that one was a Peerage bearing the date of some years back. She looked for the name of Langport; and she found that the nobleman who then bore the name, was represented as having married Miss Mildred Malcolin, daughter of Edward Malcolin, Esquire, merchant of St. Petersburg and London.

"Daughter of Edward Malcolin?" repeated Mildred to herself: "that would mean *me*! It was the widow whom his lordship married! How this error? or why this misrepresentation? Ah, and how was it that my mother was described as having perished in the waters of the Neva?"

Mildred felt that she was growing bewildered by these reflections, when the door opened and Ethel entered the room.

"Well, Mrs. Trevor," said Mildred; "I promised you that if everything turned out right and straightforward, I would give you my best thanks. God knows that at present I have nothing better to offer you—though I dare say my mother will now improve my condition for me."

"In giving me your thanks," responded Ethel, "you have done all I can possibly require. I was incapable of deceiving you—"

"How could I tell that at the time?" ejaculated Mildred almost sharply. "I had everything to apprehend at the hands of the accursed Russians. And even now that I have found a mother when I so little expected it, and that I have been transported as if by magic into the midst of this fairy scene"—and she glanced around the apartments—"I cannot calculate upon enjoying my good fortune from one hour to the next."

"You need labour under no apprehension," said Ethel, "in reference to Count Olonetz. Your mother has just now emphatically repeated to me the assurance that I myself had previously given you, to the effect that Count Olonetz entertains the hope that you will settle down in this comfortable home—in which case he would rather do anything he could to serve you, than renew the annoyances and persecutions you may have sustained."

"Well, it may be so," said Mildred, after a little reflection; "and I dare say that it is. At all events I will risk it. This place"—and she again glanced around her—"is not to be abandoned in a hurry."

"Let me assure you," said Ethel, "that your mother, entertaining the most affectionate regard for you, will do everything she possibly can to ensure your happiness. This is her house—and henceforth it is your home. She is rich—and you shall share her wealth. At her death she will leave you rich also. But in return for so much kindness—"

"Ah, well," interjected Mildred; "now for the conditions! I never saw such a world as this is! No one in it does anything without a motive more or less selfish: no heart is disin-

terested! Your very parents make stipulations with you! As for friendship!"—and here Mildred's mocking laugh rang like an infernal music through the suite of apartments.

Ethel was shocked; and for a moment she recoiled from the presence of a woman in whose disposition there seemed to be something absolutely fearful: but recollecting all that Mildred had gone through, she again felt the necessity of making every allowance for her—and she said mildly, yet firmly, "There is such a thing as a mother's disinterested love:—there is likewise such a thing as an unselfish friendship."

"By the bye, Mrs. Trevor," said Mildred, suddenly assuming a more amiable demeanour, "you have perhaps come to give me some explanations? And indeed they are necessary. Do you know what this means?"—and opening the Peerage, she pointed to the representation to which we have above referred.

"Everything shall be explained," said Ethel. "Your mother would have given these explanations with her own lips—but the discourse took a turn which prevented it. Oh! you will presently understand how impossible it really was for a mother so far to humiliate herself in the presence of a daughter! Ah, and you may perhaps comprehend how disagreeable is the task deputed to me——"

"My dear Mrs. Trevor," interrupted Mildred, "tell me the truth at once. I hate circumlocution—I always suspect some treachery where it is used."

"When you come to know me better," said Ethel, somewhat coldly, "you will not judge me in this manner. However, if your mind do indeed require no preparation for those mysteries which are about to be revealed, you had better hear the truth at once. Your mother Lady Langport has for a long series of years passed in the world as being much younger than she really is——"

"So I should think," interjected Mildred. "But there is no harm in that:"

"It was not as the Widow Malcolm she married Lord Langport——"

"Never mind what name she took," said Mildred coolly, "since she got the husband and has kept the fortune."

"It is her own fortune that she possesses," continued Ethel. "Lord Langport had nothing except this little estate of Hendon Court. But let me come to the point. It was not as the Widow Malcolm your mother was known in the world when she married Lord Langport: she passed as Miss Malcolm. Yes—it was as the daughter, and not as the mother——"

"Oh, ho!" cried Mildred, beginning to comprehend. "I see! My mother's name was mentioned amongst the deaths caused by the accident on the Neva——"

"Yes—and you disappeared at the same time," said Ethel.

"Ah!"—and now the bandage fell completely from Mildred's eyes.

"I need say no more," said Ethel. "I see that you fathom it all."

Mildred looked grave, and reflected deeply for a few instants: then she suddenly burst out into the merriest peal of laughter,—exclaiming, "This is excellent! It is the very comedy of romance! it

is the most admirable blending of farce and tragedy I ever knew!"—and again the reckless, callous, heartless laughter went pealing through the suite of rooms.

"Madam," Ethel at length ventured to interpose, "remember that it is your own mother whom you are thus making the subject of your merriment."

"All the better proof that I am not angry for the trick she played! So she has been passing herself off as me, thinking I was dead? Well, you seem to chide me for want of respect towards my mother:—you must however permit me to observe that I don't think she could have entertained any very great amount of love for her daughter."

Ethel felt that it was indeed a subject on which she could scarcely argue with any chance of success. She felt distressed—and she remained silent.

"Now, as far as I am concerned," resumed Mildred, "my mother is welcome to take my name and pass herself off for me; and I am sure that I shall never think of betraying the secret. I should like however to be initiated into the mysteries of her toilet——"

"Oh, I beseech you," interjected Ethel, with accents of the most earnest appeal, "not to touch upon this subject,—the subject which your own good sense, Mildred, must show you——"

"To be sure! a painful and a delicate one! Well, well, leave me to manage my mother. But now, what does she propose? How can I be suddenly introduced to the world as her daughter when I look as old as herself—or to speak more correctly, she looks no older than I myself am? Besides, what a mass of contradictions will there be—what a heap of inconsistencies, for the world's scandal to feast itself upon!"

"This is the very subject," said Ethel, "which requires so much deliberation. It was for this reason that I bade you on your arrival be cautious how you spoke before the servants; and this was what I meant when I intimated that I was as yet ignorant how your mother purposed to act in a *certain respect*."

"And so the servants know nothing at present?" said Mildred, musing.

"Absolutely nothing," replied Ethel.

"And they do not suspect that my mother has a daughter living?"

"No one suspects anything of the real truth."

"But my mother's age," continued Mildred,— "some one besides yourself must have known it? Her lady's-maid——"

"No one but myself!" rejoined Ethel emphatically.

"Ah, then, in plain terms, my dear Mrs. Trevor, you are my mother's sole confidante?"

Ethel intimated an affirmative.

"The course to be pursued," continued Mildred, "is as simple and easy as possible. It may be described in half-a-dozen words. Look you, Mrs. Trevor! My mother has suddenly found a sister!"

"Ah—a sister?" said Ethel: and a gleam of satisfaction appeared for a moment on her countenance; but it was instantaneously succeeded by a shade.

"What is passing in your mind?" demanded Mildred, eyeing her searchingly.

"Nothing particular," responded Ethel: but

she blushed slightly as she felt that she was giving utterance to an untruth.

"Nay, but I insist upon knowing," said Mildred imperiously. "Let there be nothing but candour here."

"Oh," said Ethel, proudly, and almost indignantly, "If you put my frankness to such a test as this, I will not shrink from it."

"That is just what I require," said Mildred coolly. "You looked pleased and then displeased all in the same moment. Perhaps you will tell me what this meant?"

"I looked pleased," explained Ethel, "because I observed that the course which you had just suggested would in no way compromise the secret of your poor mother. But on the other hand, I was suddenly smitten with sorrow to think that your presence here, instead of putting an end to a deception, only tended to multiply and widen its ramifications."

"Nevertheless," said Mildred, "you will keep the secret, Ethel—and if there be any sincerity at all on the part of Olonetz, he will likewise keep it. But, Ah! there is another—"

"And that other?" said Ethel, instantaneously smitten with a suspicion. "You mean—you mean Count Mandeville?"

"Yes. But all things considered, I need not fear him," said Mildred, in a musing tone. "It can do him no good to tell anything he knows concerning me: but on the other hand, such hostility on his part would only provoke a terrible vengeance on mine. To me he is formidable only when backed by the violence or the intrigues of the Russian power: but if it be true that the Russians mean me no mischief for the future, then may I look upon Mandeville as a serpent dispossessed of its sting. Well, then," added Mildred, "there is nothing to prevent the easy and the successful adoption of the course which I have suggested. Let me recapitulate. My mother has just found a sister—or let us rather say Lady Langport has found a sister, whom she had for years deemed to be dead. I am therefore Miss Malcolm. Do not interrupt me! If any queries be put, let it be said that the deceased Mr. Edward Malcolm, merchant of St. Petersburg, who died in that city in the year 1824, left two daughters behind him. So many years have elapsed since then that it is not likely any one will be found to stand officiously forward and contradict the statement. So now go and tell my mother that the matter is arranged—the requisite statements can be made to the domestics—and all will go on well."

Ethel quitted the room slowly; but before she ascended to Lady Langport's chamber, she sought an apartment where she might be alone for a few minutes; and throwing herself upon a seat, she covered her face with her hands, murmuring amidst sigh and sobs, "Good heavens! what a web of duplicities!—and to be an accomplice in this tissue of deceptions! And, Oh! how unnatural too! The mother compelled to disown the daughter! The daughter to call the mother *sister*! Yet how can it be arranged otherwise? Oh, this is not the point which ought to engage my attention! There is only one thing for me to reflect upon! Can I—can I remain here any longer? can I consent to repeat day by day, hour by hour, the stupendous falsehood that they are sisters?"

And Ethel groaned in spirit as she felt that her position beneath that roof, which was at first loathsome, had now become revolting, and that she was plunging down deeper and deeper into a vortex of duplicities from which her soul shrank. Yet on the other hand she thought of the emolumenta she enjoyed—the promises which Lady Langport had held out for the future; and she felt that for her child's sake she was bound to submit to much self-martyrdom and to many personal sacrifices. She wiped away her tears—she composed her feelings—and she resolved that at all events she would do nothing rashly, but that whatever step she decided on taking should be the result of the calmest deliberation. As she was ascending in this altered frame of mind to Lady Langport's chamber, she met her little boy, in the care of his nurse, upon the stairs: she snatched him up, and pressing him to her heart, felt that her resolves were strengthened and that she must do nothing inconsiderately or hastily.

On rejoining Lady Langport, Ethel communicated the plan which Mildred had pointed out, and which indeed had already suggested itself to her ladyship's mind as the only one that under existing circumstances could possibly be adopted. It was all very well that in the presence of the Russian Ambassador, on the preceding day, Lady Langport had proclaimed her resolve that there should be an end of all duplicities and hypocrisies:—it was under the influence of extraordinary feelings that she had thus spoken. But in calmer moments and on maturer deliberation, she could not so readily resign her darling vanity. To do her justice however—for she had many excellent points about her character—she was prepared to make any sacrifice rather than give up the daughter whom she had so suddenly discovered to be still numbered with the living: but on the other hand, she had entertained the hope that the worst might not happen and that the whole matter could be arranged without the exposure and utter humiliation of herself. Thus, when Ethel came and announced that the affair was to be so contrived, Lady Langport felt like a criminal to whom a reprieve had been granted. She might retain her daughter without making the sacrifice of her own vanity!—her maternal feelings might be gratified without the necessity of tearing the mask away from her own countenance!

"Ethel," she said, in a low voice, "you must despise me very much: for you can fathom what is passing in my mind. You think, perhaps, that now that circumstances have taken such a sudden and wondrous turn, I ought to deal frankly and boldly with the world—"

"Madam," interrupted Ethel, "this is a subject which only concerns yourself!"

"You speak coldly to me?" cried Lady Langport. "Oh, good heavens, Ethel! if I am to lose your friendship! But, Ah!" she exclaimed, as an idea suddenly struck her,—“if you think that because I have recovered a daughter, I shall be the less anxious for your welfare—”

"Oh, madam!" cried Ethel, bursting into tears; "how is it that you understand me so little, and that you consider me to be so selfish?"

And then Ethel stopped short, while a blush glowed upon her cheeks,—the blush of shame; for she felt that she *was* selfish, and that all the resolves which a few minutes back she had been

taking, had only sprung from interested considerations, no matter whether they were more on little Alfred's account than on her own.

"I am afraid that I have offended you," said Lady Langport, gently and entreatingly: for she comprehended not all that was passing in Ethel's bosom; "but pray forgive me, and let us not dwell upon the subject. Accept my thanks—my best, sincerest thanks—for the mission you have just accomplished to my daughter. And now, dear Ethel, if you would be so kind as to begin by intimating to the domestics, as if quite in a casual way, that a *sister* has been providentially restored to me—"

"Pray go and join her!" ejaculated Ethel hastily. "You have a thousand explanations yet to give—or at least, you and Mildred must have countless things to say to each other after so long a separation!"

"But one word, Ethel!" said Lady Langport. "You did not answer me with regard to that request which I made—"

"Ah, there is Mildred's voice on the stairs!" cried Ethel. "She is asking for me! she is inquiring for my room!"

"Go, go, Ethel!—go, dear Ethel, and see what she requires. But remember—remember, my sweet young friend"—and Lady Langport fixed a peculiar look upon Mrs. Trevor,—"remember that you never allow Mildred to penetrate into the mysteries"—and she glanced in the direction of the dressing-room.

Ethel gave no reply, but hastened out of the chamber.

"Where is Mrs. Trevor? which is her apartment? will any one show me?"—it was thus that Mildred's voice had been heard exclaiming upon the stairs.

"Yes, ma'am," said a female servant, hurrying up after her. "I will show you."

"I rang the drawing-room bell," cried Mildred petulantly, "and no one answered the summons!"

"I am sorry, madam," said the maid respectfully, "but the bell could not have rung, by some accident—and it was only when I heard you calling—"

"Well, never mind," said Mildred. "Where is—Ah, here is Mrs. Trevor herself! Is that your room, Ethel?"

"No—that is her ladyship's."

"My *sister's*, you mean:—my *sister's*!" cried Mildred pointedly, for the behoof of the female servant. "Well, which is your room, Ethel?"

"Be kind enough to follow me," said Mrs. Trevor: and she led Mildred to her own chamber.

"I tell you what I want," said Mildred. "You see that my costume is not exactly fitted for an elegant drawing-room:—and she burst forth into that half bitter, half mocking laugh which it did Ethel so much harm to hear. "So you will be kind enough to get my mo—*sister* I mean"—and here she laughed again, with a sort of heartless, callous, reckless gaiety,—"yes, my *sister* to lend me one of her dresses till I can get my wardrobe replenished by a fashionable milliner. My *sister*"—and she kept on emphasizing the word—"is either somewhat stouter than I am, or else she makes herself up to that gorgeous *emboupoint*; but nevertheless, I daresay I can make one of her dresses fit me for the present. So I will wait here

—or what is better still, you can let me know which apartment I am to occupy."

"I will inquire," said Ethel.

"This is a nice room of your's," said Mildred, looking slowly around her. "That inner door—"

"Leads to a dressing-room," interjected Ethel.

"Come with me, if you please—and I will show you to your own chamber."

"I thought you were going to inquire first. I can remain here while you are gone."

Ethel recollected that the door of the dressing-room was locked on the other side; and even if it were not, she knew that all the cosmetics and mysterious accessories of her ladyship's toilet were secured in the drawers and the bureau. She therefore hesitated no longer to leave Mildred in that chamber while she went to rejoin Lady Langport.

"Take whichever dresses you fancy will suit her," said her ladyship when the message was communicated to her.

Ethel did as she was desired; and then, having learnt which chamber was destined for Mildred's reception, she sped back to her own room.

"Now if you will follow me," she said, "I will show you where you are to sleep."

Mildred followed her accordingly; but upon being introduced to the room appointed for her use, she exclaimed, "Oh! but this is not near so nice a chamber as your's!—it is not half so well furnished—neither is it so cheerful. And it has got no dressing-room!"

"I hope," said Ethel, "that you will be satisfied with this apartment. It is not that I have any particular choice—"

"Well, my dear friend," said Mildred, "I shall ask you as a very particular favour to change rooms with me. In the first place, it would seem so odd to the servants if I were put into an apartment inferior to that which you occupy—"

"No," said Ethel, "it will not seem at all strange—unless," she added, with a glow upon her cheeks, "you mean to insinuate that I myself am only an upper sort of servant?"

"No, no—I didn't mean that. But you will see the propriety, my dear Mrs. Trevor," continued Mildred coaxingly, "of complying with my request."

"And I beg to decline it," responded Ethel, coldly and firmly.

"Hey day! what?" cried Mildred. "But, Ah! I understand it!"

"What do you understand, madam?"

"You think that because you are acquainted with certain secrets," pursued Mildred insolently, "you can take matters with a high hand."

"I am incapable of abusing the confidence that is reposed in me," exclaimed Ethel indignantly.

Mildred looked at her for a moment, as if to fathom how much sincerity there was in her speech; and then she said, "Come, my dear Ethel, you and I will not quarrel. But you were wrong to provoke me—"

"I provoke you?" exclaimed the young lady.

"Why, yes—by refusing to give me up that room. You must understand that Hendon Court has two mistresses now."

"Ah," said Ethel: "Hendon Court has two mistresses now?"

"No doubt of it," replied Mildred. "Are there

not two sisters—Lady Langport and Miss Malcolm?" and again she laughed as she emphasized the word. "But no matter. I am not going to begin my share of sovereignty within these walls by an act of unkindness or tyranny. So keep your room, Ethel—and I will endeavour to make myself comfortable in this. Ah! you have brought me three or four dresses—oh?"

"It must be some days," said Ethel, "before a dressmaker can supply your wardrobe."

"Oh we will make them work night and day," said Mildred. "I shall not spare the money in that quarter—nor in any other, I can tell you. Besides, I already see plenty of things that want alteration here. The idea of concealing those beautiful drawing-rooms behind such gloom! Why, the house wants a new front with fine large modern windows. However, I will soon show you what my taste is on the point."

Ethel made no answer, but she was moving towards the door.

"Just stop one minute," cried Mildred, "and let us see whether these dresses become me. I intend to imitate my sister in the excellence of her toilets. In fact, my dear Ethel, I have already revolved a thousand different plans in my mind. Ah! you will be dazzled by some of them, I can assure you. Now what, for instance, can be more probable than that I, as Miss Malcolm—elegantly dressed—well off—moving in the best society—and not so very bad-looking, should captivate some rich old English peer? I don't care a fig how old he is! All I want is rank—yes, title and position. You understand me, Ethel? I have been knocked about in the world for half my life; and I mean the other half to be spent in luxury, pleasure, and enjoyment. And why not? I have now at length got the chance, and I shall not throw it away. Do you not agree with me?"

"Really," said Ethel, coldly and distantly, "I am unable to offer you an opinion upon the subject."

"Nonsense!" cried Mildred. "You must in your heart acknowledge that I am right. Surely you are not devoured with scruples? By the bye, I forgot to ask—are you a widow? or is your husband alive and you are separated from him?"

Ethel's countenance became crimson; and it was with the utmost difficulty she could restrain her feelings, as she murmured, "I am a widow."

"Then let me tell you that the best thing you can do," exclaimed Mildred, "is to think of marrying again. Young and beautiful as you are—"

"Pray what dress will you wear now?" inquired Ethel quickly.

Mildred made her selection; and Ethel at once sought an excuse for leaving the room, by saying, "I will send up a lady's-maid to assist you in your toilet."

CHAPTER XLII.

MILDRED AND ETHEL.

WHEN Mildred's toilet was accomplished, she descended to the drawing-room, where she found Lady Langport. Her ladyship observed, with a feeling of maternal pride which arose within her

despite all circumstances, the great improvement which was effected in Mildred's looks by that change of apparel; and she contemplated her daughter with affectionate admiration.

"Now, do you know," said Mildred, sinking with a lounging ease into an arm-chair, "that you are beginning by treating me rather unhandsomely—"

"What?" ejaculated Lady Langport, starting with mingled astonishment and grief.

"Why, yes," pursued Mildred. "You allow this favourite Ethel of your's to keep the second-best chamber, while you thrust me into a very inferior room."

"Mildred!" cried her ladyship, "is it possible that you begin by reproaching me?—that on the very first day of our restoration to each other, you can find it in your heart to make complaints?"

"I was only telling you what I think and feel."

"I am sorry you do not like your chamber," said Lady Langport; "but we will have decorators and upholsterers, and it shall be completely renovated for you."

"Well, that is better," said Mildred; "and it is indeed exactly what I should have ordered to be done, even if you had not suggested it—that is to say, supposing that I consented to keep the chamber."

"It is the best after mine and Ethel's," said her ladyship, who was looking more or less hurt and surprised at the tone in which her daughter spoke.

"After Ethel's?" cried Mildred. "But I should rather think that mine ought to be before Ethel's."

"I beseech you—Oh! I beseech you," said her ladyship, earnestly and appealingly, "not to interfere with any arrangements that have been made in reference to Ethel. I love her dearly; and—and—she is indispensable to me. Besides, she is acquainted with our secrets—"

"Tell me something about this Ethel of your's?" demanded Mildred. "You seem to place implicit confidence in her."

"And she deserves it," rejoined Lady Langport. "She took the greatest interest in everything that concerned you—"

"How long has she been with you?"

"Only a very short time," answered Lady Langport,—"but little more than a fortnight."

"Ah, to be sure! I think I remember that she told me so. But you must have known her longer than that?"

"She was unknown to me before she came."

"Then she was well recommended?" said Mildred inquiringly.

"I took her without any recommendation at all," answered Lady Langport: "I was at once prepossessed in her favour. Look at her sweet beautiful face—the goodness that reposes in those hazel eyes! Have you yet seen her little boy?"

Mildred answered in the negative.

"A beautiful child," continued Lady Langport, "of about eleven months old. I am sure you will like him, Mildred."

"Ah!—only eleven months old, and the mother a widow! But she is not in mourning nor even in half-mourning; and yet methought that in England widows wore mourning for a couple of years?"



"Hush, Mildred!" said Lady Langport: "that is a subject which perhaps it were not well to probe too deeply. You need not look at me thus inquiringly—I declare to you that I know nothing of Ethel's private affairs. She may be separated from her husband, and it may suit her to say that he is dead: or—"

"Or what is more probable," interjected Mildred, "she may never have had any husband at all."

"I will tell you frankly," proceeded Lady Langport, in a subdued tone, "that I suspected at the very outset that poor Ethel had been made the victim of some villanous treachery. I did not therefore ask her for any references—I took her on her own personal recommendations. I thought that if it were as I suspected, I should be at once establishing the strongest claims upon her gratitude, and—as—as—I felt that she would become necessary to—to—me, it was this sort of bond

which I strove to weave between us. Thus you understand, Mildred, she is under every possible obligation to me, and she will not abuse the confidence that is reposed in her."

"I daresay not," said Mildred. "In fact, from all you have told me, there is no doubt in my mind that she is so completely dependant upon her present position, she would not on any account endanger it."

Ethel now came into the drawing-room, and very soon afterwards a servant entered to announce that dinner was ready. The three ladies descended: the repast was not served up in the principal dining-room, but in the parlour which was habitually used for the meals. Thus Mildred had not as yet seen the portraits which embellished the dining-room.

Ethel felt herself in an uncomfortable position throughout dinner-time; for Mildred was full of arrogance and pretension, continually calling her

mother *sister*, and accentuating the word—giving her orders to the servants with the same air as if she had been for years, instead of hours, one of the mistresses of that house—and indulging in a discourse which by its transition from flippancy to bold license indicated not merely the callousness and heartlessness of the woman, but likewise the absence of all moral principles. Ethel was sometimes shocked, sometimes disgusted: but what annoyed her most, was that Mildred plainly hinted at a prudish hypocrisy on the young lady's part when she did not laugh at the broad jest that was thrown out or subscribe to the loose doctrines that were enunciated. As for Lady Langport, she endeavoured with all her might and power to persuade herself that it was a mere innocent raillery on Mildred's part, or else that whatsoever sinister there might be in her behaviour or her discourse was to be extenuated on the ground of the terrible misfortunes through which she had been dragged.

The evening passed away, and the ladies retired for the night. When Ethel attended, as usual, upon Lady Langport in the dressing-room, she noticed that her ladyship was dispirited and desponding, that she vainly endeavoured to rally, and with equal fruitlessness essayed to conceal the causes of her vexation.

"I sincerely hope, my dear Ethel," she presently said, "that you will agree well with Mildred."

"It is impossible I can offer her any provocation," answered the young lady.

"What do you mean, my dear girl?" inquired Lady Langport, quickly. "You think the provocation will emanate from her? No, no—it must not! Besides, your's is so sweet a disposition that you do not take offence very readily; and for my sake, Ethel—for *my* sake, my dear girl, I know that you will now be more forbearing than ever."

"Rest assured that I will," answered the amiable Ethel, affected by the poor old lady's manner.

"I must confess," proceeded Lady Langport, after a pause, "that there is a peculiarity about Mildred which I as a mother may readily excuse, or even blind myself unto the failing—but which to you may prove galling and vexatious. And therefore, dear Ethel, I rely upon the sweetness of your disposition and the excellence of your temper for a lenient forbearance towards one who has suffered so much."

Ethel renewed her promises; and presently, on retiring to her own couch, she shed burning tears over her little Alfred as she strained him to her bosom, murmuring in low but passionate accents, "Ah, dear child! dear child! how much am I bound to suffer for your sake!"

Mildred rose early on the following morning: she ordered the carriage, and without waiting for breakfast she set out for London. She had on the previous evening ascertained at which shops Lady Langport was accustomed to deal; and to those establishments she proceeded. It was about one o'clock in the afternoon when she returned to Hendon Court, bringing with her a vast number of band-boxes and packages of all descriptions. She had largely bestowed her patronage upon milliners, linen-drapers, mercers, jewellers, perfumers, and other tradesmen. Lady Langport

welcomed her with smiles; and Mildred, sitting down to table, made a substantial luncheon, washing it down with several glasses of wine.

Having changed her toilet, and embellished herself with some of the jewellery which she had purchased, Mildred went out to ramble in the garden. She took with her a volume of a novel, and for half-an-hour or so whiled away the time by suffering her looks to wander listlessly over the pages as she strolled along the gravel-walks and amidst the parterres of flowers. Then she flung down her book, and began to gather herself a nosegay—in the midst of which occupation she heard the rustling of a dress and the tread of light footsteps in an adjoining avenue. In a few moments she perceived Ethel, who had retired to the garden that she might be alone with her reflections, and who had no idea of the chance of there encountering the very person who now occupied so large a share of her thoughts. Indeed, at the instant so unfavourably were the young lady's meditations fixing themselves upon Mildred, that on suddenly beholding her she stepped back a pace or two, and was on the very point of retiring again behind the screen of verdure which separated the avenues.

"Ah, Mrs. Trevor—Ethel?" cried Mildred.

"I beg your pardon," said Ethel, whose good-breeding instantaneously got the better of her repugnance: "is it you? We have not met before to-day. You went out early this morning?"

"I went to make some purchases," answered Mildred; "and I think you will soon find that my toilet rivals my *sister's*"—again emphasizing that word which sounded so horrible and unnatural to the ears of Ethel. "Ah, by the bye, I have been thinking," continued Mildred, "that it will be mere waste of time and money to decorate the chamber I am now occupying. It has no dressing-room—and a dressing-room I must have. I want a bath fitted up: it is good for the complexion. Once more I must beg of you to change rooms with me."

"Pray, Mildred," interrupted Ethel, "do not renew that topic. It is not that I have any unwillingness on my own account—"

"I should think not indeed!" interjected Mildred contemptuously.

"But my chamber is situated next to Lady Langport's," continued Ethel, affecting not to heed Mildred's impertinence; "and as her ladyship likes me to be near her, I hope that this explanation will prove sufficient."

"Ah, ha!" said Mildred: "then I suppose the two chambers communicate?"

Ethel hesitated for a moment; and then she said with frankness, "Yes, they do."

"And perhaps the dressing-room," continued Mildred, "is the scene of all the mysteries of my venerable mother's—I mean, I mean," she hastily and flippantly cried, "of my dear *sister's* toilet!"

"I did not say so," exclaimed Ethel with some degree of vehemence.

"No—but I guessed it," rejoined Mildred coolly. "Come, tell me, Ethel—and I will not ask *her* any questions on the point—but do tell me how she manages. Her complexion is far better than mine! What cosmetic does she use? I have brought a quantity home from the perfumer's; but I should like to know what is the

sovereign panacea against crow's feet and wrinkles. Tell me therefore, Ethel."

"I beseech you," interrupted the young lady, "not to address me on these topics. If there be anything to reveal or betray, rest assured that no traitorous word will go forth from my lips."

"Why, you are absurd, Ethel, with your scruples!" cried Mildred angrily.

"I am honest, at all events," responded Ethel.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Mildred, turning savagely upon her. "Would you infer that I am not honest?"

"I intended no inference of the kind," said Ethel, mildly yet firmly.

"Now I tell you what," said Mildred, "I think that you and I had better come to an understanding together. You affect a goodness which humiliates me:—you pretend to an integrity which fills me with mortification. I don't believe in it, Ethel. It is all nonsense. Therefore I beg that when I ask you questions, you will give me straightforward answers; and when I seek for your confidence you will not refuse it. I will speak plainer if you like. I mean, therefore, that when I ask you for certain little secrets you will not immediately climb up on your stilts and pretend that you are prevented by a point of honour from revealing or betraying them. But that is not all. I will thank you not to screw up that pretty mouth of yours when I let out a jest in the course of conversation. Furthermore, I beg that you will not look so horrified and shocked if I happen to explain any particular views about the rights and privileges of woman."

"Enough!" said Ethel. "If this be what you call coming to an understanding, it has indeed brought us to one. Know me, therefore, for what I am."

"Ah! what are you?" said Mildred jeeringly.

For an instant a blush mantled vividly upon Ethel's countenance, and she was seized with confusion: but the next moment regaining her self-possession, she lifted her head proudly, saying, "It is sufficient for you to know that I am not one who will betray whatsoever secrets may be entrusted to me. Neither am I one who will laugh at broad unchaste jests, or accede to principles that shock and scandalize the mind."

"I have no doubt we are mighty particular, Mrs. Trevor," cried Mildred, with a toss of the head; "but I would wager my life that you could not display your marriage certificate."

A deadly pallor smote the unfortunate young lady,—a paleness which looked like that of death, when succeeding so rapidly upon the vivid flush which ere now overspread her features. She staggered against a tree for support. That allusion to the marriage-certificate had conjured up, with overwhelming effect, the entire details of the wrongs and calamities she had sustained through the unfortunate love of the Duke of Ardleigh. Mildred saw that the blow had stricken home: she perceived that her conjecture in reference to Ethel was right, and that she had no husband to give a father's name to her child. The bold bad woman's purpose was served, and for an instant a smile of triumph wavered upon her lip.

"Now my young friend," she said, "we perhaps understand each other better than we did at first—better far than you meant us to do. There is

enough on the subject. I am not spiteful—I do not want to be malicious. I have got at your secret—but I will not betray it if you only consent to alter the tenour of your conduct towards me. Put off those prudish airs which you have no right to assume; and abstain from affecting a punctiliousness which you do not in reality experience. Pray attend to all I have been saying, and I have no doubt we shall be very good friends."

Ethel said not a word: she was gathering her thoughts and composing her feelings, and she acquired strength and consolation from the evident fact that Mildred had not learnt aught concerning her from any particular source—but had merely formed the conjecture, and then acting upon it, had fired the random shot, which had however so completely hit the sensitive part in Ethel's heart.

"And now," continued Mildred after a pause, "let us place ourselves upon a better footing towards each other. Remember, there are two mistresses at Hendon Court. You have already secured the favour of one; and I now offer you that of the other. There is a proof of my goodwill;—show that you deserve it by answering the little questions I put to you just now—I mean in reference to the cosmetics which my *sister* uses."

Ethel bent her superb hazel eyes earnestly upon Mildred, as she said, "I will not answer a single question upon that subject: I will not suffer myself to be drawn into any discourse thereon. I will place the seal of silence upon my lips."

Mildred turned livid with rage; and then the next moment she laughed scornfully. Ethel was about to say something more: but yielding to a second thought, she abruptly turned away and entered the house.

Her first impulse was to seek Lady Langport, tell her everything that had passed, and appeal to her whether it were possible that she could consent to remain any longer beneath the same roof with Mildred. But she suddenly recollected her resolve to do nothing rashly; and she therefore retired to her chamber, where she sat down to reflect. She could bring herself to no satisfactory issue; for her thoughts, if shaped in words, may be thus represented:—

"How could I abandon poor Lady Langport to this veritable fiend of a daughter who has come back to her?—and yet, by staying here, how can I help her ladyship to wrestle against the miseries which assuredly are in store for her? If I leave her, whither am I to go? what will become of me and little Alfred? Ought I not to dare and cadure everything for my child's sake? May I not even succeed in shaming Mildred by means of my own forbearance and meekness and Christian patience? Who can tell? At all events every sentiment of gratitude and honour prevents me from leaving Lady Langport without due warning. Aye—and what is more, I am bound to remain with her until my place be filled up. I must therefore at all events wait a favourable opportunity to open my mind to Lady Langport on the subject."

The reader will perceive that Ethel's mind was full of indecision; and thus the dinner-hour arrived without anything definite being resolved upon. She sat silent and reserved throughout the

repast: it was impossible that she could mingle in the discourse—she had no spirits for conversation—she could not force herself to be gay—and even if it were otherwise, Mildred kept the discourse upon topics which Ethel did not like. It must be however observed that on this occasion Mildred abstained from levelling any inuendo against Ethel: indeed she bestowed not the slightest notice upon her, but addressed all the conversation to her mother. As for Lady Langport, she saw that something was wrong: every now and then she cast an inquiring look upon Ethel—and then she gazed upon her daughter, as if to ascertain what had taken place: but she was bewildered, and she did not like to ask the question in the presence of both.

Thus the evening passed away—unpleasantly enough for her ladyship and Ethel: but Mildred seemed as happy and comfortable and as unconcerned as if everything were going on well, and as if her presence had brought no trouble nor annoyance into the house.

At a little before ten o'clock, Mildred rose somewhat abruptly from her seat, and said, "I shall now retire to rest. I was up early this morning—and mean to be up early again to-morrow. So I wish you both a very good night."

She then quitted the room, and the use of the word *both* conveyed the first intimation throughout the entire evening that Mildred chose to recognise the presence of such a person as Ethel.

"My dear girl," asked Lady Langport, so soon as the door had closed behind Mildred, "what has happened? what has caused this coolness between you?"

"I promised your ladyship," replied Ethel, "that I would exercise all possible forbearance towards Mildred; and I have done so. She has fastened a quarrel upon me. But I will not tell you of it now. You are tired and worn out—I see that you are—for the evening has been an anxious one for you—"

"Oh, good kind Ethel!" exclaimed Lady Langport, "you are thinking of me when perhaps your soul is smarting under the sense of some insult received from Mildred! This must not be; I beseech you to tell me what has occurred."

"No," said Ethel; "I will tell your ladyship nothing now:—for she recoiled from the idea of having to explain the nature of the taunts she had received from Mildred in respect to the marriage-certificate. "I must think—I must deliberate! And perhaps I had better wait and see how Mildred's demeanour may be towards me to-morrow."

"Yes, yes—do so, dear Ethel," said Lady Langport, who on her own side experienced no disinclination to postpone anything that might be of an unpleasant character. "Perhaps I shall have an opportunity of remonstrating with Mildred to-morrow. But Oh, she is peculiar, Ethel!—very very peculiar, Ethel!—and you may have seen—you may have seen that she does not treat me—"

The unhappy lady stopped short: her lips were quivering, and tears were starting from her eyes. She hastily applied her kerchief; and then rising from her seat, she said in a tone of forced composure, "Come, sweet Ethel—let us retire to rest."

They ascended the stairs, and separated for a

moment on the landing to enter their respective chambers. Ethel, as usual, locked the outer door of her own apartment; and then she passed into the dressing-room,—having first paused for an instant at the bed to bestow a kiss upon little Alfred. In the meantime Lady Langport locked the outer door of her own chamber; and then passing through the bath-room, she rejoined Ethel in the dressing-cabinet.

And now commenced her ladyship's night toilet,—to which on a former occasion we have so particularly alluded that it is not now necessary to recapitulate the loathsome details. Suffice it therefore to say that when at length the process was complete, and everything artificial and succedaneous was laid aside, the wretched woman again stood a living skeleton in the presence of Ethel,—a withered toothless hag, every bone visible beneath the skin, which just covered it without the intervention of any flesh to yield to the pressure!

And just at that moment a sound fell upon the ears of both Lady Langport and Ethel,—a sound as of a door opening.

"Good heavens! what was that?" muttered Lady Langport, with affright seizing upon her countenance.

"I do not know," said Ethel. "Did your ladyship lock the door of your own chamber?"

"Yes! But you, Ethel—you?"

"I remember perfectly well locking mine. But let us see! The sounds seem to come from the bath-room!"

She was rushing towards the door which separated the dressing-cabinet from the bath-room, when that door suddenly opened, and Mildred appeared upon the threshold. Yes!—and there she stood transfixed with mingled horror and amazement at the spectacle which met her eyes!

An ejaculation of dismay burst from the lips of Ethel: but it was a low half-stifled sound as if of a dying groan which emanated from Lady Langport—and then the wretched woman fell senseless upon the floor.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE HYPOCRITE.

ETHEL flung a look of indescribable indignation upon Mildred; and then she stooped down and raised up Lady Langport,—lifting that light, emaciated, attenuated frame almost as easily as if it were a child's; and she bore it to the couch. She quickly administered restoratives; and when Lady Langport began to give signs of recovering, Ethel said to Mildred, who had followed her into the bed-chamber, "You had better withdraw. Retire, I beseech you, ere your mother regain her senses!"

"Do you think my presence will be odious to her?" asked Mildred, half in defiance, though she was still partly under the influence of the shock which the horrible spectacle of her mother's real condition had produced upon her.

"Do not ask me what I think!" cried Ethel, almost petulantly; "but if you have a spark of feeling left, go! Go, I conjure you! I would not have done this which you have just done,—no, not for all the gold in the universe!"

"It was all your fault," retorted Mildred savagely

"My fault?" cried Ethel, with mingled indignation and surprise.

"Yes—your's! If you had answered my questions about the cosmetics, my curiosity would not have been excited to the pitch that made me resolve to gratify it by hiding myself in the cupboard of the bed-room."

"For heaven's sake let us not bandy angry words now!" exclaimed Ethel. "Go—leave the room, I entreat and implore you! To-morrow, if you wish to renew your upbraidings and your accusations——"

"Was it a dream? Tell me, Ethel, was it a dream?" the voice of Lady Langport was now faintly murmuring.

"Compose yourself, dear lady," said Ethel; and she made an impatient gesture for Mildred to withdraw.

"Ah, it was not a dream!" cried Lady Langport, suddenly regaining the fullest and completest vitality. "Do not go, Mildred! do not go, daughter! Stop, I entreat—I command you!"

"Command?" echoed Mildred, with mingled fierceness and contemptuousness. "That is a strong word."

"But not stronger than the occasion requires," rejoined her mother quickly. "Now listen, Mildred! You have done a thing for which you shall repent to the end of your days! It is a deed which can never be pardoned! You have brought down a curse upon your head!"

"Let me conjure your ladyship," interposed Ethel, frightened at the fearful energy with which her patroness was speaking, and appalled at the language which was flowing from her lips,—*"let me beseech and implore——"*

"It is useless, my good Ethel!" cried Lady Langport. "A deed has been done which has changed every feeling and sentiment within me!—a deed that was as bad as sacrilege, or desecration, or even matricide! Yes!—and it is a deed, Mildred, that merits a curse!—a mother's bitter withering curse!—and that malediction do I bestow upon you!"

"Come, mother, be sensible—be reasonable," said Mildred, who was looking somewhat frightened, or who at least had an air as if she would be very glad to recall, were it possible, the deed she had done. "I am sorry——"

"Silence!" cried her mother: "silence—and hear me!"

It was a horrible scene. The old woman was sitting up in the bed—her night-dress, open in front, revealed the emaciated breast, every bone of which might be counted—and in the fury of her gesticulations it seemed as if they were skeleton arms which were thrust forth from the loose unbuttoned sleeves, and which she was waving about.

"Listen to me!" she cried; and though her false teeth were out, yet there was a frightful clearness in the articulation of the voice that was now shrill and screeching. "You were received home by your mother with open arms, Mildred—and you have rewarded her kindness with the vilest ingratitude! You knew that she had a secret which she cherished—and you have basely violated it! There are deeds which not even the nearest of kindred may do towards each other.—

deeds which no love, no friendship, no intimacy can warrant!—and such a deed is this which you have done! Oh, I wish you joy of it! Is your curiosity gratified? You now know what your mother is! You behold her in all her ghastliest terrors—in all her most cadaverous horrors! Ah! would that the days of magic and enchantment were not passed away, and that the spectacle might have blinded you,—scathing your eyeballs and searing your vision!"

"For God's sake, Lady Langport," said Ethel, "compose yourself! Be calm—be tranquil!"

"If my mother wishes the whole household to learn the secret, as well as myself," said Mildred, who was now completely self-possessed again, "she will go on in this strain."

"Instead of sinking on your knees," cried her ladyship, "and imploring my pardon in the humblest and most contrite manner, you even now appear to set me at defiance!"

"If you play the part of a madwoman," retorted Mildred contemptuously, "you must expect——"

"Oh, my God!"—and the wretched Lady Langport burst into tears. "My own daughter treating me thus!—she who has only just been restored to me! She whom I have ever loved, and was prepared to love so fondly on until the end!"

"Retire—withdraw, I beseech you!" hastily whispered Ethel.

"And leave you to do all you can to prejudice my mother against me!" replied Mildred, with a look of reptile-like malignity—but still she spoke in so low a tone that Lady Langport did not catch what she said.

Ethel recoiled from the accusation that was thus flung at her,—recoiled as if it were a serpent that was darting at her!

"Ah! I have hit the right mark—have I?" were the next words that hissed forth from between the lips of Mildred. "You are not so deep but that I understand you! Go. It is for *you* to retire,—*my* place is here."

Ethel was transfixed with consternation and dismay; and she gazed in vacancy upon Mildred as if unable to satisfy herself that she had heard aright. Lady Langport was continuing to weep bitterly; and the sounds of her own agonizing sobs had drowned the malignant hissing of the whisper in which Mildred had spoken to Ethel.

"Mother," said Mildred, bending over her, "you complain that I have not asked your pardon:—but remember that you cursed me outright."

"Cursed you, Mildred?—cursed you, my child?" and Lady Langport, starting as if with some horrible galvanic pang, bent her wild frightened looks upon Mildred. "What! curse you, my daughter? Oh, yes! I remember! My God, I was mad! mad!"

"Mother," said Mildred, in a low voice, "for heaven's sake let me be alone with you for a few moments. It is a boon," she added, in a still more subdued whisper, "which I supplicate and implore."

"And it is granted, Mildred," replied Lady Langport. "Ethel—my sweet Ethel, leave us for a little while."

"You wish it, dear madam? you wish it?" asked Ethel, who was almost frightened at the idea of leaving the poor mother helplessly alone with that unprincipled virago of a daughter.

"Yes, dear Ethel—I wish it," said Lady Langport.

Mrs. Trevor did not hesitate another moment; but she hastened to make her way through the bath-room and the dressing-room into her own chamber. Mildred followed her; and as Ethel turned to close the door of her apartment, she was encountered by that unscrupulous woman who had almost openly as it were proclaimed herself the young lady's enemy. It was a glance of malignant triumph which Mildred flung upon her; and then, as Ethel closed the door of communication, she heard Mildred lock it on the other side.

"Good heavens!" thought Ethel, finging herself on her knees by the side of her couch, "to be suspected of the most unworthy motives! to be taunted with the basest and the most grovelling selfishness! No!—not even for thee, my little Alfred! not even for thee, my beloved boy! could I have practised such detestable arts as those which that bad woman would fain ascribe unto me!"

But let us return to Mildred. Having locked the door of communication between Ethel's chamber and the dressing-room, she made her way back to her mother; and falling upon her knees by the side of the couch, she said in a voice which she rendered wild and tremulous in its accents, "Forgive me! forgive me, I beseech!"

"Yes, daughter—I have already forgiven you," replied Lady Langport.

"And that curse? that withering curse?"

"I withdraw—I withdraw it! O God! rather let it redound upon my own head, than take effect against my daughter! I was mad when I gave utterance to it! my senses had temporarily left me!"

"Oh, my dear mother," continued Mildred, "you know not how you have misjudged me!—you would be sorry to think how much you have wronged me!"

"Show me how I have done so, Mildred," cried Lady Langport, "and you know not how eager and willing I shall be to make every atonement! How have I wronged you, my poor Mildred?"

"By misinterpreting the motives which prompted me to discover your secret."

"Explain that motive!" said her ladyship eagerly.

"I saw that there was a secret," resumed Mildred: "indeed you yourself half gave me to understand that there was; and the very nature of the circumstances themselves served to corroborate the impression. I saw that Ethel had rendered herself necessary to you. Now, believe me, dear mother, I am not jealous of Ethel—"

"No, no. But go on! go on!"

"But without being jealous of her, I said to myself, 'It was all very well that my mother should have such a young person as a confidante when her daughter was dead or lost to her. But now that I, this daughter, am returned to my mother it is incumbent upon me to perform every filial duty. Who ought to be near a mother to minister unto all her wants? The daughter! Whose place is it to perform everything that a mother may want done? A daughter's place!'—It was thus I reasoned with myself."

"Did you—did you really, Mildred? Is this true?" asked the naturally kind-hearted, weak-

minded, and credulous Lady Langport, her attenuated form quivering with emotion.

"It is all true—solemnly true," replied Mildred. "And therefore you may comprehend, dear mother, how my spirit was chafed when I saw that I was thrust away from you as it were, while Ethel was retained as your favourite: I was discarded from my proper place, which was still occupied by an alien and a stranger! And thus I may have spoken rudely and sharply—"

"Ah, Mildred, I begin to think that I was perhaps wrong— But then that dear sweet Ethel—"

"Oh, I have no harm to say against Ethel," interjected Mildred. "Only—But no matter! I will hasten to say that after all the explanations I have just been giving you, my dear mother, you cannot be surprised if I resolved to gain possession of a secret that was so studiously kept from me. Ah! and now for my motive. It was the best and the purest! It still continues the same. For now, dear mother, it is I who henceforth will minister unto you in all respects!—it is I who will perform those duties which under existing circumstances are specially a daughter's!—it is I who will serve as your nurse and your attendant—your handmaid and your abigail; and though I have no doubt of Ethel's kindness and attention, yet what can exceed the care which the tenderest filial instincts will now cause to be bestowed upon you?"

"Mildred! dearest Mildred!" cried Lady Langport in a perfect ecstasy of delight: "it is in such a strain as this that I would all along have wished to hear you speak!—it is now that you are fulfilling all that I hoped and expected my restored daughter would prove! We are sisters before the world: but when alone together, we will never forget the nature of the ties that bind us!"

"No, never, my dear mother!" answered Mildred, who seemed to be overwhelmed with her emotions. "So everything is arranged, and tomorrow I will take Ethel's place—"

"That is not necessary, Mildred!" interrupted Lady Langport. "You have shown the goodwill, and that is all which is required. I would not for the world wound poor Ethel's feelings!"

"Well, my dear mother," said Mildred, "it is very kind of you to speak in this sense; but I must insist upon my right to perform a daughter's duties—I claim a preference over Ethel Trevor, who, as I have before described her, is a mere alien and a stranger."

"What would you have me do?" asked Lady Langport. "Get rid of Ethel? dismiss her?"

"Let her stay here if she likes—but not to retain her present position. That place is mine, and I insist upon occupying it. Perhaps it will be better to give Ethel a sum of money—"

"Oh, we cannot deal with her in this manner," said Lady Langport. "It would be most ungenerous! most unkind!"

"Well, but something must be done," said Mildred. "I wish, my dear mother, you would leave the matter in my hands?"

"Oh, you will not speak harshly to Ethel? you will not act with cruelty?"

"I will do nothing, my dear mother, that shall in any way offend you. Rest assured of this: your happiness and comfort and peace of mind shall now be my constant care."

In this strain did Mildred continue to talk, until her credulous mother became fully persuaded that all the good qualities of her daughter had been hitherto concealed, but were now rapidly developing themselves. At length Lady Langport said, "I leave the business all in your hands, dearest Mildred: but remember that I should never be happy again if any unkindness or cruelty were shown towards Ethel."

"There shall be none," replied Mildred. "And now, dear mother, good night. The first thing in the morning I will be with you to commence my ministrations."

Mildred then retired from the chamber; and she sought her own room with a triumphant smile upon her countenance.

"I am glad that I have taken this step," she said to herself. "It is wise to get rid of this Ethel Trevor at once! She is evidently a dangerous woman; and already had she made herself so necessary to my mother that it has required all my powers of dissimulation to play the part which I have just performed. Yes, yes! my eyes could not long remain closed to Ethel's designs! She would have prejudiced my mother against me—she would have wormed herself deeper and deeper into the old lady's confidence—she would have doubtless got her to make a will in her favour! And after all it might have ended in my being turned out of the house almost as suddenly as I was introduced into it! But still I must deal cautiously with this Ethel. She is acquainted with secrets which she must not be permitted to reveal; and therefore it will not be prudent to come to any open rupture with her."

Mildred retired to rest; but it was some time before sleep visited her eyes, for she lay and cogitated upon the course which she should adopt with regard to Ethel.

As for Ethel herself, she sat down by the side of her couch, after that outburst of emotion which we have described, and she waited to see whether the dressing-room door would be again unlocked, and whether she would be summoned back into Lady Langport's presence. Half-an-hour passed, and still the door continued closed. An hour went by, and Ethel felt assured that her services were not required any more, at least for the present. She tried the door—she found that it was still locked: she disappalled herself and got to bed. But sleep was also slow in visiting *her* eyes; and she lay reflecting upon the incidents of the evening. She saw that Mildred was her bitter enemy; and it assuredly was not a struggle upon which the amiable Ethel would willingly enter. She therefore felt perfectly inclined to abandon the ground to Mildred, if she could retreat without incurring any blame or reproach on the part of Lady Langport herself. Indeed, her position had in the space of a very few hours become well-nigh intolerable. Lady Langport had asked her to go and propagate amongst the servants the report that a *sister*, instead of a *daughter*, had been restored in the person of Mildred; and though she might have winked at the deceptive representation or have tacitly forborne from contradicting it, yet she could not bring herself deliberately and coolly to give utterance to the lie. This circumstance alone would have induced Ethel to seek any honourable pretext for leaving Lady Langport; and therefore, when all other motives

were superadded—when she reviewed all the insults she had received on the part of Mildred, and reflected upon everything that was bad, offensive, and repulsive in Mildred's disposition and character—she came to the conclusion that her sojourn at Hendon Court would now be limited to the shortest possible space.

But again she asked herself whither she should go? She had not forgotten the splendid offer made her by the Grand Duke: but she perceived an insurmountable obstacle in the way of her accepting it. The Russian Prince had spoken explicitly of the necessity of testimonials:—what testimonials could Ethel furnish? A deep gloom fell upon her soul as she thought of the sad, the hopeless, the forlorn position in which the fatal love of the Duke of Ardeigh had placed her!

Sleep at length stole upon her eyes; and when she awoke in the morning, at her usual hour, she tried the door of communication with the dressing-room—but she found it still locked. It was however almost immediately opened after she had turned the handle; and Mildred made her appearance. To Ethel's surprise, Mildred was all smiles and good humour, and she looked just as if she had never harboured a jealous feeling or spoken an angry word in reference to the young lady.

"My dear Ethel," said Mildred, "my poor mother is not very well this morning, and she is going to lie in bed for another hour or two. It shall be my task to minister unto her; and therefore she dispenses with your services on the present occasion. I hope there is no ill-will, my dear Ethel, on your part on account of anything that I may have said?"

"Good heavens, no!" cried the amiable young lady, for the moment thrown off her guard by the seeming generosity of Mildred's conduct towards her.

"Well, we shall see each other presently," said Mildred, "and then I will tell you how my mother is and when it will suit her to receive you."

Having thus spoken, Mildred bestowed several smiles upon Ethel, and then retreated into the dressing-room, the door of which she again locked. It was only for a moment that Ethel was the dupe of this hypocritical behaviour on Mildred's part; for a very brief interval of reflection enabled the young lady to comprehend the game which that deceitful creature was playing.

"By what she said to me last night," thought Ethel to herself, "she fancies that I am in the way, and she is seeking to get rid of me. Heaven knows that I can no longer have any wish to remain beneath this roof!"

The nurse-maid now entered to take charge of little Alfred, who was playing about in the bed: and the young woman gave Ethel a letter which had just arrived by that morning's post. It was addressed to "Mrs. Trevor, Hendon Court;" and the seal, which was a very large one, was impressed with the armorial bearings of some person of rank. It is not however necessary that we should at this moment state from whom the letter came, nor what was the nature of its contents.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE CHAT IN THE PARK.

THE scene again shifts to Thornbury, in Buckinghamshire. It was about the hour of noon; and on a bench beneath a tree in the park, two persons were seated. One was a well-dressed, good-looking man, whose age might be about thirty, and who had the air of an upper servant. His companion was a female, within a year or so of the same age: she was dressed with the utmost neatness, and not without a certain pretension to elegance. She possessed a handsome face, and her figure was symmetrically proportioned. To be brief, this female whom we are describing was Miss Lavinia Glover, principal lady's-maid to her Grace the Duchess of Arldleigh; and her companion was a certain Edmund Vaughan, valet to the Count de Mandeville.

The day was very sultry; and Lavinia had taken off her bonnet, which she held dangling by the ribbons beneath the grateful shade of that old tree, the trunk of which was of a size which indicated the growth of centuries. It was a secluded part of the grounds which the valet and the lady's-maid had thus sought: it was at a distance of three-quarters of a mile from the mansion itself; and it was moreover evident from their looks that they had wandered thither in order that they might converse in perfect freedom from all constraint.

"This is pleasant," said the valet, looking up at the wide umbrageous boughs, as he took off his hat and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "I don't think a cigar would come amiss. You don't object, my dear Lavinia, I know:"—and pulling forth his case, he lighted a cigar accordingly. "So you say that your mistress questioned you the other evening?"

"Yes. It was after her Grace returned from Lady Todmorden's party," replied Lavinia, "nearly a week ago."

"And what was it that she said?" asked Edmund Vaughan. "Tell me exactly, Lavinia, there's a dear creature."

"First of all her Grace threw herself into an arm-chair in her boudoir," said Lavinia: "then she looked at me very hard—and I feared there was something wrong, though I kept my countenance admirably."

"Ah, that was right!" exclaimed the valet. "But you and I, Lavinia, are rather too experienced to lose our countenance in a hurry. We are people of the world: we understand how to hide our emotions as well as our betters. Ha! ha! our masters and mistresses think, forsooth! that we shall not profit by the examples which they themselves set us! But go on, Lavinia. You were telling me that the Duchess looked at you very hard—"

"Yes, for upwards of a minute," rejoined the lady's-maid; "and then she said in an abrupt sort of way, as if she thought that she would take me aback if I was really guilty,—she said, 'Is it possible, Lavinia, that you have gone and whispered anything about me to a living soul?'"

"And what did you do?" asked Edmund.

"Do?" cried Lavinia. "I fired up at once.

First of all I pretended to be indignant—then I showed that I was hurt—"

"Capital, my dear! capital!" exclaimed the valet. "Nothing better than pretending to be wounded in the feelings. It seems to show devotedness."

"Well, the Duchess was convinced; and when she had begged my pardon—which she did do—"

"To be sure," said Edmund, laughing: "that was quite right. Well, what followed?"

"She said it was very extraordinary—she had fallen in with some one who had spoken to her about matters which she thought were involved in the profoundest secrecy—but she did not enter into any further details, and of course I did not like to question her."

"But at all events you are sure," said the valet, "that the Duchess does not now entertain the slightest suspicion that you have betrayed her?"

"I am convinced she does not," answered Lavinia.

"Well, my dear," pursued the valet, "is there anything more that you can tell me?"

"Nothing—nothing, at least, that I remember," responded the lady's-maid in a musing tone. "Let me see? I told you about the tank of water, and how that wretched man Sir Abel Kingston narrowly escaped—"

"A good ducking? Yes, yes—you told me all about that. And likewise," continued Edmund Vaughan, "about her Grace's trip in male apparel—and how nicely she baffled the scheme of the fellow Gaffney—"

"And did your master make use of all this information, think you?" inquired Lavinia.

"I believe so. At all events I recapitulated to the Count everything you told me; and he is not the man to fail in giving the fullest effect to whatsoever information may suit his purposes."

"Of course, Edmund," said Lavinia, "one must look after one's own interests in this world; and therefore, though I am really sorry to betray the poor Duchess—who is very kind and good to me—"

"Now no scruples, my dear Lavinia—and no nonsensical punctilios?" interrupted Vaughan. "No harm will happen to the Duchess: but, on the contrary—"

"On the contrary?" said Lavinia, inquiringly.

"Why, yes," rejoined the valet: "she will get a new lover instead of the one she has lost."

"Sir Abel Kingston was never her lover in reality," said Lavinia: "I mean that she never went to the extreme. She was foolish, but timid and hesitating. In fact, I suppose she dreaded to commit herself irreparably—"

"Depend upon it," interjected Vaughan, "she will not play the coquette long with the Count. He is a man who conquers off-hand."

"And now do tell me, Edmund,—who is this Count Mandeville?" asked Lavinia.

"Why, Count Mandeville?" and the valet laughed slyly.

"I dare say he is, if he choose to call himself so," said Lavinia: "but you have already suffered me to understand he is a mere adventurer. Now you ought to tell me everything; and if you do not," she added, pointing her lips, "I will not tell you another thing



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that I may happen to know. There must be mutual confidence——”

“So there is, my dear Lavinia,” said Vaughan, with a smile. “Have I not told you all I know?”

“You told me that the very first day you entered the Count’s service——”

“Yes—three weeks ago,” interjected the valet.

“Well,” continued Lavinia, “the Count told you frankly at once that he wanted something more than a mere body-servant—he required a person of confidence——”

“True, my dear. I suppose my master came to an understanding with me just as your mistress has taken you into her confidence——Only the Count did it all in a moment——while the Duchess was merely led on by degrees to let you obtain an insight into her proceedings.”

“But is your Count Mandeville a real Count?” asked Lavinia.

“He calls himself so: but on the Continent any one may take a title, and of course may bring it to England with them. There is no French *Péage* to prove that Count Mandeville is not a Count. But frankly speaking, my dear Lavinia, I believe him to be just as much a Count as I am, and no more. In fact, I do not think he is a Frenchman at all.”

“Not a Frenchman?” cried Lavinia. “Now you do indeed surprise me!”

“Well, it is my opinion he is an Englishman,” pursued Vaughan, gradually getting more and more confidential. “No doubt he speaks French to perfection——”

“And what do you think his plans are?” inquired Lavinia.

“So far as I can judge,” responded Vaughan, “he means to play the same part which all adventurers are ever anxious to accomplish. His grand aim is no doubt to marry an English heiress.”

“But why should he endeavour to acquire this power over the Duchess?”

“Oh, most innocent and ingenuous of all lady’s-maids!” cried Edmund Vaughan, laughing. “Cannot you understand, in the first place, how a man may easily become enamoured of a beautiful woman such as the Duchess——”

“Ah, yes! But——”

“Well,” continued the valet, “and then the Count—for such will we call him—no doubt calculated that the countenance, the patronage—the protection, so to speak—of a lady of the highest rank, and who is one of the leading stars of fashion, must prove vastly advantageous to him. A bold, daring, dashing adventurer, my dear Lavinia, always studies *éclat*. You know what I mean?”

“But how happens it that some highly respectable stockbroker in the City,” asked Lavinia, “has given it out that the Count is immensely rich?”

“That is the point that puzzles me,” replied Vaughan. “In fact, my dear Lavinia, there are several things in connexion with my master that I cannot make out. We have just alluded to one of them; and it certainly is a fact that there is no want of money on the Count’s part—as the fifty guineas which I had the pleasure of handing you just now may perhaps serve in a trifling way to prove. And then too, I know that the Count

is intimately acquainted with the French Ambassador; for his Excellency has called three times at the Clarendon Hotel, and been closeted with my master for hours together.”

“Well, this is strange,” said Lavinia. “How know you that the Count is a mere adventurer after all?”

“Because it is impossible for a shrewd fellow like me,” answered Vaughan, “to help seeing more or less through the designs of a person, when that person comes as it were to a prompt and immediate understanding—requires special things to be done—bribes heavily——”

“Ah, true!” said Lavinia: “he must be an adventurer.”

“But no matter to us, my dear,” interjected Vaughan; “for as things now go on, we shall soon be in possession of the thousand pounds each which we vowed to make before we committed ourselves to matrimony. So what with my Count Mandeville and your Duchess of Arldleigh, I think we are both pretty near the mark, Lavinia. Let me see? The fifty I just now gave you, makes you up seven hundred and eighty pounds sterling——”

“And you, Edmund, are in advance of me,” replied Lavinia; “for I think you told me you were up to eight hundred. But then your Count has been more liberal to you in three weeks than the Duchess has been to me in three years.”

“Not quite so disproportionate as that,” said Vaughan. “But as I was just now observing, or about to observe—the greater the intrigues and the more numerous the schemes of this Mandeville, the better for us. So whatever we may think about my master—whether Count or no Count—Frenchman or Englishman—honest man or rogue—we are not going to let the world be any the wiser on the subject. Depend upon it, whatever the Count’s secrets may continue to be, we shall be well paid for keeping them.”

“No doubt, Edmund,” replied Lavinia; “and of course it is our duty to study our own interests. But, Ah! when I think of it, you never told me how it was that the Count knew of your being able to learn any particulars concerning the Duchess of Arldleigh.”

“Indeed?” cried Vaughan; “did I not tell you? Oh, it was simple enough. You know what the Count said to me on the very first day that I entered his service——”

“Tell me again,” said Lavinia. “It is very amusing, and also instructive: it must be so eminently characteristic of the man!”

Vaughan laughed, and proceeded to light another cigar,—having done which, he resumed the discourse in the following manner:—

“I was recommended, you know, by the master of the Clarendon to Count Mandeville. I told him that I had recently left the service of the Earl of Derwent; and he demanded the reason. I told him frankly that it was because the wages were low, the Earl was mean, and there were no perquisites. He told me to return on the morrow. I did. He bade me shut the door and listen to him.—‘Edmund Vaughan,’ said he, ‘I have called upon the Earl of Derwent, and I find that you left his service in order to better yourself, as it is termed. Well, then, you told me the truth; and you shall better yourself with me. I will give you the wages that you

have asked : instead of being mean, I am generous : and as for perquisites, you shall have them by pockets' full. But they will be in the shape of bribes. Yea, *bribes* for secret service. You are to be a sort of diplomatic valet,—not a mere vulgar body-servant. Your post will become a confidential one ; and that is the reason why I set out by promising it shall prove lucrative. Understand me, man ! I have hired you because I am a physiognomist : I see that you are intelligent, shrewd, astute, and I will add selfish. Well, be as selfish as possible ; and depend upon it that if you make my interests your own, or calculate how you may serve your's by forwarding mine, you will quickly amass gold. Now, Edmund Vaughan, do we understand each other ?—And I boldly answered, ' We do.'—Thus the compact was at once made, and I entered then and there into the service of the Count de Mandeville."

"What a strange person he must be!" said Lavinia. "It must be a real pleasure to be in the service of such a gentleman—at least when one's in his confidence."

"Ah! but you may rest assured, my dear Lavinia," rejoined the valet, "that the Count does not intend anybody to be in his confidence any more than is absolutely necessary. He is a thorough man of the world—wide awake—up to snuff, and all that sort of thing. However, I can make myself sufficiently useful to answer all his purposes ; and he is of an undoubted liberality, which will answer mine."

"But you have not yet told me," said Lavinia, "how it was the Count learnt that you were in a position to obtain particular information in reference to the Duchess of Arleigh?"

"Ah, I was coming to that point," said Vaughan. "You must know, my dear Lavinia, that the very moment I entered the service of the Count, he began to treat me as if I had been for years in that position—so far, I mean, as the off-hand kindness and condescension of his manner were concerned ; and yet I must tell you that he knows how to keep his inferiors at a respectful distance. Well, he began by giving me certain commissions to execute at once. There were particular persons concerning whom he required all the information he might possibly be enabled to obtain ; and amongst them was the Duchess of Arleigh. 'Oh,' said I at once, 'here is a point on which I shall be enabled to acquit myself in a highly satisfactory manner.'—'How so?' inquired the Count.—'I happen to be engaged,' I answered, 'to a certain handsome and interesting person, called Miss Lavinia Glover, who holds the post of principal lady's-maid to her Grace.'"

"You surely did not speak of me, Edmund," said Lavinia, with a sly smile, "in that flippant manner?"

"Flippant indeed!" ejaculated the valet. "I gave you epithets which prove my appreciation of your good qualities ;"—and by way perhaps of still farther indicating the same, Mr. Edmund Vaughan now regaled himself with a kiss upon the lips of Miss Lavinia Glover.

"And you really think," said Lavinia, when she had smoothed her hair which was rather disordered by the process,—“you really think that the Count will become the lover of the Duchess?”

"There is scarcely any thinking about it," replied Edmund. "As I said just now, the Count

will not submit to any idle coquetry, however Sir Abel Kingston may have chosen to put up with it."

"Ah, it was a shocking thing, Sir Abel's downfall and sudden death!" said Lavinia. "Do you really think he died of disease of the heart, or that he poisoned himself? By the bye, you know his valet very well—do you not?"

"I have known Luke Parkins for years," replied Edmund. "I met him yesterday, and he was telling me about his master's death and the Inquest."

"The newspapers said that there was some disgraceful scene at the Inquest," observed Lavinia. "Was it so?"

"Well, it was not altogether the most reputable affair in the world," replied Vaughan. "Luke Parkins told me so. He was very indignant—"

"And what particulars did he give you?"

"Oh, little more than you already know, since you have read the account in the papers. Let me see!—this is the 30th of the month—is it not? Well, it was in the evening of the 26th that Sir Abel was found lying dead upon the floor in the ward where he herded with other prisoners who were also committed to trial for felonies. Luke Parkins happened to call to inquire after his master's health, or else to deliver some little parcel—I forget which—when he was told by the turnkey that Sir Abel had just been picked up stone dead in the ward. Luke at once declared that it must have been through disease of the heart, which he knew that his master had, though Sir Abel was wont to keep the thing secret, for he was very touchy on the point. Well, the prison-surgeon, who had been hastily sent for, arrived at the moment, and learnt what Luke Parkins had said. So of course the thing was all clear enough: there was no more to be done but just hold an Inquest for form's sake. And a notice was at once sent to the Coroner, who issued his warrant or summons, or whatever it's called, to hold the inquiry at noon on the following day. Now, an Inquest in Newgate generally consists of some of the tradesmen living in the neighbourhood ; and a precious low set it seems that they are in the Old Bailey—chiefly keepers of coffee-shops and slap-bangs—"

"What?" asked Lavinia ; for it was impossible that the lady's-maid of a Duchess could understand the meaning of anything so vulgar.

"Slap-bangs, my dear—a very low kind of eating house," explained her intended, as he whiffed his cigar. "Well, at the appointed hour the jury assembled at the gaol ; and when they were sworn, the Coroner found that several of them were more than half-drunk—"

"How disgraceful!" ejaculated Lavinia.

"So the Coroner thought, my dear :—and he was going to kick up a row and fine the fellows, and swear in more respectable people in their place. But the Governor said something about creating a scandal—the surgeon was in a deuce of a hurry—and so, as it was all a mere matter of form, the Coroner let the business proceed. Luke Parkins gave his evidence, which was quite sufficient to prove how his deceased master had come by his death—the Coroner summed up, for a couple of minutes—the jury returned their verdict in half a one—and by a quarter to twelve the

whole proceeding was over. I can assure you Luke Parkins was quite indignant about it: he told me that never in all his life had he beheld such a disgraceful scene."

"And did none of Sir Abel's relations or friends come forward on the occasion?" asked Lavinia.

"Not a soul. But didn't you read in the newspaper that he had no near relations, and that the Baronetcy is therefore extinct?"

"To be sure! I remember!" said Lavinia. "Ah, the unhappy man! to have died in such a manner and in such a place, without a relative or friend in the world to mourn for him! I suppose he had a pauper's funeral?"

"No, no—not so bad as that," responded Vaughan. "With all his faults he had been a pretty good master to his valet Luke; and you must know that Luke is a generous-hearted fellow. So he begged that he might be permitted to accomplish the last mournful duty——"

"I understand," said Lavinia: "he begged that his master's corpse might be given up to him to be decently interred. Was that it?"

"Exactly," rejoined Vaughan; "and the funeral—which as a matter of course, is to be quite simple and private—takes place this afternoon."

"Well," said Lavinia, "it is most generous on the part of your friend Luke. But this portion of the narrative was not in the newspapers?"

"No," said Vaughan. "Luke's application was a private one, and there was no ceremony about the business."

After a little more conversation the valet and the lady's-maid rose from their seat under the branches of the huge oak, and began to retrace their way towards the mansion. When a path was reached which led to the adjacent village, Edmund bade Lavinia farewell, inasmuch as the requirements of his situation in Count Mandeville's service rendered it necessary that he should get back by the earliest means of conveyance to the metropolis.

Lavinia pursued her way to the mansion, which she reached in time to join the upper servants at the dinner-table in the housekeeper's room; and then, having made some change in her toilet, she proceeded to the boudoir of her mistress. Not for the world would she make the slightest allusion to Edmund Vaughan, nor suffer her mistress to entertain a suspicion that she had any acquaintance with the valet of Count Mandeville. She had asked permission to go out for a walk with a female friend for an hour or two; and the Duchess entertained not the remotest conception that she was being betrayed in any of her proceedings by the maid in whom she placed such confidence.

"Dear me!" cried the Duchess, raising her eyes towards the time-piece which stood upon the mantel, as Lavinia entered the boudoir, "half-past two o'clock! I had not an idea that it was so late!"

"Luncheon has just been served up, may it please your Grace," said Lavinia.

"I do not care for it," said the Duchess. "Go and fetch me a biscuit, or some slight refreshment, which I may partake of here. You know the carriage is ordered for three o'clock?"

"Ah, true!" said Lavinia: "your Grace returns to town presently."

"Have you forgotten," cried the Duchess. "that Lady Todmorden's grand fancy-dress ball takes

place this evening?—and—and I faithfully promised—I mean to say"—and it was with a blush she corrected herself—"that as all the fashionable world is to be there, it would not do for me to be absent."

"Oh, certainly not, my lady," rejoined Lavinia: and she then quitted the boudoir to procure some refreshment for her ducal mistress.

The Duchess had promised to be at the masquerade; and that promise was given to Count Mandeville, when he called upon her at Ardeleigh House on the morning after their first introduction at Lady Todmorden's ball. Was it willingly that the Duchess now prepared to redeem that promise? Was she anxious to meet Mandeville again? We cannot say that she had either a strong inclination or repugnance on the point; she herself had scarcely analysed her own feelings. There was something irresistibly attractive in the man on the one hand: but on the other, she experienced a mysterious dread of him. She could not possibly conceive how he had become acquainted with certain secrets that so intimately regarded her. But as for any indignation which she might have at first experienced towards him for his coercive use of the power which he had so unaccountably acquired over her, to compel her to dance with him at the ball,—it had given way to the spell-like fascination which the Count exercised over all, or at least nearly all, who came within the sphere of his influence.

It was in an uncertain, and therefore in more or less an agitated state of mind in reference to what she really felt towards the Count, that the young Duchess took her seat in the travelling-carriage and returned to London. The Duke, who was at Ardeleigh House, received her with a proper display of affection in the presence of the domestics; and this was succeeded by the most perfect friendliness when they were alone together. We should observe that the Duchess had quitted town on the same morning on which she had penned the letter which she had given to her husband for Imogen Hartland; and she was yet ignorant of the result of the business for which that letter was intended as a suitable introduction. "What news have you for me, Mary?" inquired the Duke.

"Nothing particular, Herbert. Your poor mother is well, as usual: no change either for the better or the worse takes place in her."

"Ah, my poor mother! I cannot bear to see the wreck which she has become! But you, Mary," added the young Duke fervently, "are very, very kind towards her!"

"I am not altogether unmindful of my duties," replied the Duchess hastily. "Your young brothers and sisters are quite well. I have passed three happy days with them; and—and—I almost regret having left Thornbury to come up to London merely for this ball."

"Oh, I am sure you will not regret it," exclaimed the Duke; "for everybody says it is to be a splendid affair. Lady Todmorden is launching out, I suppose. The truth is, she is making desperate efforts to get off one of those three daughters of her's."

"Are you going to-night, Herbert?"

"I? Oh, no! I have no taste for such scenes:—and he averted his countenance for a moment."

"My poor Herbert," said the Duchess, approaching him gently, laying her beautiful hand softly upon his arm, and looking up with compassionating interest into his countenance, "you are still grieving for your Ethel? You cannot forget her?—you never will forget her!"

"Never, Mary—never," rejoined the Duke, in a low deep voice, but with a strong emphasis. "Ah, is it not very wrong on my part to speak to you thus of one who—who can be in your eyes naught but my mistress!"

"Herbert," interrupted the Duchess, "we have sympathies between us which permit us to converse on such topics."

"Yes, Mary," cried the Duke: "for I have seen your child," he added, his voice instantaneously sinking to the lowest possible whisper; "and as I gazed upon that little girl of transcending infantile loveliness, I thought of my own child—my poor little Alfred, who as well as your's can never know a father's care nor bear a father's name!"

There was a pause, during which that husband and that wife—so singularly placed with regard to each other—were busy with their reflections; and then the Duchess said in a gentle voice, "And so you have visited Imogen Hartland?"

"Yes: and after much difficulty I succeeded in inducing her to accept the sum. As for your secret, Mary—it is as safe as if it had never been confided to any one at all!"

"A thousand thanks, Herbert, for this that you have done for me!" said the Duchess. "I now owe you a good turn. Would to heaven that I could accomplish it! I need not ask," she said, after another brief pause, "whether you have obtained the slightest clue to your Ethel? I fear that you have not."

"No," was the mournfully given answer.

"Would to heaven that I could find her for thee!" exclaimed the Duchess. "I would do it!—Oh, I would do it! Doubt me not, I beseech you!"

"Good heavens!" cried the young Duke, "how singular—how anomalous—how unnatural is our position! We, husband and wife—But enough of this!" he abruptly checked himself. "Come, Mary," he continued, with a forced gaiety; "let us turn to a blither topic. We will speak of this masked ball. Of course you are going in costume? May I inquire—"

"Oh, certainly!" ejaculated the Duchess, at once comprehending the nature of the question which her husband was about to put. "You shall see me presently when I am attired in my costume; and you shall tell me what you think of it. It is a page's fancy dress—In a word, I am going to play the part of a Page of the time of Queen Elizabeth."

"If the costume be arranged, Mary, according to your usual good taste," said the Duke, "it will assuredly become you well."

CHAPTER XLV.

THE MASQUERADE.

At about half-past nine o'clock in the evening, the Duke of Arleigh received an intimation, de-

livered through the medium of Lavinia, to the effect that he might repair to his wife's dressing-room in order to see her in her fancy dress. Thither the young Duke went accordingly; and as he beheld his Duchess standing before a Psyche, which reflected her entire form, as she adjusted her plumed cap, he was struck—almost dazzled—by her appearance. He thought he had never seen her look so handsome! Her light brown hair clustered in numerous tresses upon her shoulders of ivory whiteness; and the costume was well calculated to display the symmetry of her shape. The doublet or jacket was beautifully embroidered, and the collar was of the costliest lace which the Low Countries could supply. From the loose hanging sleeves appeared the arms so admirably modelled, so plump, so firm, and so white. The trunk-hose were gathered in a little above the knees; and thence to the feet the well-rounded proportions of the limbs were defined by the tight-fitting stockings. The dress made the Duchess look taller than she actually was; and as she turned and smiled upon her husband, the pearly teeth shining betwixt the moist coral of the lips, it seemed to him that he could have thrown himself into her arms if she had extended them to receive him.

But this feeling lasted only for a moment. He thought of Ethel—and then the beauty of his brilliant Duchess was thrown suddenly into the shade. Nevertheless he complimented her upon the elegance of her toilet, the taste with which she had chosen it, as well as the grace with which she wore it. But he did not speak the exact truth—or at least he did not give expression to all that was floating in his mind at the moment. For it occurred to him that perhaps, after all, such a costume might not be perfectly consistent with her rank and position; and this thought rapidly growing upon him, led him on to the reflection whether there were not even something meretricious in the very toilet which he had but a minute back been eulogizing as so consistent with an elegant taste? But at this instant Lavinia came to announce that the carriage was in readiness: the Duchess adjusted her mask upon her countenance; and the Duke conducted her down stairs. Should he whisper in her ear the idea which struck him, to the effect that it was possible after all that her toilet might be open to objection? But no! it was too late—she had chosen the costume—he himself had approved of it—and she must now wear it.

"Besides," he thought to himself, as he beheld the equipage whirling her away from the portico of Arleigh House, "one of her rank may do things which women of an inferior standing would not dare even to think of. Indeed, the very vagaries and eccentricities of great personages become fashionable and find thousands of imitators."

Meanwhile the ducal equipage was speeding towards its destination; and in a few minutes it rolled up to the front of Todmorden House in Piccadilly. When the Duchess entered the brilliantly-lighted saloons, she found them already crowded with company exhibiting all the fantastic varieties of costume which are usually displayed on such an occasion. We need not pause for any length of time to describe a scene which in itself is not novel to our readers, and

which indeed we only introduce on the present occasion on account of the incidents that occurred there, they being inseparable from the continuous thread of our narrative. Suffice it therefore to say in reference to the masquerade itself, that the dresses were as costly in their materials as they were varied in character, and that the *élite* of the aristocracy were gathered there under the guises of heathen deities, priests, Spaniards, shepherdesses, Bohemians, warriors, monarchs, pilgrims, courtiers, Crusaders, trouhadours, Turks, brigands, nymphs, dryads, Bedouins, sultanas, Virginian planters, veiled Circassian slaves, Hamlets and Macbeths, Juliets and Ophelias,—in short, it would be impossible to enumerate the varieties of personifications which were assembled in the brilliantly-lighted saloons of Todmorden House.

The most spacious apartment was fitted up with a row of boxes on each side, after the fashion of a theatre, and these boxes were for the accommodation of these guests who either being too old or too sedate to wear fancy costumes, might nevertheless feel pleasure in gazing upon the scene that was passing before them. Thus that large saloon had to a certain extent the appearance of a small theatre the pit of which is boarded over for the purposes of dancing. It was this effect also which the arrangement was intended to produce; but contrary to Lady Todmorden's calculation, very few persons chose to avail themselves of the boxes, for nearly all had come in a fancy-costume of some kind or another, or else in dominoes. There was a splendid band in attendance; no expense had been spared to give *eclat* to the entire proceeding, and altogether this was the most brilliant entertainment which had ever taken place at Todmorden House.

As a matter of course the utmost hilarity prevailed: but still there was nothing uproarious or boisterous—there was a visible and appreciable gloss of good-breeding over all. The badinage and the repartee were refined and exquisite: jests innumerable circulated, but without the slightest tinge of coarseness. Yet on the other hand, all ceremonial stiffness was banished—there was no unnecessary reserve nor cold formality, nor any unpleasant restraint upon the gaiety of the scene. So much for the outward appearance thereof. But Ah! who can tell how the opportunity served for avowals to be boldly made and attentively listened to?—avowals which perhaps would have been otherwise long postponed or never made at all!

And as the masks concealed blushes, in the same way that the disguises concealed the identity of the individuals from the general knowledge, it followed that young wives averted not their countenances when listening to the language of illicit love and audacious hope which young men who were *not* their husbands dared to breathe in their ears.

But let us quit the general description and proceed to the incidents which we have to relate. The young Duchess soon attracted universal attention. The richness and elegance of her costume first riveted the regards, which were then still further attracted by the matchless symmetry of the shape which that fancy dress set off. The snowy plume waved with such grace from the cap which rested with such airy lightness upon

that beautifully-shaped head: the light brown hair shone with so rich a gloss as it flowed in tresses upon shoulders of alabaster whiteness;—eyes of so lovely a blue looked through the holes of the mask, which also left a most delicious mouth entirely revealed. But still, as all the upper part of the countenance was hidden, it was by no means easy for even the most penetrating observer to discover who the lady was that wore so gracefully the dress of a Page of the Elizabethan period.

Presently a Troubadour, whose costume had been creating almost as great a sensation as that of the Duchess herself, gradually made his way towards her Grace, and whispered, "I know you."

And on her side the Duchess instantaneously knew who the Troubadour was,—not by any glimpse which she obtained of his features, nor by the symmetry of his shape, nor by his gait nor his gestures; for all these were concealed or disguised:—nor yet from his voice, for it was in a whisper that he had spoken: but it was from an intuitive knowledge that this was he whom she had promised as it were to meet at that masquerade. She trembled for a moment; for she felt as if the man whom she thus met exercised some mysterious power over her own destiny. But conquering this superstitious feeling—or rather, we should say, suddenly falling back upon the characteristic gaiety and enjoyment of the scene, she said in a disguised voice, "You think that you know me, Sir Troubadour? But perchance you are mistaken. Name me—but only softly in my ear; and say whose page I am."

"I know you, beauteous lady," replied the Troubadour, still speaking in a cautious whisper, for masques were passing and repassing them in all directions: "I know you by that elegance of carriage mingled with dignity of gait which so completely belongs to the brilliant Duchess that she cannot even forget her sex or her rank while undertaking to play the part of a dashing reckless young page. Ah, lady! if every one beheld you with the same eyes as myself, you would vainly endeavour to conceal your identity beneath that garb—but everybody would know who it is that is thus apparelled. You are silent! Perhaps you think my discourse too bold? or perhaps you marvel with what eyes I dare to contemplate you? That every one surveys you with admiration, I need not say: but I may venture to observe that a more tender sentiment can blend with that of admiration. May not the Troubadour speak of love? It is the theme of which he most likes to sing; and Ah, lady! it is love which gives keenness to the vision, and which, even if the eyes themselves were shut, would warn the heart by the magnetism of some unknown sympathy that the beloved object is near."

"That you know who I am, I feel convinced," said the Duchess, laughing, and no longer attempting to conceal her voice: "but I really am at a loss to know whether you are remaining faithful to your assumed character when availing yourself of the privilege it gives you to address me in this strain: or whether—"

"Whether it be Hippolyte Mandeville addressing the Duchess of Arleigh?" added the Count in a whisper so low that it was impossible for those who were passing at the time to catch what he said.

The Duchess remained silent. Mandeville saw that the lower part of her countenance was suffused with a sudden flush, which instantaneously vanishing, left it pale in contrast with the black mask.

"I asked you to be here to-night—and you said that you would," he continued. "The promise itself seemed to indicate that I might venture to hope that I am not altogether an object of indifference. I beseech your Grace to permit me to lead you aside—to one of those empty boxes yonder—where we may converse without restraint for a few minutes."

Though the words were in the sense of an entreaty, yet the tone in which they were uttered had the slightest tincture of a command—not rudely so—nor imperiously coercive—but just sufficiently marked to indicate a consciousness of some power which the speaker wielded over his fair listener. The Duchess said not a word: but she took Mandeville's arm, and he felt her hand tremble as it rested lightly upon him for support.

They entered one of the boxes to which we have before alluded, and which were fitted up commodiously and handsomely, with cushions and draperies.

"It is indeed very kind of Lady Todmorden," said Mandeville, as he handed the Duchess to a seat and placed himself by her side, "to furnish such excellent accommodation. After pulling her rooms to pieces, spoiling her paint and her paper, and going to this vast expense, it would be a source of annoyance indeed if she did not manage to get off one of her daughters."

"Perhaps you, Count," said the Duchess, half gaily and half timidly, "mean to take compassion upon one of them and produce a sensation in the fashionable world by leading her to the altar?"

"Would you have me give my hand," asked Mandeville, "where I could not bestow my heart?—or does your Grace conceive that the denizens of the fashionable world have no hearts? Ah, say not so, I beseech you!—for at this moment you have a heart entirely devoted to yourself—and it is here."

He laid his hand upon his breast as he spoke. The Duchess felt confused: she remained silent for some few moments; and then again laughing, she said, "Is it still the Troubadour who is addressing me?"

"No," replied Mandeville. "Forget that I am clad in this fancy garb—think of me only in my true character—and listen to me! I have had the pleasure of knowing you only for one short week—and this is but the third time that I have found myself in your society. But there is such a thing as love at first sight; and therefore you will not deem me mad, nor romantic, nor deceptive when I declare that I love you!"

The Duchess started—and it was under the impulse of a feeling which she could not define to herself—she knew not whether she were more pleased or annoyed by the avowal which had just been made. Mandeville was handsome and fascinating; and it was impossible for any woman to hear with indifference such an avowal from his lips. But on the other hand, there was that superstitious awe in which the Duchess stood towards him—a dread lest the power that he

wielded might prove inauspicious for her own destinies.

"But if you do not consider me mad or ridiculously romantic," continued Mandeville, "you may perhaps deem me arrogant and presumptuous. I hope that this is not the opinion which you entertain of my conduct?"

"And if it were," said the Duchess, mustering up her courage,—“and if I were to tell you so, what reply would you make?"

Mandeville's dark eyes were riveted upon her through the holes in his mask; and he said, "Without arguing this question, tell me—may I venture to hope?"

"Count Maudeville," responded the Duchess, with firmness and dignity, "you just now admitted that you had not known me more than a week and that this is the third time we have been together. What would you think of me if I were to receive your language with encouragement instead of resentment? Ah! you seem to know that you have acquired a power over me," she went on to say, her courage yielding and her firmness melting, as she again perceived his dark eyes riveted upon her. "But tell me—tell me—how did you learn—how did you obtain any insight—"

"Hear me," interrupted Mandeville. "Could it be a matter of surprise that you—young, beautiful, and courted—should feel indignant at the conduct of your husband who abandoned you for the sake of that Ethel whose loveliness is not to be compared to yours?"

"Ah!" murmured the Duchess: and then she mentally added in a consternation of surprise, "He knows everything!"

"And thus," continued Mandeville, "you had naught to restrain you within the bounds of those obligations which perhaps under other circumstances you would have implicitly obeyed. You possess the heart of a woman—and that heart must love something. You are lovely—and it is natural that you should seek to be beloved. Well then, it is perfectly intelligible how a certain man obtained a temporary empire over your mind,—a man whose name I dare not breathe in your ear."

The Duchess gasped; and then laying her hand suddenly upon Mandeville's arm, she said, "I swear to you that I am innocent in respect to Sir Abel Kingston."

"I know it," replied the Count with a sort of calm confidence. "I am aware that even while standing upon the very verge of the precipice, you had the courage to prevent yourself from falling over. Pardon me, my dear Duchess," he continued, with one of those exquisitely fascinating smiles which revealed his brilliant teeth, "but there was a little coquetry on your part, blended with a still larger amount of timidity; and thus you were saved from falling into the arms of that man."

Again was the vivid blush discernible upon all the lower part of the beautiful lady's countenance; and her snow-white bosom heaved and fell with the strong emotions that were agitating her.

"Tell me—tell me," she said, in a low half-choked voice, "did you know that man? did he betray aught that had ever taken place—"

"Will you believe me," interrupted the Count.

—and he spoke with an air of sincerity which produced an immediate effect on the Duchess,—“will you believe me when I swear that I never exchanged a syllable with that person in my life!”

The Duchess reflected in an agitated manner, and then she said, “One word! I entreat you, one word! Am I betrayed by any one in whom I have placed confidence?—my own maid, for instance?”

“Can you think,” interjected Mandeville, with a tone expressive alike of reproach and indignation, “that I should condescend to tamper with menials?”

“Pardon—pardon me!” said the Duchess. “But good heavens! what would you have me think? No, no! it would be ridiculous!”

“What would be ridiculous?”

“To suppose that you possess a preternatural power.”

Mandeville remained silent for nearly a minute; and there was something in this silence that was more than solemn—it was indeed awful for the patrician lady. She knew not what to think. Her good sense and her intelligence prompted her to discard the idea of anything supernatural in connexion with this man: but how, on the other hand, was she to account for the knowledge which he possessed of her affairs and the marvellous truthfulness with which he had probed all her conduct with Sir Abel Kingston?

“Tell me—tell me,” she said, “who and what you are, mysterious being!”

“I am Hippolyte Mandeville,” he answered, “the most enthusiastic admirer of the Duchess of Ardleigh:”—then, hastily drawing forward one of the crimson draperies in front of the box, he took off his mask, raised the fair patrician’s hand, and pressed it to his lips.

At that instant an individual habited like a Turk, with a large turban, flowing garments, and huge trousers, and whose countenance was completely concealed by his mask, peeped over the parapet of the box, and surprised Mandeville as he was imprinting his lips upon the hand of the Duchess. The Turk instantaneously withdrew: the Duchess snatched away her hand, and Mandeville readjusted his mask in the twinkling of an eye.

“Good heavens! who could that have been?” ejaculated the Duchess.

“No matter,” replied the Count. “At all events he could not know *you*—and it is of little consequence that he should have seen or recognised *my* face. Besides, he is evidently a person of discretion as well as of curiosity; for when he had gratified the latter by peeping into the box, he gave a signal proof of the former by vanishing at once.”

“Do you see him now?” asked the Duchess.

“No: he was instantaneously lost amidst the crowd. But let us think no more of that incident,” continued Mandeville; “and, Oh! let me recall your attention to a more tender topic! You know not the deep impression that you have made upon my heart. If I were fortunate enough to be the husband of so beautiful and charming a being, my life would be one uninterrupted demonstration of love and devotedness towards you. And, Oh! think you not that circumstances have already seemed to indicate that there is something

in my destiny which must interweave itself with your’s? Ah! you start—”

“Yes, yes: for that idea *has* occurred to me!”—and then, after a moment’s pause, the brilliant Duchess ejaculated, “Oh, if there were less mystery about you—if you would treat me with a greater amount of confidence—”

“Proceed, proceed,” said Mandeville: “speak unhesitatingly! tell me what you would say!”

“I would say—I would say,” continued the Duchess, “that after the fervid language you have held towards me,—language which is apparently so sincere—”

“It is sincere,” interjected Mandeville: and he pressed her hand with warmth.

“I would say, then,” continued the Duchess—and a blush was again upon her cheeks, as might be seen by the crimson hue that appeared below the mask,—“I would say, then, that situated as I am with my husband—feeling the want of some one on whose loving friendship I could rely,—yes, and I will even admit that feeling the necessity of loving some one and being beloved in return—”

“Ah, Mary—dearest Mary,” murmured Mandeville, “I understand you—and all that I could hope or expect has now emanated from your lips! A thousand, thousand thanks! I am not indifferent to you—and you shall love me! Oh, I will make you love me! Never has woman yet experienced such devotion from man as that which I will demonstrate towards you! I know that for a moment you fancied that I had by some means acquired a power over you, and that I meant to use it with a tyrannous effect. But, Oh! you were mistaken! I will not be your tyrant—neither will I be your slave. There shall be a manly affection and a sincere friendship on my part: there shall be confidence and reliance on your’s!”

Such language as this, when flowing in a voice of the finest masculine harmony, upon the ear of a woman of a temperament that was more or less fervid and of a heart that was more or less susceptible, could not fail to produce all the effect that was desired. And it did so. The young Duchess contrasted, as her new admirer went on speaking, his mode of address with that which Sir Abel Kingston had been wont to adopt towards her; and she now felt that she was under the influence of a charm and a spell such as she had not known before. And then that very mystic power to which the Count had been alluding—the power which he had so signally displayed in proving his knowledge of her most cherished secrets—that same power, too, which still remained unexplained—combined with other influences to strengthen the Count’s cause as he pleaded it, and to render the young Duchess weaker and weaker in any attempt which she might have made to resist him. And then too, all in a moment she remembered that he was the object of an universal interest—sought for and courted in that fashionable world into which he had so recently burst like a wild erratic star;—and there was something eminently gratifying to the pride even of the brilliant Duchess that she should have been the one—the only one—amidst all the galaxy of English beauties who had made an impression on the distinguished foreigner. Such at least was the idea with which she flattered herself;



—and, to be brief, all circumstances combined to impel her irresistibly towards Hippolyte de Mandeville.

“You have understood me,” she murmured, “and you have comprehended what answer my lips would frame if you demanded of me whether it were possible that in return for all the devotion and the friendship you have promised, I could give you my love? And now leave me—at least for a few minutes. Let me compose myself ere I mingle again with this gay crowd.”

Mandeville pressed her hand and issued from the box. The Duchess threw herself back on the seat and gave way to her reflections. But it is not necessary to chronicle what was now passing in her thoughts: her feelings towards Mandeville have already been sufficiently analyzed to enable the reader to follow in the channel of her present meditations.

Some minutes elapsed; and then the Duchess,
No. 29.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

rising from her seat, leant over the parapet of the box and gazed upon the varied and interesting scene which was spread before her. But gradually she relapsed into the train of meditations from which she had just before aroused herself: the scene became a brilliant confusion—her reverie deepened—and she was still leaning over the parapet of the box. All that was most fascinating and agreeable on the part of Mandeville—all that was most attractive in his language and his looks filled her imagination; and she was already revelling in the idea of possessing such an admirer,—thinking to herself that if she *must* err, it were venial indeed to go astray with such an one as he. Her heart was thrilling with a deep rapture, and a smile was upon her coral lips. She felt a hand laid upon her own as it rested upon the parapet of the box: she raised her eyes—the smile was expanding into a still more delicious sweetness on her lips—the mark

was removed from the face which was now almost close to her own—and, just heaven! what a thrill of horror passed through the form of the beautiful Duchess when she recognised Sir Abel Kingston!

Consternation struck her dumb; and as her brain reeled, darkness came upon her eyes—though she just remembered that she beheld the mask again adjusted upon the features which they had for an instant revealed, and then the wearer thereof was lost amidst the crowd. She staggered back to the seat, on which she sank down under the influence of a mingled terror and dismay which it were impossible to describe.

Mandeville, after quitting the Duchess, as already related, made his way through the crowd, and issuing from the brilliantly lighted saloons, hurried down the staircase. In the hall his valet Edmund Vaughan was at once descried amidst a knot of other servants; and the Count beckoned him into the cloak-room, where there happened to be no other person at the time.

"Edmund," said Mandeville, "it was a presentiment which bade me order you to be here on the present occasion."

"I shall be glad, sir," answered Vaughan, respectfully; "if I can be of any service."

"You can," resumed his master. "Have a cab in readiness—watch well for the appearance of a person dressed as a Turk—follow him—and ascertain who he is. I need not tell you that caution is to be used, and he must not be suffered to suspect that he is pursued."

The Count then gave some few requisite details with regard to the costume of the individual who had thus become an object of interest; and Edmund promised to fulfil the mission thus confided to him.

Mandeville retraced his way to the brilliantly lighted saloons; and he was lounging amidst the company, when some one suddenly took his arm, and he found that it was none other than the brilliant Duchess in her Page's attire.

"For heaven's sake, let me speak to you somewhere!" she said, in a voice which sounded deep and hollow; and Mandeville felt that she trembled violently as she clung to him for support.

"What is the matter?" he asked quickly.

"I cannot tell you here!"—and it was evident that the patrician lady was labouring under a violent agitation; for her pale lips were quivering below the mask, and her bosom was heaving like a tumultuous sea against the Count's arm as she literally clung to him to prevent herself from falling.

"Shall we return to the box?" asked Mandeville.

"No, no! I have a horror of it!" rejoined the Duchess, with mingled terror and impatience. "It is the same as if you were to ask me to go into a haunted room!"

"Mary, this must be serious—very serious!" said Mandeville; "and you absolutely frighten me! But whither can we go?"

"Ah! I recollect!" said the Duchess, whose brain now began to reel less than it had been doing, and who was regaining somewhat of her natural courage. "This way!"

They passed through the crowd, and nowhere did she again perceive the individual in the Turk's garb who had so much frightened her. They de-

scended to the dining-room, where refreshments were served to those who required them; and the Duchess begged Mandeville to procure her a glass of water. He suggested wine, but she would take nothing but water; and it was with a petulance savouring even of irritability that she spoke, as if she were impatient of every instant of unnecessary delay ere she communicated to Mandeville the cause of her excitement and terror.

The beverage seemed to revive her; and again taking the Count's arm, she passed with him into a conservatory leading out of the dining-room.

"I thought that we might be here alone together!" she said, as sweeping her locks around she beheld no one amidst the tropical trees and choice plants which were grouped and arrayed so tastefully there.

"And now tell me, dearest Mary," said Mandeville, "what is it that terrified you?"

"You remember," she gasped for breath,—"you remember," she went on to say, "that person who was dressed as a Turk?"

"Ah!" said Mandeville; "to be sure! He had the impudence to peep in upon us—"

"Hush, hush! for God's sake hush!"—and through the holes of the mask the beautiful eyes of the Duchess were swept in terror around.

"What of this personage?" asked Mandeville, with a curiosity and interest that were now poignantly excited.

"You will not believe me!" said the Duchess, in a voice that was still trembling and agitated. "No, I am sure you will not believe me!—but it is true! It could not possibly have been a dream! And yet how *can* it be true?"

"Do speak, Mary! What is it that has happened?"

"After you left me—you had been gone some minutes—that form returned—Yes, yes! it was not a dream! it was a reality!—a horrible, frightful reality!"

"One would almost imagine you had seen an apparition, dear Mary!"

"Oh, tell me, do you believe in them? But no! it is ridiculous! Oh, how weak and foolish I am!" she exclaimed. "I will be more courageous—and as it could not have been an apparition, but must have been he himself, in the veritable flesh and blood—"

"Of whom were you speaking? whom did you see? or whom thought you that you saw?"

"That man removed the mask from his face," replied the young Duchess, in a very low voice, but yet in a firmer tone than she had yet been adopting; "and it was—it was—the countenance of—Oh, do not doubt me!—Sir Abel Kingston that was thus revealed!"

Mandeville started: but instantaneously regaining his self-possession, he reflected deeply for a few moments,—at the expiration of which he asked, "Are you sure of this, Mary?"

"I am sure of it," she replied solemnly and earnestly. "He placed one hand upon mine, while with the other he removed his mask."

"And he said nothing?"

"Not a syllable. He looked at me in such a way—Oh, I cannot describe how!—but there seemed to be a mingled mournfulness and malignity in the gaze that he for a few moments bent upon me."

Again Mandeville reflected; and he said in a

slow musing tone, "Extraordinary things have happened in this world; and it would not be the first time that the dead have come to life again."

"Good God! what mean you?" asked the Duchess: for though she could not see the Count's face, as he retained his mask, yet there was something so peculiar in the tone in which he spoke that it struck her with a species of vague terror.

"I mean, dearest," he said, taking her hand and pressing it between both his own,—“I mean that it would not be the first time that the supposed dead have reappeared in the world.”

"Ah!" said the Duchess, with a sense of relief, though she paused not to analyze her feelings: "now I comprehend you. Let us take it for granted, then, that by some unaccountable means this man is still alive. And yet—and yet," she added, eagerly catching at an idea which had abruptly smitten her, "it is quite possible that there may be some one so exactly like himself—"

"Possible, but not probable," interrupted the Count. "For if I remember aright, the newspapers declared that he had no brother nor any near relation, and that consequently the title was extinct. Come, Mary, busy not yourself with an idea that may prove to be delusive. If there be any evil to be encountered, let it be met boldly; and therefore take it for granted that by some strange means or another that man yet lives!"

"In this case," said the Duchess, shuddering visibly, "I am completely in the power of a wretch who may haunt me day and night—one who may exaggerate trifles and misrepresent facts to a ruinous extent! It is true that he may not dare to appear publicly in society:—neither on the other hand dare I take steps to surrender him up again into the grasp of justice! Thus, unseen by all the rest of the world, he may secretly haunt me; unknown in the new spheres where he will perhaps move disguised, he may circulate scandalous whispers concerning me! For, Oh, such a wretch as that, crawling like a reptile in a thicket, may scatter forth its venom around—and I the principal victim!"

"Mary," said the Count, who had suffered her to proceed uninterrupted, and who had reflected profoundly while she was speaking, "I am fully sensible of all the dangers to which you are now exposed. You may indeed be haunted by a spectre—pursued by an apparition—dogged as it were through the world by one who though really alive, must nevertheless seem as if he had risen up from the dead."

"Good heavens!" murmured the wretched Duchess, there is something absolutely frightful in the vivid truthfulness of the picture that you have just drawn!"—and again she shuddered visibly. "Oh, what can I do? have you no consolation to give?—nothing to suggest?"—and her voice now sank into accents of the deepest reproachfulness.

"Mary, do you believe," asked the Count, "that I can help you in this dilemma?"

"I do, I do!" replied the Duchess, eagerly catching at the hope which his words seemed to hold out.

"And you think that I can rescue you from this horrible nightmare—save you from this spectre that otherwise means to haunt you?"

"I do, I do!" rejoined the Duchess. "Oh, I

have every reliance upon you! I know not why, but it now seems to me as if you were the only person in the whole world who could befriend me!"

"I am," he said in a tone of confidence.

"And you *will* befriend me, Mandeville? Oh, you will befriend me, Hippolyte?" murmured the Duchess, with all the most winning accents of woman's powerful appeal.

"And if I do this for you, Mary," he said, taking her hand and holding it in his own, "may I hope that I shall not sigh in vain?"

"I know not what you mean to do, nor how you purpose to act," answered the Duchess, her eyes sinking beneath the glowing regards which Mandeville fixed upon her through the holes of his mask; "but inasmuch as I place an implicit—aye, almost a superstitious reliance upon your power, I will abandon myself blindly and confidently unto you. Save me—save me from any danger which may at present threaten me!—save me, Hippolyte, and I am your's!"

"Thanks, Mary! I will save you."

Mandeville now led the Duchess away from the conservatory; and as they paused in the dining-room to partake of some slight refreshment, he said to her, "Will you remain until the end; or do you wish to return home after the excitement you have experienced?"

"Which do you think I had better do?" asked the Duchess.

"If I were to consult my own selfish feelings only," replied Mandeville, "I should beseech you to remain. It is only just midnight—supper is to be served at one o'clock—and would it not seem strange if the brilliant Duchess were not amongst the company?"

"True!—and moreover I have made my preparations for remaining here," was her Grace's response. "Nay, do not think that I intend to lay aside my mask while still wearing this costume; but Catharine Todmorden has kindly lent me her chamber—I have sent an evening dress thither—and presently, when I make a change in my toilet, no one will suspect that I had figured as a Page of the Court of Queen Elizabeth. For I happen to know that several other ladies will likewise change their attire; and then too there are all the dominos that will be laid aside—"

"And therefore, everything considered," said Mandeville, "you will remain?"

The reply was given in the affirmative, and the Count led the Duchess up-stairs again to the saloons. There in a few minutes he separated from her, with the whispered information that it were probably better they should not be seen too much together, inasmuch as the costume of both attracted no mean amount of attention, and it might therefore possibly be surmised who they were.

Mandeville, on leaving the Duchess, hastened downstairs, leapt into his carriage, which was waiting for him, and drove back to the Clarendon Hotel, where he dwelt. He inquired if his valet Edmund had returned?—and he was answered in the negative. Repairing to his dressing-room, he changed his Troubadour attire for a plain evening suit; and by the time his toilet was accomplished Edmund Vaughan made his appearance.

"Well, what tidings?" asked Mandeville, without the least excitement, but in a sort of careless, indifferent tone.

"I followed the individual whom you indicated, sir," replied the valet; "for he left the house almost immediately after you had given me your orders."

"Well?" said Mandeville.

"He entered a street cab," continued Vaughan, "and drove to a house in Windmill Street, near the Haymarket."

"Some queer houses in that street, are there not?" inquired Mandeville.

"I believe so, sir. The house which this personage entered is a middle-sized one—gloomy-looking enough—and has the name of Pluckley on a brass plate on the door."

"And what is this Pluckley?"

"I do not exactly know, sir—although I asked the question: but I will find out to-morrow morning."

"Do nothing more till I tell you," said Mandeville. "Ha! that note?"

"Why, you see, sir," proceeded the valet, who had just taken a billet from his pocket, "I have done something more than you told me—I hope I have not done too much—but I thought that you must have particular reasons for ordering that person to be followed, and that you would naturally like to know as much about him as possible—"

"Good!" said Mandeville. "You are the astute and intelligent fellow that I from the very first took you to be. But that note which you hold in your hand?"

"It is directed to the Duchess of Ardleigh, sir."

"Indeed! From whom did you receive it?" demanded Mandeville, with difficulty concealing his amazement.

"From the person whom I followed, sir," replied Edmund. "Shall I explain? or have you any orders first of all to give in reference to the note?"

"Explain," said Mandeville.

"I followed the Turk—as I must call him for distinction's sake," resumed Edmund, "to the gloomy-looking house in Windmill Street. There he alighted from the cab which brought him; and having said something to the driver, he entered the house by means of a latch-key which he had about him. I had alighted from the cab in which I had followed him and was watching at a little distance. In ten minutes he came out of the house again—"

"Still disguised, and with a mask upon his face?" asked Mandeville.

"Yes, sir—and it was this that struck me as being so strange as to make me play the little trick which put me in possession of the note. I will now explain how it was, sir. I saw the Turk give the cabman a note: he also thrust something else into his hand, which was no doubt more than the regular fare, for the cabman touched his hat with exceeding politeness; and the Turk, having given him some instruction, retreated into the house and shut the door. Hastily dismissing my own cab, I sped to the bottom of the street, and there I waylaid the one which had conveyed the Turk.—'I'm engaged,' said the cabman.—'Engaged?' I cried: 'why, you are empty!'—'Ah yes, but I have got to do an errand,' said the man.—'In which direction?' I asked.—He named it; and then I exclaimed,

'Why, that is precisely the quarter to which I want you to drive me!'—'Then jump in,' said he.—'No,' said I: 'I prefer riding on the outside; it's a fine night;' and I leapt on the box. 'You must go quick,' I said, 'for I am in a tremendous hurry, and I shall give you something handsome. But what may happen to the errand you have to perform with an empty cab? To go and fetch somebody may be?'—'Not a bit of it,' answered the cabman: 'it's a note I have to deliver at Ardleigh House.'—'Well, that is strange!' cried I; 'for I belong to Ardleigh House.'—'You?' and he eyed me searchingly.—'Yes,' I said; 'and it's there you are going to drive me.'—'Then of course,' resumed the cabman after a few moments' reflection, 'you know a young woman, a lady's-maid.'—'I'll be bound you mean Lavinia!' cried I, hazarding the guess.—'The same,' responded the cabman.—'Well,' I continued, 'this Lavinia and I are on such terms that any little business which is entrusted to her might as well be entrusted to me.'—To make matters short, the cabman gave me the note, enjoining me to consign it with all possible caution to the hands of Lavinia.—'Who gave it you?' I asked.—'I don't know,' he replied curtly: then after a pause, he said in a more civil tone, as he saw me twirling half-a-crown between my fingers, for his proper fare was only eightpence or a shilling at the outside, 'It was a gentleman who I set down at one Pluckley's in Windmill Street.'—'Pluckley's?' said I: 'what a queer name! Who is he?'—'I don't know exactly what he is,' rejoined the cabman: 'I know him by sight very well, and his wife too. They are rum-looking people.'—At this moment the cab stopped at Ardleigh House; I leapt down, gave the driver the half-crown, and at once made a pretence of descending the area-steps; but the moment the cab had rattled away, I sprang up the steps again without being seen by any one belonging to the premises—and here I am, sir."

"Excellently managed altogether," said the Count, who listened without impatience to his valet's narrative; for its details afforded him the most gratifying proof of the astuteness and ready wit of his faithful follower.

"You have done well, Edmund," continued Mandeville; "and it is perhaps useful that this billet should have fallen 'into my hands:'—then, as he consigned the note to his waistcoat-pocket, he thence took another sort of note—namely, one of the Bank of England for ten pounds—and this he bestowed upon Vaughan.

The valet bowed, and retired on a sign made him by his master to that effect; and the instant he was alone, Mandeville broke open the letter—and having read it, he sealed it again with such niceness and accuracy that it was impossible to tell that the original seal had been violated. Then hastening down to his carriage, which had been kept waiting, he drove back to Todmorden House in Piccadilly, which he reached a little before one o'clock.

On ascending to the brilliantly lighted saloons, Count Mandeville found that nearly all the guests had by this time removed their masks; and he also noticed that there were several more ladies in plain evening toilet than there were when he had taken his departure upwards of an hour back: so that it was evident they had put off their fancy-costumes and made these changes in their raiment

in the chambers of Lady Todmorden's daughters. The appearance of the Count at once created a sensation; for very few, except the lady of the mansion and her daughters, suspected that he had been there before that evening in another garb. As the "distinguished foreigner" made his way amidst the crowd—bestowing bows, smiles, or shakes of the hand, according to the degree of intimacy on which he considered himself to be or chose to place himself with those whose salutations he thus acknowledged—his elegant appearance attracted general admiration. The exquisite cut of his clothes, the seemingly unstudied precision with which his cravat was tied, the white waistcoat so accurately fitting the slender form, without crease or wrinkle—in a word, the entire appearance of this personage elicited the admiration of the ladies and provoked no small amount of envy and jealousy on that of the gentlemen.

As he made his way through the principal apartments, he beheld the Duchess of Arleigh (no longer in a fancy dress) conversing with a group of ladies at the upper end of the room. He did not immediately proceed thither, because it was not his policy to seem to force himself upon persons of rank, but rather to show that he himself was courted. Thus he was affecting to plunge very deeply into discourse with some old nobleman whose good opinion he thought he might just as well win *en passant*, when the Duchess beckoned him towards her.

"Pardon me, my lord," he said, "but I must oblige that sign from a superior divinity:"—and he advanced with his wonted graceful ease towards the group of which the Duchess was the central star.

"Count," said the Duchess, "you must decide a little dispute which has arisen amongst us."

"And if your Grace be one of the disputants," was the reply, "I hope that I shall be enabled to make you come off victorious."

"Several of those ladies have declared their conviction that you have been here before this evening," continued the Duchess, "and that you bore your part amidst the gaieties which just now prevailed. I, on the other hand, express my conviction that you have not been here."

Mandeville at this moment caught a whisper which one lady was breathing in the ear of another, to this effect—"Now see if he don't admit that he was dressed as a Troubadour!"

"Indeed, your Grace," said Mandeville, "I am sorry that in settling this little dispute—which by the bye elevates me into an importance highly flattering, but very little deserved,—in settling the dispute however, I regret that truth compels me to decide against your ladyship. I was here just now; indeed, I have been here all the evening. I wore a domino, which I threw off but a few minutes back in the gentlemen's cloak-room."

"Then he was not the Troubadour, after all!" the whisper again reached his ear.

"And now," said Mandeville, "might I venture to ask whether your Grace has appeared this evening in any other costume than that which you at present wear?"

"Yes," she replied: and suddenly recollecting that there were at least a dozen Swiss shepherdesses just now amongst the company, she added, "If the truth must be revealed, I wore the fancy dress of a Bernese peasant girl."

The result of this conversation was to create the completest mystery in respect to the veritable garbs in which Mandeville and the Duchess had respectively appeared. We may farther proceed to observe that the young Duchess now looked surpassingly beautiful in the evening toilet which had succeeded the Page's costume. She was slightly pale from the lingering effects of the shock which she had sustained from the disclosure of Sir Abel Kingston's countenance: but now, as she leant upon Mandeville's arm while he escorted her to the supper-room, she felt as if she were clinging to one who had the power to save her from all evils and perils; and the colour came back to her cheeks, and the light of confidence, and joy, and gratitude—we might almost have said of love—danced in her beautiful eyes.

We will not protract this chapter, which is already a long one, to an unnecessary length by describing the splendour of the banquet, nor by dwelling on the delight of Lady Todmorden as she saw how well everything was going off, and how Mr. Warren the stockbroker was evidently attaching himself to one of her daughters; while a Marquis, who was a widower, was paying attention to the second—and a young Baronet, who had just come of age, was whispering tenderly in the ear of the third. Nor will we stop to chronicle all the encomiums which were whispered amongst the guests upon the brilliancy of the entertainment. It however seemed to be universally acknowledged that it was the most splendid ever yet given at Todmorden House; and Mandeville whispered to the Duchess, "If her ladyship only succeeds in getting off one of her daughters by means of this affair, she will have made a good speculation."

Some of the company began to leave the supper-table; and amongst them were Count Mandeville and the Duchess of Arleigh.

"I have to thank you, Hippolyte," she whispered, as she leant upon his arm, "for the mode, as delicate as it was ingenious, in which you just now averted all suspicion relative to the fact that you and I had been so much together during the earlier part of the evening. There was one spiteful old lady who vowed and protested that you were the Troubadour, while I heard another whisper that she thought I was the Page."

"And now, dear Mary," interjected Mandeville, "they are completely thrown off the right scent. But I wish to speak to you particularly. Shall we revisit the conservatory? No one is likely to be there now, and we may be enabled to have a little discourse alone together."

"What have you to say to me? Has anything fresh transpired?"—and the Duchess spoke quickly and nervously.

"Fear nothing! rely entirely on me!" said Mandeville.

"Yes, yes!—I do, I do!" and she clung more closely to his arm.

They proceeded to the conservatory, where, as they had anticipated, they found themselves alone together.

"Dearest Mary," said the Count, "you were not deceived—there was no illusion. That man still lives."

"Ah!"—and the Duchess turned pale. "You have already made inquiries? You have already obtained some clue?"

"More than that," responded Mandeville, with

that air of calm confidence, which he was so well able to assume, as if he were utterly incapable of vaunting or exaggerating the extraordinary powers which he seemed to possess. "I know where he is—I can lay my hand upon him at any moment."

"You have seen him?"

"Only at the instant that he peeped in upon us when we were in the box; and then, as you are well aware, I did not see his face, nor at the moment did I suspect who he was. But he has written you a note——"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the Duchess, her pallor now becoming deadly: "he does not mean to sleep until he has shown me how well he can become a persecutor!"

"Fear not, Mary—fear not," said Mandeville, throwing his arm round her waist, and now for the first time venturing to press his lips to her cheek.

"Have I not begged you to repose the fullest confidence in me?"

"Yes, yes—I do! I will! I must!"—and she suffered him to strain her to his heart. "But that note which he has dared to write me——"

"It is here," said Mandeville; and he produced it from his waistcoat-pocket.

"Good heavens! in your possession!"—and the Duchess gazed with a species of trembling awe upon a personage who naturally appeared to her to be the most extraordinary being whom she had ever encountered.

"Yes," continued Mandeville, quietly, and without appearing to think or feel that he was doing anything out of the common way, "this note is from that man. See! it is addressed to yourself. His messenger was bearing it to Arleigh House, when it fell into the hands of some one who at once brought it to me."

"And why to you?" asked the Duchess, with an amazement that was utterly bewildering.

"Oh, simply because he was a faithful adherent of mine—one whom I had sent to ascertain whatsoever might be gleaned in reference to this resuscitated villain, Sir Abel Kingston. Do not fear that your name will be talked about. I have saved it from that danger. If the billet had not been intercepted by an agent of mine, it would have been left at Arleigh House; and who can tell what curious or impertinent eye might have peered into its contents?"

"True, Hippolyte—true!" said the Duchess.

"How considerate you are on my account!"—but still bewilderment and a species of awe-struck amazement blended with the gratitude which her looks expressed.

"Oh, heaven knows that now—*now*," she emphatically repeated, "I can entertain no doubt of your power to help and to save me in every danger! But this note—you are acquainted with its contents?"

"I? Oh, no, Mary," responded the Count with a smile. "I am not quite a conjuror."

"My vision is dazzled," said the Duchess: "and I really could scarce tell whether the seal were broken or not."

"Think you," asked Mandeville, in a tone which seemed to be full of gentle reproach, "that I would violate the sanctity of a correspondence addressed to yourself?"

"Oh, under such circumstances—this letter having fallen into your hands—and considering, too, all the reliance I place upon you—all the confidence I repose in you——"

"Thank you, dearest Mary, for these assurances:—and again the arm circled the waist, and again the lips imprinted kisses on the beautiful countenance. "Read that letter," he said, "and let us see in what terms the villain has the audacity to address you."

The hands of the Duchess trembled as they held the note; for it actually appeared to her as if it were a missive which had emanated from the dead! But Mandeville spoke encouragingly in her ear, so that she mustered up her courage and broke the seal. The address on the envelope had been written in a feigned hand: but the writing of the note itself was that of Sir Abel Kingston. The contents ran as follow:—

"Midnight, May 30.

"I have revealed myself to you. You now know that I am not numbered with the dead, as you had doubtless hoped. That you never loved me, is evident from a thousand circumstances; and you will not be surprised at the tenour of this communication. I am a desperate man, as you may readily suppose; and as the world has shown no mercy to me, I intend to show none to others. You know that you are in my power; and if you dare to breathe a whisper of my existence I will be signally avenged—I will expose you though I sacrifice myself! Ah, you have a new lover! What think you of anonymous notes and industriously circulated whispers, to the effect that the Duchess of Arleigh went disguised to Lady Todmorden's to meet her paramour? And who will not recognise and acknowledge the truth of the avowment, when it is likewise proclaimed that the brilliant Duchess was appraised as a Page and her lover as a Troubadour? But enough! This is only a fresh instance of the power which I have acquired over you,—a power which you dare not defy! And now mark well. It is absolutely necessary we should meet, and that on the occasion of such interview you should have twenty thousand pounds at your disposal. It will only be paying me the sum which you promised a short time since. Therefore I command you that at eight o'clock in the evening punctually, on the 1st of June, you meet me by the Duke of York's column in Waterloo Place. You can wear some mean apparel if you seek to disguise yourself effectually. It will not be the first time you have done so—as perhaps a certain Mrs. Grills might be enabled to certify. Precisely as the clock strikes eight, you will drop your kerchief twice, as if by accident; and thus I shall at once recognise you. Think not, however, to play off any treachery upon me. My disguise will be impenetrable until I choose to reveal myself. Therefore if you come not alone—or if I behold the slightest grounds for suspecting that you mean to deal perfidiously with me—I shall take a step which will wreak a deadly vengeance upon your head, although at the same time I may be involving myself in utter destruction! But I care not: for remember, I am a desperate man!"

It was with a variety of feelings, the intensity of which can be better imagined than described, that the Duchess of Arleigh perused this missive. The colour completely deserted her cheeks; and when she had finished reading the document, she handed it to Mandeville, who had

stood gazing upon her with an air as if he were completely ignorant of what the contents of that letter might be. He took and read it, still maintaining a look to prevent the suspicion that he was already well acquainted with its menacing nature:—then raising his eyes, he said with a scornful smile, "Miserable wretch! does he think that you are so friendless as to yield to his threats, as dastard as they are malignant?"

"Oh, it would be my ruin! my utter ruin!" murmured the Duchess, "if he were to take the step which he has so unmistakably threatened! Ah! after the discourse which just now took place with those ladies, how overwhelming would be the disgrace of exposure! The very worst would be thought—and spiteful tongues would ask wherefore I should have represented that I was attired as a shepherdess, and why *you* should have proclaimed that you were disguised in a domino?"

"Tranquillize yourself, Mary," said Mandeville: "there shall be no exposure and no disgrace; nor shall those scandal-loving ladies ever learn that we ere now deceived them with the representations that we made in reference to our costumes."

"Oh, is it possible that I may venture to hope?"

"Hope everything," said Mandeville.

"But this letter, so frightful in its threats—so daring in its menaces—evidently showing that the wretched man is indeed desperate!"

"Heed not the letter," said the Count. "You shall defy the enemy."

"What am I to do? how am I to act?" asked the Duchess.

"You will do nothing, Mary," was the response.

"But you?"

"I will do everything. Now, fear not," continued Mandeville, with his wonted air of calm consciousness of power. "From the moment the clock strikes eight in the evening of the 1st of June—that is to say, the day after to-morrow—or rather to-morrow, for we have already entered on the 31st of May at this hour of the morning—"

"Yes," said the Duchess, full of feverish anxiety. "But you were telling me that from the moment which the wretch has named for the appointment—"

"From that moment, Mary, he shall trouble you no more."

The Duchess gave a prolonged sigh indicative of the relief which was conveyed to her mind by an assurance wherein she placed implicit trust; and as Mandeville's arm again encircled her waist, she of her own accord presented her lips to invite his kiss.

"And now, dearest," said the Count, "banish all apprehension from your mind. Think no more of the wretch otherwise than as an enemy whom you have triumphed over—a reptile on whom you have set your heel! Oh, let smiles appear upon your lips, and let the light of confidence again illuminate your eyes!—for you know not how beautiful you are in your happy moments, dear Mary!"

"And it is you," murmured the young Duchess, bending her grateful regards upon Mandeville, "who experience the power to render me thus happy."

"I rejoice that it is so, Mary—because I love you devotedly and fondly! You know not how much! And now let us rejoin the company—Ah! and give me that note—I will destroy it presently—And stay! one moment, my Mary! Let me place this camellia in your hair. Ah! how it becomes you! Now look up and smile again! There! you are inexpressibly handsome!"

They returned to the saloons, where dancing was now being resumed with spirit; and it was not until nearly three o'clock in the morning that the Duchess of Ardeleigh was handed by Count Mandeville to her carriage.

"She is mine!" said the Count, as he threw himself complacently back in his own carriage: "she is mine!—and in less than three more days the conquest will be complete!"

CHAPTER XLVI.

ETHEL'S ALTERED PROSPECTS.

LET us now return to Hendon Court. Lady Langport remained in bed until nearly noon on the day following that night of exciting incidents when her daughter Mildred broke in upon her mysterious toilet and discovered her horrible secret. Ethel, be it remembered, had been told by Mildred—who adopted a sudden bearing of politeness and affability—that her ladyship did not require her services on that occasion; and thus Ethel fully comprehended how Mildred was playing a deep game, and how her own position at Hendon Court was becoming hourly more precarious through the hypocritical machinations of that deceitful creature. But, as we have seen, Ethel would for a variety of causes have only been too glad of any reasonable excuse to withdraw from the service of Lady Langport—though at the same time she felt exceedingly loath to abandon that unfortunate mother altogether to the unscrupulous and unprincipled daughter who in an evil hour had been restored unto her.

Ethel had received that same morning a letter sealed with the armorial bearings of a great personage. She had read this letter with the deepest interest and with a sentiment of the liveliest hope: but still she hesitated to obey the summons which it contained. She was walking in the garden, pondering the circumstances of her position, when Mildred accosted her.

"My dear friend," said Mildred, assuming the sweetest smile she could possibly conjure up for her hypocritical purpose, "I have been thinking a great deal of you."

It was almost a look of indignation which Ethel bent upon her: but conquering her emotions, she hastily inquired, "How is Lady Langport now?"

"A little better. She has just come downstairs," answered Mildred. "I assisted in her toilet—It was a daughter's place, you know—"

"Has her ladyship inquired for me? does she wish to see me?" asked Ethel.

"Oh, yes—you can go to her when you like,"

responded Mildred. "But I think it my duty to tell you something, Ethel: for since we agreed to be friends, and you declared this morning that you had no ill-will towards me, I must show you that I am deserving of kindly feelings on your part."

Ethel remained silent. She could not possibly give back assurances of friendship when she knew that those which she was receiving were as false and hollow as they could be: but she marvelled to what end this insidious preface was to lead.

"I have been thinking," resumed Mildred, "that situated as I am, it is more than probable that I may experience annoyances from a certain person——"

"Ah!" said Ethel: and then, as a recollection struck her, she at once added, "But I thought you informed me that you no longer dreaded Count Mandeville?—for it is doubtless to him that you are alluding."

"I do not dread him, Ethel," rejoined Mildred: "because he is only dangerous under certain circumstances. But what I mean is this,—that he may seek me out—he may persecute me with his visits—and as I know from what you said that you stand in perfect horror of that man——"

"Well?" said Ethel, determined to see to what extent Mildred's duplicity would reach.

"I was thinking," pursued the deceitful woman, "that it would be very unpleasant and inconvenient for you to stand the chance of being molested here by that dangerous and unprincipled person."

"If your fears on my account had arisen from generous motives," said Ethel, "I should have thanked you with fervour. But let us understand each other at once, Mildred. I am not your dupe——"

"Dupe!" echoed Mildred angrily. "Such language——"

"Patience, and listen to me!" interrupted Ethel. "I repeat, I am not deceived by your manoeuvres. You wish to get rid of me. You first of all endeavoured, by your insolent supercilious conduct towards me, to render my position intolerable here; but finding that I was not prepared to desert poor Lady Langport all in a hurry, you are now endeavouring to frighten me away."

"And I suppose," said Mildred, her lips white and quivering with an ill-subdued rage, "you mean to tell me that you will remain?"

"On the contrary," answered Ethel: "I am ready to go."

It was almost a cry of joy which burst from Mildred's lips; and seizing Ethel's hand, she exclaimed, "Pray do not let us part in anger. Do not misunderstand me!"

"I can assure you," answered Ethel coldly, "that I do not misunderstand you. Neither must you misunderstand me. I shall not leave Hendon Court at your bidding, nor on account of the terrors which you have been seeking to conjure up. But if Lady Langport of her own accord intimates that my services are no longer useful to her, depend upon it, Mildred, I am too proud to eat the bread of indolence!"

"Perhaps you will go and speak to—to—my sister?" said Mildred, emphasizing the word in that style which was so abhorrent to the ears and the feelings of the well-principled and delicate-minded Ethel.

"Yes—I will go and speak to her ladyship,"

she said: and at once separating from Mildred, she re-entered the house.

Repairing to the drawing-room, Ethel found Lady Langport reclining upon the sofa. A glance was sufficient to show Ethel that her ladyship's toilet was not characterized by the same precision and nicety—the same artistic refinement, so to speak, as when she had superintended it. There were evidences of haste and slovenliness, as well as of inexperience and incompetency, which showed that Lady Langport had gained nothing by the substitution of Mildred's services for those of Ethel.

"My dear young friend," said her ladyship, giving Ethel her hand, and speaking in a voice that was tremulous with emotion, "I am afraid that you may fancy I have slighted and neglected you; but what could I do, Ethel, when a daughter claimed the right——"

"You could only obey the maternal impulse, doubtless," interjected Ethel. "Oh, my lady, I beg that you will deal candidly and frankly with me! I know that circumstances have changed——"

"They have, they have!" exclaimed Lady Langport. "When you and I first met, I could not foresee that a daughter would be so soon restored to me."

"And now that this daughter is restored," said Ethel, "you expect to find in her all that you hoped or thought to find in me."

"I am afraid, my dear young friend," said her ladyship, "that under these altered circumstances you will not be so happy and so comfortable as you were at first."

"In one word, Lady Langport," said Ethel, "do you wish me to leave you?"

Her ladyship averted her countenance for some moments; and then she said with a sudden exclamation, "No! God is my witness that I do not wish you to leave me!—and great would be my happiness if you and Mildred could agree together. It is astonishing that you cannot! You, Ethel, are of the sweetest and most amiable disposition; and I have now begun to discover so many excellent qualities in my daughter—Why do you look so strange, Ethel?"

"Strange? I look strange, dear lady? Oh, believe me that I would not willingly nor intentionally express by look or word an opinion relative to family matters! I see that you recognise the necessity for me to leave you——"

"And now you will think that I am ungrateful towards you!" cried Lady Langport, with a sort of hysterical vehemence: "you will remember all I said—the pledges and promises I exacted from you—the prospects I held out that you should never leave me except by your own wish——"

"Do not excite yourself thus, dear lady, on my account," interrupted Ethel. "I cannot charge you with ingratitude. Heaven forbid! Circumstances have changed—and you are not responsible for events which you could never have foreseen. I am incapable of so much injustice as to deem you ungrateful!"

Lady Langport wiped away the tears from her eyes; and she pressed Ethel's hand feverishly.

"If we must part," she said, "at all events let it not be until you shall have found the means of establishing yourself comfortably elsewhere."

"I think," said Ethel, "that I know of some—"



MILDRED'S EVENING TOILETTE.

No. 30.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

thing which might suit me—that I have a chance—”

“Good!” cried Lady Langport: “I am rejoiced to hear it. Your welfare will ever be dear to me; and remember, Ethel, that should circumstances place you in a position to need the succour of a friend, you must not hesitate to apply to me. Go—leave me for the present! My feelings are overpowering me!”

Ethel pressed the gloved hand, and hastened from the room. She sped to her own chamber—she apparelled herself for going out—she now no longer hesitated to obey the summons contained in the letter with the large seal. She speedily issued from the house: she ran down the lane—and she caught the omnibus which she knew passed along the main road at particular hours. She entered London; and on alighting from the omnibus, she made the best of her way to the mansion of Count Olonetz in Grosvenor Square.

On inquiring for the Russian Ambassador, Ethel was at once conducted to an apartment where, after remaining alone for a few minutes, she was joined by the Count. He welcomed her with that dignified courtesy which was the principal characteristic of his demeanour: he begged her to be seated—and taking a chair near her, he said, “I need not ask, Mrs. Trevor, whether you have received my letter?”

“It is in consequence of that summons, my lord,” she replied, “that I am now here.”

“As I informed you in that letter, Mrs. Trevor,” continued Count Olonetz, “the Princess Roxana is most anxious to have you as a companion; and the Grand Duke is willing, if possible, to gratify his daughter’s wish. I therefore promised that I would communicate with you, in order to see if any arrangement to that effect can be possibly made.”

“I need scarcely assure your Excellency that I feel highly flattered by the honour which is thus conferred upon me; and I will moreover confess that my circumstances are such as to render the offer a very tempting one.”

“Before we proceed any further with that topic,” said the Count, “be kind enough to tell me how Mildred fares with her mother?”

“It is precisely because Mildred has undertaken to perform all necessary duties towards her parent,” answered Ethel, “that I myself am no longer wanted at Hendon Court. Thus my circumstances are altered. When I was here the other day, I was so situated as to be beyond the necessity of accepting the offer made to me by his Imperial Highness. But now it is different.”

“I understand,” said the Count, “and indeed I am not astonished. You find your position at Hendon Court very much altered in the society of Mildred? But tell me—think you that Mildred will become domesticated at Hendon Court—that she will settle down quietly into her new mode of existence, and that her ambitious designs will not soar elsewhere?”

“Mildred’s is a character, my lord, concerning which I should not like to express a strong conviction,” answered Ethel: “but that Mildred ought to be contented with the power she is acquiring and the riches she will be enjoying beneath her mother’s roof, is beyond doubt.”

“Good,” said the Count. “And now, Mrs. Trevor, let us revert to the business which has

brought you hither. You have learnt from my letter—Ah! by the bye,” he suddenly interrupted himself, “you mentioned nothing of its contents to Lady Langport or Mildred?”

“Nothing, my lord: the letter was marked *Private and Confidential*. Your Excellency was going to observe—”

“Yes—I remember, I was about to say that you learnt from my letter,” continued Olonetz, “that my mission to the British metropolis will probably be accomplished much more speedily than was at first anticipated, and that in a week or ten days I may leave on my return to Russia. The Grand Duke and the Princess will accompany me. Are you prepared to leave your native land at so short a warning?”

“I have no ties to retain me here,” responded Ethel. “But is your Excellency aware that I am a mother?”

“Yes: you told the Princess that you were a widow and that you had a little boy. The Grand Duke said something to you the other day, of the necessity of giving proofs of your respectability. That is a point which you may leave me to settle with his Highness.”

Ethel looked amazed for a moment; and she could scarcely repress an ejaculation which rose to her lips.

“Of course,” continued Olonetz, “you will take your child with you. The fact of your being a mother is no obstacle to the carrying-out of the present negotiation; for the Princess has expressed her wish—the Grand Duke has supported it—and I am bound to see that it is fulfilled.”

“Your Excellency must receive the assurances of my most fervid gratitude,” said Ethel.

“If I did not entertain an excellent opinion of your disposition and character,” said the Count, “I should not so readily assent to this arrangement, nor become a party to the making of it. But now, Mrs. Trevor, there are two or three little points on which we must come to an understanding: for I need not remind you that your position becomes somewhat a delicate one towards the Grand Duke and the Princess, considering your acquaintance with Mildred and her mother.”

“Then I presume, my lord,” said Ethel, “that those illustrious personages remain altogether in ignorance of everything which has recently occurred?”

“In total and absolute ignorance,” rejoined Olonetz. “The Princess believes her mother to be dead: the Grand Duke knows she is alive, but is unaware of her presence in the British metropolis. Now listen to me attentively. If ever you mention the name of Lady Langport in the hearing of the Grand Duke or the Princess, you must always be upon your guard in order to prevent the suspicion that you are acquainted with anything peculiar in reference to her ladyship or her connexions.”

“I shall be careful on that point, my lord.”

“And you will never suffer it to transpire that you have had any acquaintance with Mildred.”

“Oh, it were impossible that I should be so indiscreet!” cried Ethel: “for this would be to reveal to the Princess that her mother lives,—that mother whom it were better that she should believe to be no more!”

“Precisely,” said the Count. “And when in

Russia you will still leave Lady Langport ignorant of your whereabouts and the situation which you hold."

"Decidedly, my lord—if such be your wish."

"It is," continued Olonetz. "But if you happen to notice any letter arriving for the Princess in the handwriting of Lady Langport or Mildred, you will at once act a friendly part—"

"Ah, my lord!" ejaculated Ethel, "do you not think that I would watch over the interests of the Princess as if she were a younger sister?"

"Good," said the Count. "I am convinced you will. And therefore you must not hesitate to report to the Countess Olonetz, or else to myself, any circumstance which may transpire to excite in your mind the suspicion that these women—I mean Lady Langport and her daughter Mildred—are at any time seeking to correspond with the Princess or her imperial father."

"I repeat, my lord," answered Ethel, "that in all respects will I do my duty according to my ability and my conscience."

The Count looked at Ethel for a moment, as if he did not precisely comprehend in what sense she used the term "conscience:" for it assuredly is not a word that is to be found in the dictionary of Russian diplomacy. However, he seemed satisfied by the look of artless sincerity which Ethel's countenance wore; and he proceeded to explain what her pecuniary remuneration would be, mentioning a sum the liberality of which filled her with amazement.

"I think," he said, "if I recollect right—you have already mentioned the name of Lady Langport to the Princess? You told her with whom you were living—"

"I may have done so," responded Ethel, deliberately with herself; "but I am not quite sure."

"At all events, the name *must* be mentioned," said the Count, "because it is absolutely necessary I should inform the Grand Duke under whose care you have lately been dwelling. The name of Lady Langport need not therefore be kept a secret:—all you must be especially cautious about is to avoid letting drop a syllable which may establish the slightest connexion between herself and Mildred."

"Rest assured, my lord, that I shall be cautious," answered Ethel.

"I think we have now nothing more to discuss," said the Count. "The Duke and his daughter have gone out with the Countess for an airing in the carriage—or else you might have the honour of an interview. To-morrow morning you shall receive another letter from me, communicating the result of the report which I shall presently make to his Imperial Highness; and as I have no doubt the issue will be favourable, I shall let you know at what hour you may come to take up your abode with the Princess Roxana."

Ethel rose to take her departure: but she hesitated for a moment—and then she said, "Lady Langport will naturally ask whither I am going and where I have been fortunate enough to obtain a new situation. What am I to tell her?"

"Ah, my dear young lady," exclaimed Olonetz, "I must leave you to settle that matter for yourself. Make some excuse. Pretext and evasion are venial under certain circumstances. Your own good sense must show you how very inconvenient it would be for Lady Langport and Mildred to

learn that *you* of all persons were about to become the companion—the associate—I may even say the friend of the Princess. They might endeavour to make you the private means of communication between themselves and the Princess—"

"Oh, my lord! believe me, Lady Langport is incapable of such gross impropriety!"

"Hem!" said the Count drily. "I confess I have no faith in the probity of a woman who is in herself a living counterfeit, and who has made her own existence one vast stupendous lie. Moreover, there is Mildred herself, concerning whose utter want of principle and inordinate ambition there is no doubt."

"Well, my lord," said Ethel, "I must be guided by your superior judgment and follow your prudential suggestions."

Then, with renewed expressions of gratitude for the "kind and generous interest" (as she expressed it) which the Russian Plenipotentiary had shown in her behalf, Ethel took her departure.

So soon as she was gone, Count Olonetz repaired to his own private cabinet, and opened an iron safe, the key of which was suspended to a thin but strong gold chain which he wore inside the bosom of his shirt. He drew forth a book with black covers and a red back. It was not a printed book: it was half filled with entries made in manuscript, some with black ink and some with red. It was now with black ink that Count Olonetz made the following entry:—

"MEMORANDUM. — Ethel Trevor, English-woman, to be placed as spy on the proceedings of Grand Duke and Roxana. Ethel's character—unsophisticated, artless, frank, and unsuspecting. Secrets may easily be wormed out of her. Circumstances have rendered it more than ever necessary to take precautions against ambitious designs in a certain quarter. Not only is there now Mildred, the discarded wife and the mother;—but there is also Lady Langport the grandmother of the Princess, who might perhaps take it into her head to reveal herself to her imperial granddaughter and seek to lead her into a correspondence. Ethel Trevor can no doubt be made use of as a spy without herself suspecting that she is serving such a purpose. One circumstance is especially useful. Mildred and Lady Langport are to remain in ignorance that Ethel Trevor is in this particular situation; so that if they endeavour to initiate a secret correspondence with the Princess, they will be unaware of the certainty of their letters being intercepted through the recognition of the handwriting."

Having finished the Memorandum, Count Olonetz restored the book to the safe, which he carefully locked.

But what was the use of that book? the reader may possibly ask. It could not serve for the mere purpose of registering matters which the astute Count could with the most perfect accuracy carry in his memory. No: but it was in case he should die, that the hints, views, and designs therein recorded might be rendered available for the information of other instruments of the Russian system who might succeed him.

Between four and five o'clock in the afternoon, the Grand Duke and his daughter returned from their ride with the Countess Olonetz; and the

Count then sought an interview with the Imperial Prince, which he quickly obtained—and they were now alone together.

"I have seen this Mrs. Trevor, may it please your Imperial Highness," said Count Olonetz; "and I trust that everything is arranged to your satisfaction."

"Arranged already?" ejaculated the Grand Duke, with some little degree of surprise.

"Yes, my lord," responded the Count. "I believe that I am not in the habit of allowing any delay to interfere with the execution of your Highness's good will and pleasure."

"I am glad for my daughter's sake," said the Grand Duke, "for she has set her mind upon this arrangement. Besides, I myself should be glad for her to have some one to keep up her knowledge of the English language, and instruct her in the history and literature of the nations of Western Europe. All these tasks Mrs. Trevor is doubtless well able to fulfil?"

"I have no doubt of it, your Imperial Highness," answered Count Olonetz.

"Then I presume you have made inquiries concerning her?"

"I have," responded Olonetz; "and the results are completely satisfactory."

"Good," said the Grand Duke: and then, after a pause, he inquired with a sort of half listless indifferent air, "And of whom may you have made these inquiries?"

"Mrs. Trevor is now dwelling with a certain Lady Langport," replied Count Olonetz, "the widow of a diplomatist of high rank—a very respectable woman—"

"And you have seen Lady Langport?"

"Yes, your Imperial Highness! I have seen her—Certainly."

"Ah, well," said the Grand Duke: "I am glad that the business is settled. When is Mrs. Trevor coming?"

"Now that I have received the assent of your Imperial Highness to the arrangement which I have made," replied Olonetz, "I shall write to Mrs. Trevor and tell her that she may enter upon her duties to-morrow."

"Yes—let it be so," remarked the Imperial Prince: and as he sauntered out of the room where this interview took place, he had the air of one who was perfectly satisfied with a particular arrangement, and neither craved farther explanation nor scrutiny with regard to its details.

But a few minutes after he separated from Count Olonetz, the Grand Duke proceeded to the drawing-room, and for a few seconds turned over the leaves of a *Court Guide* which lay upon the table.

But let us now follow in the footsteps of Ethel, who, on taking her departure from the mansion of Count Olonetz in Grosvenor Square, entered a cab and at once drove back to Hendon Court. It was now past four o'clock in the afternoon; and Ethel at once ascended to her chamber, to change her toilet as well as to devote a little while to her beloved boy Alfred, and also to make up her mind in respect to the answer she should give when questioned by Lady Langport in reference to her prospects. Her services were not called into requisition by her ladyship: the door between the chamber and the dressing-room remained locked; and there were no sounds on the other side to in-

dicate that Lady Langport was there to make the wonted evening change in her own toilet.

A few minutes before the usual dinner-hour, Ethel descended to the drawing-room; and there she found Lady Langport reclining upon a sofa, and in the same dress—a morning costume—which she had worn on leaving her chamber. Her ladyship at once observed the expression of surprise which swept over Ethel's features; and comprehending its meaning, she hastened to say, "It is all my own doing, Ethel! Mildred offered to assist me in my evening toilet, as you have been wont to do—but I did not feel equal to the task. The truth is, I am not in good spirits—and I preferred remaining here quiet until dinner-time. Besides," added her ladyship slowly, and as if she were rather musing with herself than intending the observation for Ethel's ears, "I must not take up too much of my dear Mildred's time."

"Ah!" thought Ethel to herself, as she gave a compassionating sigh, "this last reason is the truth—and the poor lady is afraid of trying the patience of her daughter!"

At this moment Mildred made her appearance; and Ethel could not repress a start of surprise on beholding her. She was dressed as if for a ball or some brilliant assemblage: her costume was alike of the most elegant and costly description, evidencing the taste and artistic skill of some fashionable French *modiste* at the West End. A beautiful wreath of artificial flowers circled Mildred's head; and her hair was arranged with the most scrupulous attention. Bracelets embellished her bare arms: she carried a fan in her hand—and she entered the drawing-room with a certain affected coquetish air, as if she was striving to produce an impression upon a numerous assemblage of people.

Lady Langport's first feeling, on thus beholding her daughter in her evening toilet, was one of admiration; for she forgot at the instant how inconsistent and likewise how extravagant it was for her to don such expensive finery when there was no company present to be entertained. To Ethel's mind there was something exceedingly ludicrous in this display on Mildred's part; and the young lady could not help thinking to herself that the toilet of the mother must now be assuredly sacrificed to that of the daughter.

"Well, what think you of this dress?" asked Mildred, glancing at herself in the mirror.

"It becomes you admirably," responded Lady Langport. "But I presume you have only put it on just to try it, and to ask our opinion how it fits?"

"Oh, indeed, I am dressed for the evening!" ejaculated Mildred. "You have numbers of fashionable acquaintances,—and therefore no one can tell who may happen to drop in. I intend to make it a rule to dress in a manner that shall be creditable to the house—and—and afford you pleasure," she added, lowering her voice to a whisper and assuming a conciliatory look of affection as she bent down towards her mother.

Lady Langport smiled. She felt that she did indeed require the solace of all the loving attention which her daughter could possibly bestow upon her!

"Ah, I told you, Ethel," said Mildred, now turning gaily and triumphantly towards the

young lady, "that I would set my milliners to work day and night until they accomplished the task. Such beautiful things as they just now sent me home! But when did you return, Ethel?"

"About an hour and a-half ago."

"If I had known that you were going into London, we would have had the carriage and I would have gone with you," pursued Mildred, who now chose to be very affable to Ethel, as well as loving towards her mother.

"You have not told us yet, Ethel," said Lady Langport, "what you have done?—for you know, my dear girl, that I am most anxious on your account—"

"I think—yes, I think," said Ethel, "that I shall take my leave of you to-morrow. Indeed, I am almost sure."

"Ah!" said Mildred; "I wish you all happiness!" and she could scarcely conceal the delight she experienced at thus finding that one whom she regarded as a foe, was about to retire from the scene.

"May I hope," said Lady Langport,—"*may I hope, Ethel,*" she repeated, hesitatingly and tremulously, "that the change you are about to make is one that promises well—satisfactorily—for you—"

She could say no more: her voice was choked in a sob which she could not possibly repress.

"Perhaps Ethel would rather not be questioned at present," said Mildred, who saw that the subject was a sore one for her mother.

Fortunately the matter was cut short by the entrance of the footman, to announce that dinner was served; and the three descended to the dining-room. But little was said during the repast. Lady Langport was visibly in low spirits; Ethel was thoughtful on many things; and Mildred was afraid of appearing too gay, lest she should unmask herself to her mother and betray all the heartless hypocrisy of her conduct in respect to Ethel.

Dinner was over—dessert was disposed of—and the ladies had ascended to the drawing-room to partake of coffee, when a vehicle of some kind drove up to the front of Hendon Court. In two or three minutes the footman entered the drawing-room, and addressing his mistress, said, "If you please, my lady, a gentleman has called and begs a moment's conversation."

"Did you ask him to walk up?" inquired Lady Langport.

The footman replied in the affirmative,—adding, "But the gentleman declined, as he said that he should not detain your ladyship more than a few moments. I showed him into the breakfast parlour."

"But his card? his name?" said the mistress of the house.

"He said it was useless to give his name, as he was personally unacquainted with your ladyship."

"He is a stranger, then?"

"And looks like a foreigner, my lady. He wears a moustache—"

Ethel started—for the idea of Count Mandeville struck her; and she also perceived that the same thought occurred to Mildred.

"Yes—a light moustache; and he is very tall," continued the footman. "He came in a London cab. He speaks quite like a foreigner."

"Go, dear Ethel," said Lady Langport, "and see who this gentleman is. I do not feel well enough. Besides,"—and she glanced at her toilet as if she felt that she was not in fitting evening costume to receive a visitor.

"Oh, I will go," said Mildred. "It is my place, dear *sister*," and she spoke the word emphatically because the footman was in the room.

Mildred accordingly quitted the apartment, and descended the stairs, preparing herself with a dignified carriage of the head and a coquettish bearing of her fan to make an immediate impression upon the stranger, whoever he might be. The footman threw open the breakfast-parlour door: the visitor was examining a beautiful oil painting which hung at the further extremity, and thus his back was towards Mildred as she entered. The door was closed behind her by the footman; and as she advanced, the rustling of her dress made the stranger turn round.

But how sudden was the start that he gave!—and how simultaneous was the galvanic effect produced upon her whose eyes met his own!

"Mildred!" he exclaimed: and then he stood gazing upon her with an expression of countenance not easy to be described.

As for Mildred, no sound escaped her lips; but she staggered towards a chair, on which she sank down, overcome with terror, shame, and other feelings: for he who stood before her was none other than the man who had once loved her so tenderly and devotedly—the father of her child Roxana—the husband from whom she had been long ago divorced—the Imperial Grand Duke!

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE GRAND DUKE AND MILDRED.

WE will pause to explain how it happened that the Russian Grand Duke came to visit Hendon Court. In the first place he had been struck by the comparative readiness with which Count Olonetz had assented to the wish of the Princess that Ethel Trevor should become her companion; because, in the first instance when the matter was suggested and the Grand Duke had with his own lips proposed it to Ethel, Olonetz had thrown cold water upon it. But still further in contrast with his former behaviour on the subject, Olonetz had now appeared to be zealous in hastening the negotiation to a conclusion, by sending for Ethel, instituting inquiries concerning her, ascertaining her accomplishments, and learning enough about her to be enabled to recommend her with confidence—and all this within the space of a very few hours! The Grand Duke knew full well that Count Olonetz was one of the most wily politicians and crafty diplomatists in a sphere where all policy was astute and all diplomacy of the keenest intensity; and he could not help thinking that the Count must be swayed in his present conduct by some ulterior motive apart from the mere desire to afford pleasure to the young Princess. And then again, the Grand Duke knew not how it was that Ethel had in the first instance visited the Russian Embassy, nor for what she had been brought thither on that day when she was first introduced to Roxana.

No explanation on this head had been offered to the Grand Duke; and if he had not asked a question on the point, it was because he fancied that an explanation would be volunteered. Finally, he was resolved that his daughter should be brought up with the strictest principles of rectitude and virtue, and that she should be kept apart from all contaminating influences; so that he was not altogether satisfied with the somewhat hasty and off-hand manner in which Count Olonetz had disposed of the subject of taking references and making inquiries with respect to Ethel Trevor.

From all that we have just said, the reader may perceive that there was sufficient to excite some little misgiving in the mind of the Grand Duke in respect to Count Olonetz's present motives, and likewise to render him desirous of learning something more than he already knew with regard to Ethel. He had looked in the *Court Guide*—he had found the name of Lady Langport as a resident at Hendon Court—and accordingly, after dinner his Imperial Highness had sallied forth from the ambassadorial mansion in Grosvenor Square, had taken his seat in a common hack cab, and had repaired to Hendon Court, little dreaming indeed that on crossing the threshold of that mansion he should find himself in the presence of her whom he had once loved so devotedly and who was his divorced wife!

And there it was that they met! Seventeen years had elapsed since they had last seen each other—seventeen years since the husband was torn away from the wife in the very heart of Siberia! The Grand Duke had lately seen Mildred's portrait,—that portrait which was in the possession of his daughter Roxana. It had been taken when Mildred was in all the bloom and glory of her beauty; and though the image of her who had once been so much loved could never have passed out of the Prince's mind, yet the impression had been revived, so to speak, and restored to all its pristine clearness by the sight of that portrait. Thus the idea which the Grand Duke had of Mildred, naturally was as she had appeared seventeen years back in Siberia ere he was so rudely separated from her. But since that time, as years had passed away, he had often thought to himself that Mildred was getting older and older—that she must therefore be changing in appearance: and he had often caught himself wondering how much was likely to be left of that superb beauty which had at the outset so ensnared his heart.

And now he beheld her before him! And how looked she? He was amazed to perceive at the first glance how handsome she still was—how well preserved all her charms! Let it be borne in mind, too, that her grand beauty received every advantage from the exquisite toilet in which she appeared, and which it would almost seem as if some presentiment had made her embellish herself wherewith as if for such an occasion as this. The Grand Duke was astonished. Instead of time, and care, and wandering, and penury, and dissipation, having marred all the beauty of that face, spoil the contours of that form, and stamped the whole being with every evidence and sign of premature old age, those features conserved all the perfection of their outline—there was not a wrinkle upon the brow—nor had the eyes lost their lustre, nor the lips their redness, nor the teeth their ivory

purity. No!—all those charms were still there, the same as characterizing the Mildred of his imagination,—differing only in their association with a womanhood of riper years! Yes—there they were, those charms so well preserved that any one might have in a moment recognised in her the original of the portrait! There also was the rich symmetry of the shape, outlined as if still with all the freshness and firmness of youth:—there also was the luxuriance of the rich brown hair!

It is true that Mildred had shrunk back from the gaze of the Grand Duke,—true also that she had tottered to a chair, on which she had sunk down overwhelmed by feelings which the reader may easily comprehend, and which despite all her hardihood and the audacious readiness of her self-possession, she could not immediately control. But chiefly it was terror that seized upon her; for the sudden thought flashed to her mind that it was an indignant ex-husband who had come as a harbinger of some terrible fate—perhaps exile for a third time to the horrible wilds of Siberia! But perceiving that it was a sense of amazement with which the Grand Duke was smitten—and therefore speedily comprehending that he was as much surprised at the encounter as she herself was—she took courage; and with a characteristic promptitude of purpose she resolved to be guided by circumstances in whatsoever discourse might now ensue—not perhaps without the hope that something might yet transpire to her own advantage.

Rising from her seat, she stood with an air of mingled suspense and meekness, anxiety and submission, in the presence of the Prince. Her look, her attitude, her entire bearing were suddenly chosen and adopted with all the skilfulness of a cunning woman who held herself prepared for any emergency or requirement—to sink down as a suppliant if she found her cause weak, or to hold herself up as the wronged and outraged woman if she should happen to find the tide of circumstances flowing in her favour.

Two or three minutes elapsed ere a word was spoken,—two or three minutes, which may seem a ridiculously short space in the ordinary affairs of life, but which constitute a long pause when every second is characterized by a hurricane of conflicting thoughts—when every moment is marked by the conjuring-up of countless recollections of the Past! And therefore this pause seemed a long one now; and it afforded Mildred leisure to recover her self-possession, and to balance her mental equilibrium firmly as if for the encounter of a crisis wherein all depended upon the power of intellect that she might display.

"Mildred," said the Grand Duke, at length breaking the long silence, "I little thought that it was destined for us to meet again in this world."

"Nor I," she responded, purposely adopting a low tone in order that no particular interpretation might be put upon the emotion it displayed.

"I know not whether it be a good angel or a demon of evil that has now brought us thus together," continued the Grand Duke, who endeavoured to appear severe and cold, but who could not repress the tremulousness of his accents. "If it be a good angel it must have been with a heavenly meaning for us to meet once again on

the earth, that I might assure you of my pardon for the past. But if it were an evil demon, throwing me thus in your way with the hope that I should overwhelm you with reproachings and upbraidings, that hope shall be disappointed."

Mildred remained silent, and seemed to be deeply affected. She appeared as if the power of utterance were choked with sobs which she was vainly endeavouring to stifle; and the Duke mechanically advanced a pace nearer to her.

"No," he said, "I will not reproach you—for I cannot forget that it was I who first seduced you from the path of virtue!—it was I who first betrayed your virgin chastity in St. Petersburg ere I made you my wife in Tobolsk! Yes, Mildred, your's has indeed been a sad fate; and I feel—Oh! I feel that in your heart you must with bitterness assign all your sufferings and calamities unto your connexion with me! But if you have suffered much, I also have suffered, Mildred! The fatal Past has projected its sombre shadow over my soul in the Present; and there that gloom will still hang for the Future of my existence. My love, then, of other times has not been fatal to *you* alone—but has shed its darkness likewise over myself!"

Mildred sank upon a chair, and the tears were now trickling down her cheeks,—tears that were not altogether forced, for there was something in the looks and accents of the Prince which would have touched a heart of flint,—the strong man who strove at the outset to be severe and cold, melting beneath the irresistible influences which the Past had left hanging over him!

"You may suppose, Mildred," he continued, "that I have heard of you from time to time."

"Yes: doubtless my enemies," said Mildred bitterly, "have failed not to prejudice you to the very uttermost against me."

"That your misdeeds, Mildred, have not been palliated by those who reported them to me, is probable enough. But, alas! even apart from such exaggeration, they have been sufficient to shock my mind, and make my soul revolt against the idea that she of whom I thus heard was the Mildred that I had once loved, esteemed, and admired!"

"My misdeeds?" she said, now venturing upon a still bolder experiment than before: and she gave a sudden start and sent a glance of indignation flashing from her eyes.

"Did I use a term that was too strong, Mildred," asked the Grand Duke, "when I spoke of your misdeeds?"—and then he added with that almost overwhelming sternness—so fierce, so savage—to which only a member of the Imperial Family of Romanoff could give full effect, "I should have called them profligacies and crimes if I had not just now promised that I would not reproach or upbraid you."

"Name them! name them!" cried Mildred, determined to play the neck-or-nothing game of ascertaining how many of her antecedents were known to the Grand Duke, so that she might see if there were a possibility of exculpating herself in his eyes. For with all a woman's tact she had not failed to perceive that there was yet a lingering tenderness in his heart for the name of Mildred, and that her beauty, preserved to a degree utterly beyond his expectation, had likewise produced its effect upon his mind.

"Name them?" he said. "Ah, Mildred! of what use is it to recapitulate those incidents which cannot fail to be vividly present to your own memory? If I thought—Oh! if for a moment I thought—But no! it is impossible!"

"What is impossible?" she demanded vehemently.

The Grand Duke did not immediately answer: but bending upon her a look of mournfullest compassion, his eyes spoke his meaning ere his lips shaped it in words when he at length said, "Impossible, Mildred, that you can be innocent!"

"If you mean," she said, "that I have been a wanderer and an outcast over the earth—that I have suffered persecutions more numerous and bitter than any other living female could possibly know—if you mean that I have been hunted from land to land by the bloodhounds of your Government—driven to seek a refuge in all climes, but suffered to settle myself down in none—condemned to experience penury the most horrible, destitution the most hideous—then dragged back into exile amidst the eternal winters of Siberia—again effecting my escape—encountering perils which if written in a book would be treated only as the ravings of madness or the impossibilities of romance,—if you mean that the love with which you once honoured me has proved the bane of my existence, and has been to me as a curse, while to all other women love becomes a blessing,—if this is what you mean, Oh! then I have been very guilty! For if suffering be sin, and misery be vice, and unhappiness be crime, then may you with justice brand me as the most monstrous criminal of the age!"

There was a fearful eloquence—a terrible vehemence in the language that thus flowed from Mildred's lips: but though all the looks and gestures which accompanied it seemed to corroborate its truth, it only produced a certain effect upon the Grand Duke—it did not convince him. He shook his head mournfully: he knew how much she had suffered—he could even make allowance for crimes which had arisen, so to speak, out of those sufferings—and he did not wish to wound her feelings unnecessarily by arguing the subject.

"And if," she continued, following up the partial advantage which she saw that she had already gained,—“if you mean that I cannot possibly be innocent because I have been proscribed—that I must be guilty because Russian policy has found it expedient that I should be so regarded,—and if my criminality must be judged by the extent of Russian malignity, rancour, and vindictive hate, carried even to the extreme of rearing my daughter in the belief of my death, so that she may not even be allowed to speak of her poor mother,—Oh! if all these circumstances render me a criminal instead of a victim, *then* you are right to accuse me! right also to declare that my innocence can be never proved!"

"No one denies that you have suffered much, Mildred," said the Grand Duke. "God knows that you have!—and well and truly have you said that my love has been a curse to you! But still there is the line to be drawn between your calamities and your misdeeds. Stop! do not interrupt me. I know that I have but little right to reproach you. The stern decree of my imperial father—who is likewise as much to me an imperial

master as he is to the veriest serf in his dominions—dissolved our marriage—aye, broke with a brutal and impious violence the bond which religion's sacred rite had established between us. Well then, you became free. But, Oh, my God! that you should have ceased to be my wife in heart!—that you should have forgotten the duties which love itself imposed!—yes, those duties which were likewise strengthened by the fact that you were the mother of my child! For Oh! I swear to you, Mildred, that though the decree of divorce went forth, yet in my heart did I remain your husband! In heaven I registered a vow that I would never marry another—and I buoyed myself with the hope that the time might come when circumstances might alter, and that our hands might yet be re-united. But then came the terrible tidings that you had fled—”

“Good heavens!” cried Mildred, as if with an air of mingled affliction and astonishment; “would you have had me remain in that horrible exile? why do you accuse me because I fled?”

“Woman,” said the Grand Duke, again renewing that air of fierce sternness to which we have above alluded; “I blame you not because you fled—but because it was in the company of a paramour!”

“Ah!” ejaculated Mildred: “my enemies have dared say *that*? But yes—it was natural! The opportunity was too good to be lost by my persecutors!”

“Do you deny it? dare you deny it?”—and now the Grand Duke strode another pace towards Mildred as if with threatening purpose.

She saw—or at least hoped that this might be made the crisis of the game that she was playing; and fortified with all her hardihood, but giving to it the appearance of a woman's natural indignation, she exclaimed, “Yes, I dare deny it!—and here will I fearlessly proclaim that Ivan Zadonski was one of the noblest and the most magnanimous of men! Entertaining for me a chivalrous compassion, he undertook to ensure my escape from an exile that my persecutors meant to be eternal; and as delicate in his attentions as he was faithful in his friendly devotion, he never for a moment sought my society or addressed a syllable unto me, except when in the sanctioning presence of the matron who accompanied me.”

“What!” ejaculated the Grand Duke: “you were accompanied by a female?”

“Assuredly,” answered Mildred, opening her eyes wide as if in astonishment at the question. “But, Oh! I understand, I understand!” she cried, as if a sudden light had burst in upon her mind. “My enemies suppressed that fact!”

“Good God, if it were true!” muttered the Prince, averting his countenance and covering it with his hand: but the next instant turning towards Mildred, he said with the coldness of revived suspicion, “Even if that young aide-de-camp was not your paramour, and even if on this particular point you may be enabled to exculpate yourself,—yet what of your behaviour in Australia and subsequently in India? Ah, Mildred! I have read with my own eyes the reports which were addressed to the Government by our agent in Sydney, likewise by our Consul at Bombay; and they spoke of you as leading the most abandoned and profligate of lives—especially with an

Englishman—I forget his name at this moment—it was the same who betrayed you in India—”

“The villain, from whose false lips,” cried Mildred vehemently, “went forth all the calumnies that were embodied in the reports to which you have alluded! But, Oh! wherefore do I attempt to justify myself? Ought I not to shudder at the consequences? Leave me—for God's sake leave me! Yea, yes!—better deem me guilty!—better avoid and hate me as for years you have done! Fool, fool that I was to suffer the natural pride of woman to get the better of me for a moment!”

“What on earth do you mean, Mildred?” asked the Grand Duke, startled and bewildered by this vehement outburst of passionate exclamation flowing in a channel so different from that in which the previous topics had been progressing.

“I mean,” she exclaimed, “that if by any chance—But no, no! do not question me! Go—leave me! Why did you come here?”

“Mildred, I insist upon an explanation,” said the Grand Duke. “I am just and upright—and I swear that if I have been deceived by any misrepresentations concerning you—”

“Oh, it is this that I dread! For God's sake leave me!” she cried, now appearing to be in an agony of terror.

“Again I ask what do you mean? Tell me—I beseech you, tell me!”—and the Prince mechanically seized Mildred by the hand.

“Save me! save me!” she murmured, sinking upon her knees at his feet; and then as a perfect agony was still expressed upon her features, she cried, “Do not let them drag me away and carry me off again to Siberia!”

“Why should you fear this, Mildred?” asked the Grand Duke.

“Oh, because if by any chance,” she responded, “I should be enabled to make an impression on your mind in reference to all the foul charges that have been levelled against me, you will go and institute inquiries—you will tell Count Olonetz that we have met—and my God! I would sooner die—Oh, I would sooner die than be dragged back into that awful region from which I have twice escaped!”

“By heaven,” exclaimed the Grand Duke, moved by this picture of mingled grief and terror which looked all so completely natural, “I would not take a single step, Mildred, that should harm a hair of your head! No!—my God, no! Poor creature! you have already suffered too much; even if you have been guilty!”—and with an irresistible impulse he passed his hand caressingly over her luxuriant hair as she still knelt at his feet. “But if innocent—Oh! if innocent, whole years of happiness would not repay you for the sorrows through which you have passed! Rise, Mildred—rise!”

He raised her up; and then suddenly turning away, paced to and fro in the apartment, utterly bewildered how to act—a pray to the most painful agitation, and even excruciating excitement. But suddenly stopping short in front of Mildred, he said abruptly, “How came you to voyage with that Englishman from Sydney to Bombay, unless he were your paramour?”

“The wretch followed me—I did not voyage with him of my own accord. He was a spy and



an agent in the employ of the Russian authorities. He persecuted me with his addresses at Sydney—I repulsed him. He threatened, me—and by his menaces he revealed himself in his true character, for he proclaimed what he had in his power to do unless I submitted to his will. I fled from Sydney to escape the importunities and the perils which environed me. But behold! he was in the same ship; and at Bombay 'twas the same as at Sydney—aye, worse! for there the villain's treachery was crowned by my betrayal into the hands of the Russian consul—and my God! I was borne back to Siberia!"

"And what has become of that Englishman?" demanded the Grand Duke.

"I do not know," replied Mildred, without the least hesitation; for she saw the answer was a safe one.

Again did the Grand Duke turn and pace the apartment: again was he most cruelly bewildered
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how to act. Mildred's tale might be true—and the grossest, the foulest, the most abominable calumnies might have been uttered against her; for the Prince knew how unscrupulous was the policy and how utterly unprincipled the diplomacy of the nation to which he belonged. On the other hand Mildred's tale might be false; for the Grand Duke bore in mind all that he had read in the reports of the Russian agents of the artfulness as well as profligacy of her character, her speciousness, her plausibility, and her powers of dissimulation. On the one hand his heart yearned to do justice to an injured woman, if injured she really were: but on the other hand he recoiled from the idea of being duped and deceived by a hypocritical, crafty, designing wanton. And for so many long years had he been accustomed to look upon her as guilty, that it was difficult for him to deem her innocent all in a moment!

"How is it that I find you here, Mildred?" he

demanded, after a long pause; and now he again suddenly stopped short and confronted her.

"Surely the reason which brought you hither," she said, "must prove suggestive—"

"Answer me!" he interrupted her: "why do I find you at Hendon Court?"

"If you knew in what relation Lady Langport stands towards me—"

"Well, Lady Langport—yes, it is she whom I came to visit. What is she to you?"

Mildred had already revolved in her mind the answer she should give, for she saw at a glance that it would be to her advantage to prove how respectably and honourably she was living. She therefore said, "Lady Langport is my mother."

"What! your mother?"—and the Grand Duke looked fiercely indignant as if repelling a lie that was being told him.

"I repeat, my mother," said Mildred, firmly yet mildly.

"Your mother? Why, she perished in the Neva many long years ago!"

"The Russian authorities said so," rejoined Mildred: and then she added significantly, "But they do not always tell the truth—as I know to my cost."

"But this is strange!"

"It is nevertheless true. Lady Langport is my mother. Ask her. She will not deny it—and then perhaps you will believe me; for Oh! you believe me not now!"

"And how long have you known that this mother of your's exists?"

"Only a few days. But why—"

"Stop!" interjected the Grand Duke: "do not question me yet—You know a certain Ethel Trevor?"

"Oh, to be sure," cried Mildred. "She lives here."

"Yes—as a sort of companion or friend of Lady Langport?—is it not so?"

"Precisely," answered Mildred.

"And therefore she is perfectly respectable—a gentlewoman by birth and education?"

"Oh, in all respects!" rejoined Mildred, determined to invest everything belonging to her mother's household with the most roseate tint.

"And now answer me, Mildred," observed the Grand Duke. "Has Ethel Trevor spoken to you of me—and—of—of—Roxana?"

"Yes," replied Mildred, thinking it safer to tell the truth, the more so as she felt convinced that Count Olonetz must have kept the Prince in the dark with regard to many important details, even if not the whole series of recent circumstances.

"Do you know," was the illustrious Russian's next question, "what business Ethel Trevor could have had to transact the other day with Count Olonetz?"

"Oh, yes," answered Mildred, with an air of the most ingenuous candour. "Count Olonetz somehow or another discovered that Lady Langport was my mother; and Ethel Trevor was made the means of communicating the circumstance to me."

"Ah!" said the Grand Duke: "now I understand!"—for indeed the matter thus far became clear and apparent enough. "Mildred," he said, after a few moments' additional reflection, "how is it possible that you can be ignorant of the motive which brought me hither this evening?"

"I cannot even now divine it," said Mildred,—"unless it be that you wish to see this Ethel Trevor of whom you have been speaking? But I ought to tell you that she is not going to remain here—she departs to-morrow—she leaves of her own accord—"

"Well?" said the Grand Duke, as if asking for the remainder of the explanation.

"She has got another place somewhere," continued Mildred.

"And do you not know where?" inquired the Grand Duke.

"No—indeed I do not," rejoined Mildred. "Ethel is naturally a reserved and close person—"

"No matter!" interjected the Prince, who thought to himself that another mystery had just arisen which must be cleared up. "Now, Mildred," he went on to demand, "is it possible that my visit hither can remain a secret—at least for the present—from Lady Langport and Ethel Trevor?"

"Yes—it can be kept a secret," responded Mildred. "They are in the drawing-room up-stairs—Doubtless they wonder what detains me so long: but—"

"Can you not devise some pretext—some excuse?—pretend that it was an acquaintance—"

"If you wish it—if you command it," said Mildred, with an air as if it were only a reluctant assent that she gave to the utterance of a falsehood. "I must manage by some means—"

"Yes—this must be done," said the Grand Duke. "I have the most cogent reasons for the course which I am enjoining. —Mildred," he continued, after a brief pause, during which he contemplated her with the most earnest attention, "you shall soon hear from me—or else we shall meet again. Be cautious—be circumspect—and fear not that you will be compromised through me."

For a moment she fancied that he was about to take her hand: indeed he appeared to make a gesture to that effect; but he doubtless thought better of it—he perhaps feared to commit himself too much, at the present uncertain juncture of affairs—and it was with some degree of abruptness that he quitted the room. Almost immediately afterwards Mildred heard the vehicle drive away from the front door, and all that had just passed wore the aspect of a dream.

But no—it was not a dream! He who was once her husband—he who was the father of her child—he who years back in the depths of Siberia had plighted his vows to her at the holy altar—had just now been in her presence! As she rapidly reviewed everything which had passed between them, she saw full well that she had *moved* him, even if she had not *convinced* him. A wild hope was now agitating in her brain: a splendid vision seemed to be passing before her: every pulse thrilled with the fervid fire of this ambition that had been so suddenly rekindled within her. Was it possible that the dream might be fulfilled—that the hope which was expanding in her bosom would be gratified? In short, was it within the range of probability that the Grand Duke should become impressed with the conviction of her innocence—that he should insist upon restoring a mother to a beloved daughter—that he might succeed in overcoming all difficulties, even

to the scruples of the Czar himself—and that instead of persecution and Siberian terrors, there should be a re-marriage, happiness, and triumph? Was all this probable? Common sense might have told Mildred that it was barely so: but still it was within the range of possibility; and wild ambitious hope, tinting everything at the moment with its roseate hne, made all that was acknowledged to be *possible* seem actually *probable*.

Settling her looks into their wonted aspect, Mildred returned to the drawing-room, where she found her mother labouring under so much nervous uneasiness on her account as to have been already deliberating with Ethel by what means they could ascertain who the stranger was that held Mildred in so long a parley.

"You did wrong to frighten yourself," said Mildred, with an easy careless air as if nothing extraordinary had actually taken place: "you might have supposed that I was voluntarily remaining to converse with the gentleman who called."

"Yes—I daresay I was foolish," interjected Lady Langport; "but still I was uneasy on your account. The idea of some Russian treachery was uppermost in my mind—"

"Let us hope there is no fear of that," said Mildred: and then, without looking at Ethel, but as if merely following up the train of her thoughts in quite a natural manner, she added, "Rest assured I shall never do anything that will again draw down upon me the Russian displeasure."

"God forbid!" rejoined Lady Langport with solemn emphasis. "But who was your visitor?"

"Oh, a gentleman whom I originally became acquainted with abroad," replied Mildred, without the slightest change of countenance or confusion. "I met him yesterday while I was shopping in London; and I mentioned where I was living, without either the thought or the wish that he should pay me a visit. But he came, apologizing for the lateness of the hour on the ground that he is about to leave England to-morrow, and he wished to know if he could be of any service to me abroad. He drew me into a discourse concerning mutual acquaintances—and thus the time passed away."

"But in the first instance he inquired for me?" said Lady Langport.

"True," responded Mildred. "That was an act of courtesy on his part, not merely towards yourself as the mistress of the house, but likewise towards me, that it might not for an instant appear as if he had come by my particular invitation."

Lady Langport was perfectly satisfied by this explanation: but Ethel thought there was something strange in it:—indeed, the suspicion was floating in her mind that Mildred was not altogether telling the exact truth. But she said nothing; and very shortly afterwards Lady Langport intimated her intention of retiring to rest.

Ethel glanced at Mildred to ascertain whether her services would be required that evening, or whether they had been already finally dispensed with.

"I understand your goodness of heart, my dear Ethel," the hypocritical Mildred hastened to whisper; "but I will perform all the duties which I have undertaken."

"Good night, my dear Ethel," said Lady Lang-

port, pressing the young lady's hand fervidly: and then she added in a voice full of emotion, "I repeat, my sweet friend, that whithersoever you go, my best wishes will attend you."

"Good night, dear Ethel," said Mildred; "and remember that henceforth the sincerest friendship is to exist between us, no matter how far we may be separated:"—and it was with an assumed warmth that the hypocritical creature wrung Ethel's hand.

A few minutes afterwards Ethel was in her chamber, straining her little Alfred to her bosom and with a sigh thinking of the beloved boy's equally beloved father. It was some time before slumber visited her eyes; for she had many things to serve as topics for reflection—many subjects that crowded in her mind.

The morning brought the promised letter from Count Olonetz, informing her that the arrangement entered into on the preceding day had received the approbation of his Imperial Highness the Grand Duke, and that Mrs. Trevor might with the least possible delay repair to her new destination.

On descending to the breakfast-parlour, she found Mildred already there, and evidently prepared to give her a greeting of the most studied friendliness.

"How is her ladyship?" inquired Ethel.

"She has passed a very bad night, and is now sleeping," responded Mildred. "But do you leave us to-day?"

"Yes: I have received a letter which has decisively fixed my plans. I purposed to leave at about noon; but if in the meantime it would be disturbing her ladyship to bid her farewell—"

"Let me deal candidly with you, my dear Ethel," said Mildred; and the very pretence on her part of dealing with candour only served at once to render Mrs. Trevor all the more suspicious. "Her ladyship," continued Mildred, "has been rendered nervous and agitated by the idea of parting from you: I know that she dreaded the farewell scene; and this circumstance must prove to you how sincere is the friendship which she entertains on your behalf. She desired me to give you this letter. Nay, read it not now," added Mildred, as Ethel was about to break the seal.

Mrs. Trevor hesitated for a moment; but the next instant she decided upon following the request just made—and she secured the letter unopened about her person. She and Mildred then sat down to breakfast; and she perceived that her companion strained every nerve to maintain the most affable demeanour towards her—to overwhelm her with attentions, and to lavish upon her the seeming proofs of friendship. Ethel was nauseated by these demonstrations which she knew to be so hollow and insincere; and speedily rising from the breakfast-table, she retired to her own chamber to make her preparations for departure.

The instant she was alone, she opened the letter which had been presented to her by Mildred, and which was in the handwriting of Lady Langport. It had been written on the preceding night; and her ladyship thereby conveyed her apprehension that she might not in the morning be equal to the task of bidding Ethel farewell. She therefore had recourse to these means of saying everything kind and affectionate; and we may observe that the

letter was indeed penned in the warmest and the most grateful strain. It contained a bank-note for five hundred pounds, which her ladyship entreated Ethel to accept, declaring that naught could possibly afflict her more than to find that this little tribute of affectionate friendship was rejected. There was a postscript, wherein Lady Langport assured Ethel of her conviction that Mildred entertained a sincere friendship towards her—that she (Mildred) deeply regretted any unkind words which might have escaped her lips—and that nothing would afford Lady Langport greater pleasure than to know that Mildred received Ethel's sincere forgiveness and that they parted good friends.

At first Ethel was overwhelmed by the affectionate tone of the letter and by the munificence of the gift which it conveyed: but as the first impression began gradually to pass away, the idea stole into her mind that Mildred had exercised some voice in dictating the letter and in suggesting the pecuniary testimonial. This thought was a painful one; and the generous-minded young lady endeavoured to repel it—but she could not. Then, how should she act? Her good sense told her that her services for barely three weeks at Hendon Court could not be estimated at a tithe of the sum thus presented to her:—but on the other hand might she not regard it as the offering of pure friendship and gratitude on the part of Lady Langport? must it in any sense be considered as a bribe for the maintenance of the tremendous secret which was in her possession in respect to her ladyship? was it likewise to be looked upon as a sop thrown out to appease her for being compelled to make room for Mildred beneath that roof? Ethel felt pained while asking herself these questions. To be brief, however, she determined upon putting the best construction on the whole proceeding, and ascribing the gift to the kindest and purest feelings on Lady Langport's part. We should observe that one circumstance struck her as peculiar; and this was that Lady Langport did not ask in the letter to what new home Ethel was about to remove—nor had Mildred at the breakfast-table exhibited any curiosity on the point. But then it struck Ethel that inasmuch as she herself had volunteered no explanation thereon, the mother and daughter had been restrained by mingled feelings of delicacy and pride from interrogating her on a topic which she seemed resolved to envelope in silence.

She penned a billet of affectionate gratitude to Lady Langport, but as a matter of course forbearing from all allusion to that very topic. Her preparations for departure were now all made: she took leave of the domestics, with whom she left proofs of her generosity; and the moment came for her to bid farewell to Mildred. We will not pause to chronicle all that Mildred said—nor how she overwhelmed Ethel with assurances of everlasting friendship, and with oft repeated hopes that no offence nor provocation on her part would be thenceforth remembered. On this point Ethel replied with a generous fervour; and she issued forth from Hendon Court, followed by the nursemaid bearing little Alfred in her arms, and by a man-servant carrying her boxes.

“Up to the very last,” she thought to herself, “no question has been put to me with regard to my new destination. The carriage was offered,

and no comment was made when I declined it. The very mode in which I am leaving the place ought to excite some suspicion that it is with a certain degree of mystery, if not with actual stealthiness, I am removing to my new home!”

The end of the lane was reached; and in a few minutes the omnibus made its appearance. Ethel received the child from the hands of the nursemaid, who was not to accompany her; and she proceeded into London. From the point where the omnibus stopped, a cab bore her to the mansion in Grosvenor Square; and there she was at once introduced to the suite of apartments occupied by the Princess Roxana.

How joyous were the greetings which Ethel received!—with what ingenious enthusiasm did the amiable young Princess welcome her anxiously expected friend!—and with what a gush of girlish delight did she take little Alfred in her arms and kiss and fondle him as lovingly as if it were the child of some near and dear relative whom she was thus for the first time embracing! And with what promptitude had all the preparations for Ethel's reception been made! The services of an English nursemaid were already secured for little Alfred; and they were to occupy a chamber contiguous to Ethel's, so that she might exercise the completest supervision in respect to the care bestowed on her offspring. Her own chamber was in the immediate vicinage of the Princess Roxana's; and a lady's-maid was appointed to attend upon her.

When the Princess and Ethel found themselves alone together—little Alfred having been borne away by his new nurse—the artless Russian girl threw her arms again and again round Ethel's neck, embracing her fondly. Then she produced her portfolio of drawings—and they looked over them together; and they took their turns at the piano and the harp; and then Roxana led Ethel to inspect her suite of apartments.

At length the Princess approached a topic upon which she was evidently desirous to enter, but the thought of which caused a shade to come over her beautiful countenance.

“My dear Ethel,” she said, “you must answer me one question?”

“Speak, dear Princess. What is it that you would ask me?”

“The other day,” continued Roxana, “you remember we were talking of my poor deceased mother—I told you that I would show you her portrait—and then the instant you glanced at it you ejaculated the name of *Mildred* in so singular a manner that it really struck me as if there were a meaning attached to the incident—some deep significancy—”

“My dear Princess,” interrupted Ethel, “had you not previously informed me that your mother's name was *Mildreda* or *Mildred*?”

“To be sure! But still,” continued the beautiful Roxana, fixing her soft limpid blue eyes earnestly upon Ethel,—“but still it struck me as if you ejaculated the name with the vehemence of a sudden recognition—”

“Remember, dear Princess, that at the very instant of which you are speaking the door opened and the appearance of your father threw all your ideas into confusion.”

“Yes,” said Roxana; “and therefore, when

I subsequently strove to gather my recollections, I may have fallen into error with regard to your look and manner when you ejaculated the name of Mildred. Oh! do you remember my poor father's excitement—the haggard and ghastly expression of his countenance as he sank down upon a chair—”

“Let me hope, dear Princess,” interrupted Ethel, “that he did not afterwards chide you when you explained to him—as of course you must have done—how you had for so many years managed to keep secret possession of that portrait?”

“Oh, no, Ethel!—my father was incapable of chiding me for such a thing! He is too just and generous, and too kind! Oh, chide me?—no! And when you were gone he made me sit down upon that ottoman at his feet, and tell him how the portrait had originally come into my possession, and with what emotions I had been wont to contemplate it; and he asked me all I had ever heard whispered round me in reference to my mother. And as I went on telling him candidly and truly all that he sought to know, the tears trickled down his cheeks; and, Oh! I wept bitterly, Ethel; for I could not bear to see my dear father weep—he who has always so much command over himself!”

“And what did he do with the portrait?” inquired Ethel, whose curiosity was deeply interested on this point.

“At first,” replied the Princess, “my father said he would keep it, but that I should enjoy the privilege of seeing it whenever I thought fit. But then I suppose that he beheld so sudden a shade of sadness come over my countenance, and saw that my heart was so ready to burst with affliction, that he took compassion on me, and he bade me keep the portrait which I cherished so tenderly. And then I was so glad, Ethel!—and I embraced my dear father a thousand times, thanking him for his kindness. He charged me to keep the existence of that portrait a secret, as I had hitherto done; and therefore I am as careful as ever in preventing it from falling under the eyes of Count or Countess Olonetz.”

Here we may conclude this chapter, leaving Ethel Trevor comfortably installed in her new home, and felicitously comparing her present prospects with the mode of life which she had led during her short sojourn at Hendon Court.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE BILL OF EXCHANGE.

By the side of a bed in which her father lay sleeping, at the house in Hatton Garden, sat Selina. The medicine bottles upon the toilet-table might have served as a hint that Mr. Casey was an invalid; and it only required a slight glance at his countenances to confirm the surmise. The natural sallowness of his complexion mingled with a ghastly pallor: the hard lines upon his brow, and about the eyes and lips, seemed to be more deeply indented than ever. This was the fourth day since he had been seized with illness,—the fourth day since he had been stricken down in

his study by the discovery of the loss of the papers. And this day of which we are now speaking, was the 31st of May—the one on which the bridal was fixed to take place,—the one whereon he had hoped to behold his daughter Selina enter into the bosom of one of the finest old patrician families in the kingdom! But the usurer was now sleeping in unconsciousness that the day had arrived and was passing without the slightest prospect of his hopes being realized; for after a long interval of feverish wakefulness, he had sunk off into slumber under the influence of a strong opiate which his medical attendant had deemed it necessary to administer;—and this sleep had already lasted several hours.

Selina sat by the side of the couch, with her eyes fixed upon her father's face. Her own countenance was very pale: she sat perfectly motionless—her features were rigid, save ever and anon the quivering of the lips which trembled as if under the influence of some strong emotion that was agitating within.

It was past one o'clock in the afternoon, when Mr. Casey slowly opened his eyes and began to look about him with the vacant air of one who could not altogether collect his thoughts nor comprehend why he was there, nor remember what had happened.

“My dear father, how do you feel now? Oh, tell me how you feel?”—and Selina spoke in the softest and kindest tone—indeed with an affectionate earnestness so deep that if he had been the best and most estimable of fathers, his condition could not possibly have excited a more loving interest on the part of his daughter.

“Is it a dream, Selina?—a dream?”—and the usurer pressed his disengaged hand to his brow. “No, no!” he exclaimed, with a sudden sound that was not exactly the cry, nor yet the howl of a wild beast, but something between the two; “it is not a dream! I recollect it all! What news—what news, Selina? You are silent, girl? Ah! then, am I to understand that the—the—deeds—”

“Compose yourself, dear father—compose yourself, for God's sake!” said Selina, in a low but appealing voice.

“Compose myself?” he fiercely ejaculated. “Malediction! perdition!”—and then still more terrible imprecations burst from his lips.

“My God!” murmured Selina, clasping her hands, frightened and dismayed.

“How long have I slept?” suddenly demanded her father: then, without waiting for a reply, he snatched up his watch, which lay upon a table by the side of his bed; and on seeing what the time was, he cried out with rage and anguish, “Near two o'clock!—and this is the day! What has been done?”

“What would you have had done, dear father,” asked Selina softly and imploringly, “while you are stretched here upon a bed of sickness?”

“What would I have done?” he savagely exclaimed: “I would have had the bridal take place! Has anybody been from the Trent-hams?”

“Lord Trentham has sent to inquire after you—”

“Who told him that I was ill?” demanded Casey sharply.

“How could he help knowing it, dear father,

considering all circumstances?" said Selina. "Mr. Osborne called—of course he was at once told—"

"What! of the loss of the deeds?" interjected the usurer.

"I did not say so, father:"—and now Selina's voice and manner suddenly became cold as if she were offended at the imputation.

"Well, well—I did not mean to be cross with you," said her father; "but allowances must be made for all I have suffered. Has Bulteel been?"

"He called this morning, at eleven."

"And why the deuce did I not see him?"

"You were asleep, father—and Dr. Scott had expressly ordered that you were not to be disturbed."

Casey muttered an imprecation against Dr. Scott—and then inquired when Mr. Bulteel was coming again?

"He said he should call at two o'clock, father."

"Well, it's two now—o'clock upon it. Why the deuce doesn't he come? Oh! everything is combining against me!—losses and disappointments—disappointments and losses! But I will triumph yet. If the Trenthams have done this, they shall suffer for it, or make amends!"

"Oh, my dear father," said Selina, in a voice of mingled reproachfulness and affliction, "can you possibly fancy for a single instant that the Trentham family could be guilty of such a wicked thing as to steal your deeds?"

"I don't know what to think:—how should I?" exclaimed Casey, with reviving irritability. "How am I to account for it? Who could have done it except those that are most interested in the job?—and though I confess I don't see how 'twas done, yet—"

"At all events, dear father," interjected Selina, "you must not jump to the hurried and unjust conclusion that the only way to solve the mystery is to attribute the—the—act to persons who, however great their embarrassments, would scorn the deed."

"Then what on earth am I to think?" demanded Casey. "Must I suppose that my wife or either of my own children would rob me?"

Selina gave a convulsive start, as if she were about to ejaculate something from her lips, when a loud double knock at the front door echoed through the house.

"There's Bulteel—that's his knock!" exclaimed Casey. "Go and bring him up at once."

"Your medicine, dear father," said Selina. "It is two o'clock."

"Perdition take the medicine!—But stay!" added the usurer, more quietly: "as I have got to pay for it I may just as well take it. Not that I think I want it; for this sleep has done me a world of good—I feel quite strong again; and if it wasn't for the recollection of all the accursed things that have happened to me—But let's see Bulteel: he may have some good news."

Mr. Casey took his medicine; and Selina hastened from the room, into which Mr. Bulteel was shortly introduced. He was a short, middle-aged, dark-complexioned person, with restless eyes and a cunning look: he was well dressed, and handsomely embellished with jewellery. We may add that he belonged to the legal profession, and that

his chambers were situated in one of the Inns of Court leading out of Holborn, and therefore at no great distance from Hatton Garden itself.

"What news? what news?" cried Mr. Casey.

"Nothing, either good, bad, or indifferent," responded Bulteel; and then as he sat himself down by the side of the bed, he added, "Nothing, I mean, except the opinion that Gramplin gives of the business."

"Ah! and what does he say?" exclaimed the invalid quickly; for he thought there was something peculiar, if not actually embarrassed in Bulteel's look and manner at the moment.

"You know, Mr. Casey," said this professional gentleman, "that Gramplin is one of the cleverest detectives of the Force—but at the same time he is just as liable to err in opinion as other men. And therefore, if it weren't for this reservation or proviso which I have just set forth, I should think that I was positively and actually insulting you and your family by repeating what the man says—"

"And what does he say?" demanded the usurer petulantly.

Mr. Bulteel gave a short cough; and then he continued thus:—"Mr. Gramplin, the detective, is more blunt and matter-of-fact than delicate and polite. He says that as it is evident there was no burglarious entry into the premises for the purpose of carrying off those deeds, the act must have been accomplished either by one of the regular inmates of the house or else by some one from outside."

"Well, well," interjected Casey, "we know all this. If Gramplin can tell us nothing else—"

"But listen," said Mr. Bulteel: "Gramplin says that if it were a person from outside, he must have had an accomplice inside. Therefore—and it is this part of the business which is so insulting—"

"Never mind! Go on. Gramplin says, therefore—"

"That either you yourself," continued Bulteel, "have put away the deeds for some good reason or another—or else that some member of your family, or one of the servants, must have been an accomplice of the thief from outside."

"And why in the devil's name should I put away and pretend to lose my own documents?" asked Casey, with sneering contempt.

"Hem! My dear sir," rejoined Bulteel, "such things are done—and Gramplin as a man of the world knows it. For instance, if a person is going to become bankrupt—"

"Enough!" interrupted Casey, with angry impatience; "this is ridiculous as applied to myself! As for the disappearance of the deeds, it is impossible to suspect either of the servants; and as for one of the family—"

He paused—reflected—shook his head mysteriously—and then looked very hard at the lawyer.

"Well," said the latter, "what is now uppermost in your mind?"

"No!" cried the invalid abruptly; "I won't think such a thing! She is too good—too loving—too affectionate! But no matter, Bulteel, whether the thief from outside had an accomplice in the house or not,—it is impossible, that this thief could be any other than Launcelot Osborns."

"It certainly looks like it," said the lawyer;

"but of course on this head Gramplin could not pronounce an opinion."

"You will go and get a warrant and arrest him at once," said Casey with a savage sternness in his voice.

"Very good—it shall be done if you wish it. Only bear in mind that if such an extreme measure be adopted, you cover the young man with disgrace: and instead of his being a desirable husband for your daughter, he becomes one whom you would spurn and keep at a distance. And pray remember, my dear Mr. Casey, that a violent policy is not always the best. Look at the case of Sir Abel Kingston. If you had taken my advice and arrested him simply for the debt—"

"He would have gone through the Insolvents' Court and laughed at me," interjected the usurer.

"And as you arrested him for forgery," rejoined Bulteel, "he has gone out of the world and baffled you altogether."

"But in reference to this present business," said Casey impatiently, "I will not be beaten—and I will be revenged! I will carry out my aims—"

"And this is precisely what I want you to do," said the lawyer, "and to which end I am bound to render all my assistance. Why not try gentle measures? The Trenthams are still in your power; and I am much mistaken if you could not in a very short time bring them to their senses. What say you? Shall I put in an execution to the tune of eighteen or twenty thousand pounds? I think I have Lord Trentham's bonds and bills at my office to that amount—"

"Yes—twenty thousand pounds exactly," said the usurer: then after a few moments' reflection, he added, "Let it be so: it is the best course. It need make no noise, and can be speedily hushed up if the Trenthams come to their senses."

"No doubt of it," said Bulteel; "for of course, if Launcelot Osborne has really pilfered these deeds, it can only be for the purpose of extricating his family from your clutches and saving himself from being compelled to marry your daughter. Therefore, if what we are now going to do should bring him to book, your aim will be accomplished—he may keep the deeds he has stolen—"

"Certainly," interjected Casey, "for I had all along intended—and indeed had undertaken—to give them up as Selina's dowry."

"Well then," added Bulteel, rising from his seat, "it will be as broad as it is long. An execution for twenty thousand pounds is no joke in any aristocratic family—particularly in one that is so near the verge of ruin as the Trenthams."

"Besides," added Casey, "you yourself may go with the bailiff to make the seizure, and you can just whisper in the ear of the young scamp Launcelot that there may be such a thing as a criminal prosecution in the background. You may tell him too that affidavits can be made in reference to the lost securities, and then an application can be addressed to the Court of Chancery to put me in the same position as before—"

"Leave the whole business to me," said the lawyer, "and I will do the needful. The seizure shall be made this very afternoon at Trentham House."

Mr. Bulteel thereupon took his departure; and Selina returned to her father's chamber. Mr. Casey said not a word; but he set up in bed, and

looked very hard and very searchingly in his daughter's face. She could not fail to observe that scrutiny: and she met it with a steadiness of look as if she were sustained by the purity of a soul that was conscious of no evil.

"Selina," said the usurer, slowly breaking silence, and riveting his regards even still more keenly and searchingly upon his daughter, "answer me as if you were on your oath before some judge empowered to question you—aye, or as if you were answering unto your Maker!"

"Speak, father," said the young lady, with a cold and steady firmness; "why do you thus solemnly adjure me?"

"He who stole the papers from my office," continued Casey, "must have had an accomplice inside these walls. All the circumstances prove it. My own key must have been purloined for the moment—or the pattern of the lock must have been given for the manufacture of another key. And that it was no ordinary robbery is proved by the fact that nothing else was taken—"

"All these things, father," said Selina quietly, "you have argued before, over and over again."

"But I repeat them now," rejoined the usurer sternly, "because they are to lead to a question which I am about to put to you, and unto which you will reply as solemnly as if you were standing in the presence of your God! None other than Launcelot Osborne—"

"Again that suspicion, father!—nay, more, that imputation!" interjected Selina indignantly.

"Will you swear, then, daughter—will you swear," resumed her father, whose eyes still remained riveted upon her,— "will you swear that you were not the accomplice of Launcelot Osborne in that theft?"

"Father, I swear," she answered, with unchanging countenance and unflinching look.

Still her father's eyes lingered upon her for a few moments; and then, as if his own hard heart experienced a shock at having suspected his daughter of a deed in regard to which he was now convinced of her innocence, he suddenly suffered his whole manner to undergo a change; and smiling as kindly as such a countenance as his could smile, he patted her cheek, saying, "I believe you, Selina—I believe you. Indeed, I never doubted you. Only—only I thought I had better ask the question—"

"And now, father, you are convinced?" said Selina; "and you will not again torture yourself nor degrade me with so dishonouring a suspicion?"

There was at this moment a knock at the chamber door: Selina hastened to see who was there, and she received a letter from the hand of a maid-servant. It was addressed to her father, who immediately opened it and read the contents, which ran as follow:—

"Windmill Street, Haymarket,
May 31, 1847.

"Sir,

"I beg to inform you that I hold the acceptance of your son, Mr. Sylvester Casey, for the sum of one thousand pounds. It is dated the 9th of May, at twenty-one days; and therefore with the three days' grace, it will be due to-morrow. As a matter of course I should have waited to present it for payment in the usual

way of business, if it had not been for a circumstance which is of so extraordinary a character as to induce me to give you this notice that such a bill is in existence with your son's signature. The circumstance I allude to is this—that happening yesterday to meet Mr. Sylvester Casey, with whom I am slightly acquainted, I reminded him that his acceptance was nearly due,—when he turned round upon me and denied ever having signed such a bill at all. Now, as I fairly discounted this bill in the way of business, I shall maintain my own rights, if need be, by the aid of the law; and it is therefore under legal advice that I send you, sir, this notice, in order that you may be prepared to save your son from the consequences of his present dishonourable attempt to evade the payment of his liability.

"I remain, sir,

"Your obedient servant,

"RICHARD PLUCKLEY."

"Here's a fresh trouble!" exclaimed the usurer, when he had finished reading the letter.

"What is it, dear father?" asked Selina hastily.

"Another forgery of that scoundrel Abel Kingston. He has been using your brother's name—for a thousand pounds too!"

"But you are not compelled to pay it, father?"

"No—certainly not; and I don't mean it. But still it may give trouble—law-proceedings and all that sort of thing. Where is Sylvester?"

"He went out just now, when Mr. Bulteel came," answered Selina. "He said he should not return until the evening."

"And he has not been up to ask me how I am!" said the usurer angrily.

"He came up while you slept, father; he would perhaps have waited until Mr. Bulteel took his departure—only he thought that his visit might be a longer one, and Sylvester had some appointment to keep."

"Oh, I daresay," rejoined Casey, ironically. "You are too kind, Selina—you always find excuses for every one! But no matter—I shall get up now."

"Are you sure, dear father, that you are strong enough?"

"Not only strong enough to get up now, but also to go out this evening."

"Go out?" echoed Selina, with mingled astonishment and dismay.

"Yes, to be sure," answered her father gruffly.

"I must go and see about this unpleasant business."

Selina remonstrated, but all in vain: her father was resolute—and she knew his temper well enough to be aware that when once his mind was made up, no power of persuasion could turn him from following his own course.

The hours passed away—the evening came—and between eight and nine o'clock a cab stopped at the door of Mr. Pluckley's house in Windmill Street. Mr. Casey and his son alighted. They knocked at the door; and as they stood waiting for their summons to be answered, Sylvester inquired, "By the bye, does he expect us at this hour?"

"Yes," replied his father: "I answered his note at once, and sent to tell him that one or both of

us would be sure to call upon him in the evening."

The front door was now opened; and a female servant conducted the two Caseys up a gloomy staircase, into a meanly furnished sitting-room on the first floor. It was a large apartment, and was only dimly lighted by the two candles which stood upon the table. Mr. Pluckley instantaneously came forward to receive his visitors; and notwithstanding the nature of the business which had brought them, he showed them a polite attention, at once placing chairs for their accommodation. He was an elderly man, short and stout, with an expression of countenance which indicated a business-like keenness, not unmixed with benevolence. He wore a brown wig; and his clothes, though shabby, were of an old-fashioned cut and fitted badly, so that there was something grotesque and comical in his appearance.

Mr. Casey senior scrutinised with attention the individual with whom he was now for the first time brought in contact, but whom he had long known by repute as a bill-discounter, money-lender, accountant, general agent—and, in short, one of those nondescript men of business in whom the modern Babylon abounds, and some of whom manage to make a pretty good livelihood and occasionally to enrich themselves. Mr. Pluckley was one of these; and though no one seemed exactly to know whether he was a man of wealth or a man of straw—whether he used his own money or played with that of others—yet very certain it was that he did a great deal in the discount way, and could always find a few thousands when the security was such as would bear some little investigation.

While Mr. Casey senior was from beneath his eyebrows taking a good view of Mr. Pluckley in order to form a judgment of the nature of the enemy he had to deal with, Sylvester sat lolling back in his chair with an affectation of fashionable ease, while his eyes slowly wandered round the apartment to note and criticise its contents. He observed the dingy hangings to the windows—remarked where the damp appeared through the paper on the walls—noted how the carpet was worn and soiled—wondered to what remote date belonged the rickety old chairs—and then complacently caressed his chin as his eyes settled upon the reflection of his own ugly countenance in a looking-glass precisely opposite to which he was seated.

Meanwhile Mr. Casey senior was opening the conversation with Mr. Pluckley, by observing, "This is an unpleasant business, sir, which has brought us together."

"If there be anything unpleasant in it, Mr. Casey, it will not be my fault:" and Mr. Pluckley seemed to blend in his manner a business-like formality with a certain natural good-humoured suavity.

"Are you determined to proceed," inquired Casey, "in a matter where you are sure to lose?"

"I am determined to proceed," responded Pluckley; "in a matter where I am sure to gain."

"But the acceptance is positively a forgery," said Mr. Casey emphatically.

Mr. Pluckley shook his head, at the same time observing, "I think I can bring persons forward who will prove your son's handwriting."



AZALINE.

"A handwriting may be well imitated," rejoined Casey senior. "You told my son that Sir Abel Kingston was the drayer of the bill on which this acceptance is supposed to figure. Of course you are aware, Mr. Pluckley, that forgery was Sir Abel's forte—it was for forgery he was arrested—"

"I know it," interjected Mr. Pluckley: "but still I hold my ground. Your son was intimate with Sir Abel—they dined together—I may add they dissipated together—"

"But it is so unlike Sylvester to do such a foolish action!"

"Nevertheless, I am afraid that he *has* done it," interrupted Pluckley: "and you, my dear sir, must suffer for it."

"You persist in your intention," demanded Casey, "of presenting that bill to-morrow?"

"I shall present it to-morrow at your house in Hatton Garden, Mr. Casey."

"And if it be not paid?" said the usurer significantly.

"Mr. Pluckley shrugged his shoulders, saying, "In that case the matter will go into the hands of my lawyer."

"But here," said Mr. Casey, "is my son who will repeat to you what he said yesterday, that he never accepted the bill—that he himself had no pecuniary dealings with the late Sir Abel Kingston—and that he not only pledges his word as a gentleman to that effect, but is also ready to confirm it upon oath."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Pluckley, now looking as if he were somewhat staggered; "this certainly grows serious:—and turning half round in his chair, he surveyed Sylvester as well as the dimness of the two candles would permit him.

"It's all right, my dear sir," said the young man, affectedly passing his hand through his horrid red hair; "I wouldn't deceive you for all the world. Truth before all things:—that's my principle. Why, damme, my dear sir, I wouldn't stake my character for such a trifle. Go and ask such men as the Duke of Ardeleigh, and Captain Cauliflower, and Mr. Tiffany, and such men as them, what they think of me. They know that Sylvester Casey's word's his bond, and that if he once wrote his name across a slip of paper he'd never deny it."

"Mr. Sylvester Casey," said Pluckley, with a very serious expression of countenance, "you are prepared to swear that you did not give your acceptance to a bill of a thousand pounds on behalf of Sir Abel Kingston?"

"Oh, yes—I'll swear that in a jiffy," exclaimed Sylvester.

Mr. Pluckley looked for a moment as if he were somewhat disgusted at the flippant manner in which young Casey was dealing with the question; and then deliberately opening a writing desk, he produced a document, which he held before the young man's eyes, saying, "Here is the bill. Look well at that writing—pause—reflect—answer not hurriedly—but consider whether you ever wrote that acceptance?"

"I was drunk if I did," exclaimed Sylvester.

"No," resumed Pluckley, still with solemn look and speech; "this is not the writing of a drunken man. If ever you wrote that acceptance at all, it was when you were perfectly sober and in the full possession of your faculties."

"Well then," rejoined Sylvester, "I can swear—"

"Stop a minute!" interrupted Pluckley. "I do not want law—I only want what is right. If you really did not accept the bill, I shall not attempt to enforce payment. I will abide by this issue."

"That is speaking like a sensible man," said Mr. Casey senior, with an inward chuckle of deep joy.

"A regular trump," added Sylvester.

"This," said Mr. Pluckley, taking from a side table a book with a well-worn dingy cover, "is the Bible. I know that I have no right to administer an oath: but on the other hand you are under no compulsion to take it. I repeat I put the matter upon this issue. Swear upon the sacred volume that the acceptance to the bill is not your's, and there is at once an end of the matter."

For a moment Sylvester seemed to recoil from the ordeal thus submitted to him. Flippant, unprincipled, and reckless though he were, yet he was not so thoroughly and inveterately wicked as to be enabled to contemplate perjury without emotion. But he suddenly encountered his father's looks, fixed severely and threateningly upon him: he accordingly plucked up his courage, and taking the book in his hand, he said with his accustomed levity, "Why, of course, I will swear to the thing that's true."

"Then swear," replied Mr. Pluckley, "and kiss the book at the same time. Call upon heaven to strike you dead if you are giving utterance to a falsehood."

Again did a sensation of terror come over the young man in the presence of a ceremony which had something solemnly awful in it: but again did he recover his presence of mind as he met his father's looks riveted upon him; and he was about to raise the sacred volume to his lips and repeat the words which had just been dictated to him, when a ghastly spectacle burst upon his vision. For there, in the looking-glass opposits to which he was seated, appeared a form clothed in white—a spectral apparition in a winding-sheet!—yet was the countenance instantaneously recognised—the countenance of Sir Abel Kingston! The figure raised its right hand in a threatening manner, and then it instantaneously disappeared.

"Good heavens! what is the matter with you?" cried Pluckley, springing forward, and thus placing himself in front of the young man at the instant the spectacle was vanishing from his view, so that Sylvester could not altogether tell the manner of its disappearance.

"Confound him! what ails him?" muttered his father, who having had his back turned towards the mirror, beheld naught of the scene which we have been describing.

Sylvester was ghastly pale: his eyes were staring as if about to burst forth from their sockets: utter horror and consternation were upon him—and vainly did he gasp for the power of utterance when Pluckley and his father hastened towards him.

"What is it, young man?" asked Pluckley in a tone of solemn adjuration.

"Sylvester!" and as his father thus spoke his name in his ear, he clutched him tightly by the arm to recall him to himself and remind him of the part that he had to perform.

"There!—I've had enough of this," said Sylvester, suddenly starting up from his seat. "I'll have no more of it!"—and it was with a visible shuddering that he flung his looks towards the mirror.

"What do you mean?" demanded Casey, with sternness.

"Ah! what do I mean?" and still his eyes glared wildly. "I won't swear. No—nothing shall induce me! Heaven or hell—I don't know which—would overwhelm me! It's all right, Mr. Pluckley—Pray forgive me—Don't let this go any further—But the signature is mine—and—and—if the governor there don't choose to pay the bill, you must send me to gaol—that's all."

There was something ludicrous in the terror which still clung to Sylvester Casey; but neither his father nor Pluckley were disposed to laugh at him. The former was a prey to an indescribable rage, to which however he dared not give vent, inasmuch as it would be acknowledging that he had been an accomplice in the awful perjury that was at the outset contemplated on the part of his son.

"Young man," said Mr. Pluckley, addressing himself to Sylvester, "you have done well not to consummate a fearful crime. Mr. Casey," he added, turning towards the usurer, "you will pay this bill to-morrow."

"Pay it? I pay it!" growled Casey. "I suffer for this wicked boy's extravagances!"

"Yes, sir—you will pay that bill," interrupted Pluckley, "to prevent the exposure of your base—your infamous conduct, which I am fully able to fathom to the very bottom. And now good evening to you both."

Father and son quitted the room, descended the stairs, and issued from the house.

"And now, sir," said the former, when they had both taken their seats in the cab, "will you tell me how it was that you broke down in such a wretched manner, and how by your conduct you have managed to cost me a thousand pounds?"

"Come, father, there's no use in blowing up about it," replied Sylvester. "I couldn't help it—I don't know what it was—I suppose it must have been the imagination. Yes—no doubt it was: but—"

"Enough, sir—enough!" interrupted Casey, who was almost furious, and yet he felt that he could not possibly give vent to all his rage under such circumstances. "You have shown yourself an arrant poltroon and coward—and that is enough for me. We will speak no more of the matter. But perhaps you will some day know more completely than you even do now, what I think of you."

Silence then prevailed between father and son, each remaining absorbed in his own thoughts as the cab bore them back to Hatton Garden.

CHAPTER XLIX.

AZALINE.

On the same evening of which we have been writing, the following scenes occurred at Trent-ham House in Berkeley Square.

In an elegantly furnished boudoir, a beautiful young lady was reclining upon a sofa, giving way

to her reflections. Upon the table lay the last Christmas issue of the "Book of Beauty;" and if that volume had been opened at a particular page, it would have revealed a picture at the bottom of which was the word AZALINE. It was the portrait of a lady who was represented as reclining upon the grass in some rural retreat, amidst fruits and flowers and festooning foliage. The apparel of the young lady was plain and simple, thus harmonising with the picturesque interest of the whole design. And this was the portrait of the young lady who now reclined upon the sofa in that elegantly furnished boudoir:—this was Azaline, daughter of Lord and Lady Trent-ham.

She was not now in that raiment of charming simplicity which her portrait represented; but she was attired in an elegant evening costume. She was about twenty years of age, tall, symmetrical, and displaying all that beauty of proportions and perfection of physical development which characterize the most attractive period of woman. Her posture upon that sofa might have shown that her limbs were full and tapering, and that her contours were firm in their rich modelling; while the fineness of her hands and feet, as well as the proud yet graceful carriage of the head, showed her patrician breeding. Her hair was a dark brown; her eyes were of a liquid clear blue; her features were faultlessly outlined; her complexion was beautifully clear, and the skin seemed to be of a velvet smoothness. As she now sat half reclining upon that sofa, giving way to her reflections, the beautifully formed lips, moist and red, were slightly apart; and fitting portals did they seem, with their contrasting ranges of ivory inside, for the fragrant breath.

The white arms, bare almost to the shoulder, were admirably rounded; and upon the brow, high and polished the tracery of blue veins was delicately defined. The *corsage* of her dress was cut very low; but the costly white lace which trimmed it ascended over the richly moulded bosom, yet hiding those glowing contours only as much as the foam conceals the swelling wave. Altogether it was a beautiful specimen of the gentler sex whom we find as the occupant of the boudoir; and the longer that fair being was contemplated, the more completely would all delicate, refined, and æsthetic impressions rise dominant over, or rather we should say subdue and absorb, whatsoever sensuous thoughts might in the first instance have been engendered by a beauty so rich and softly seductive.

Azaline was a strange creature. She bore a singular though beautiful Christian name, which might almost seem to have been bestowed upon her with a presentient feeling that she deserved to be marked as no ordinary being. She was endowed with a rare intelligence; she had read much—thought much; and instead of lazily adopting the ideas of others, had formed notions and theories for herself. She went but very little into society; she entertained the supremest contempt for the frivolities of fashionable life. Yet when she did mingle in scenes of gaiety, she could render herself as agreeable and charming as other women. She could assume all in a moment the graceful levity and adopt the conversational trivialities and airy nothings of the gilded saloon; so that few would suspect the natural strength

of mind and the admirable cultivation of intellect which existed beneath the surface. Though in one sense proud of the ancient family to which she belonged, yet was she most liberal in her opinions: she admired the virtue which shone by its own unaided lustre—the genius which made for itself a glorious renown—the enterprise which raised itself from poverty to wealth, from obscurity to importance. She looked upon all these as evidences of the highest nobility—the loftiest aristocracy. Though a pure Christian, she was liberal in her religious opinions, and believed that the path to heaven was equally open to the good of all sects and denominations. In disposition she was kind and affectionate, and of a generosity that was capable of the most magnanimous sacrifices. Her parents thought her singular—too bold in her opinions, and of an intellectual forwardness that was unbecoming her years and her position: but, on the other hand, they could not help dearly loving one who was a ministering angel in sickness and a consoler in the midst of the world's calamities.

Azaline, as we have said, was giving way to her reflections: but presently awakening as it were with a start from her meditation, she cast her eyes at a timepiece on the mantel, and mentally ejaculated, "It is already nine o'clock. They will be here directly!"

In a few minutes a low knock at the door reached her ears: she sprang towards it, and gave admittance to her brother Launcelot, and a female form, closely veiled, who was clinging to his arm.

"This is my sister, who has so much longed to see you, dear Imogen," said Launcelot. "She will love you—and you will love her. She is everything that is good and amiable as you yourself also are, dear Imogen! And now I shall leave you together."

Thus speaking, Launcelot Osborne took his sister's hand and joined it to that of Imogen; and the two hands clasped each other warmly. Launcelot issued from the room; and Azaline said to her visitress in a kind voice, "Come and sit down by my side on the sofa. And now, will you not raise your veil?"

Imogen at once complied; and Azaline actually started with surprise on beholding the handsome countenance that was now revealed to her. The two young women gazed upon each other with looks of admiration; for Imogen thought that Launcelot's sister was the most beautiful creature she had ever in her life beheld—while Azaline was entertaining precisely the same idea in respect to her visitress.

"Oh!" said Azaline, at length breaking silence, and speaking in a tone of enthusiasm, "it is no wonder that my brother loves you!"

"And is it because the brother loves me," said Imogen, "that the sister has been kind enough to receive me?"

"I love Launcelot," replied Azaline, "and I am prepared to love whosoever becomes the object of his own affection. His friends must be my friends—"

"What!" interjected Imogen; "despite all difference of rank?"

"Yes—despite all difference of rank," responded the young patrician lady.

"Do you know what I am?" asked Imogen: "do you know that I am an actress?—nay,

nothing so high as that;—a mere equestrian at a second or third-rate theatre!—something not quite so good as a dancer in the ballet at the Opera!"

"Why speak thus of yourself?" asked Azaline: "why should you with bitterness run down a profession which you have rendered honourable as it applies to yourself, inasmuch as it affords you the bread of industry?"

"Oh, Miss Osborne," said Imogen, "I feel as if I were something very low in comparison with you, the high-born patrician lady!—and it would seem more natural to me if you were now to overwhelm me with reproaches and upbraidings for daring to love your brother, than that you should thus treat me with so much consideration and kindness! Indeed it almost appears an act of presumption on my part to have suffered myself to become the object of your brother's love at all!"

"How could you help it, Imogen?" asked Azaline with a good-natured smile: then taking her companion's hand, she went on to say, "Launcelot has told me so many excellent things concerning you, Imogen, that I was determined to see you—I begged him to gratify my wish—and now I have to offer you my excuses that you should have been subjected to the mortification of being introduced stealthily into the house."

"Oh, offer no apology," said Miss Hartland; "I can full well understand how little agreeable it would be to your father and mother to encounter such as I am within these walls!"

"And yet heaven knows," said Azaline, with a smile half bitter, half mournful, "that there is no reason for the exercise of any undue pride beneath this roof. You are not ignorant, Imogen, that the shades of ruin are gathering closely around the proud coronet of Trentham."

"I know," said Imogen, "that it is because your brother will not marry the one whom he loves not, that this ruin menaces your house. And it is therefore I—I whom you must blame as the real cause of all this!—though heaven knows how innocently and how unwittingly I have been the authoress of so much mischief!"

"You must not blame yourself, Imogen," said Miss Osborne, in a kind and gentle voice. "My brother does right to refuse to marry where his heart's affections are not concerned. For myself, I look upon a marriage of interest and expediency as a crime—an outrage against that holy sentiment of love which, from all I have read or heard, is the one great blessing that survived the fall of our First Parents! Launcelot told me that he loved another—he confessed the same to our father and mother—he said that it was she who had been presented to them on that day when they were expecting Selina Casey—"

"But he has not told them who it really was that knelt at their feet on that day of which you are speaking?"

"No," replied Azaline: "he has not told them the name of the object of his love. Neither would he tell me at first. But I besought him to do so—I reminded him that my sentiments are somewhat different from those of the generality of the world, and that I would sympathise with him rather than blame him; and then he opened his heart fully unto me—he mentioned your name—he told me that he loved you more than

life itself, and that sooner than renounce your love or bestow his hand upon another, he would put a period to his existence!"

"And must ruin overtake your family, dear young lady," asked Imogen, "on my account?"

"Heaven only knows how all this is to end," replied Azaline. "To day was the one fixed upon by the usurer who has us in his power—who who recently had——"

"And in Selina," interjected Imogen, "Launcelot has found the kindest and most generous of friends!"

"Yes," said Azaline; "but as yet there is a mystery enveloping the whole proceeding. The usurer is taken ill, and Selina pens a hasty note to Launcelot to bid him be of good cheer, for that in respect to the great bulk of my father's liabilities he is no longer in her father's power. She enjoins the strictest secrecy, and she will give no explanations relative to her meaning. Launcelot called at the house; and she would enter into no details—she merely bids him trust to her, and all should be well."

"Yes," said Imogen, "Launcelot has told me all these things; and it is evident that whatever course Selina Casey may be adopting, and whatever her policy, she is a magnanimous and generous-hearted woman."

"There can be no doubt of it," replied Azaline. "And now, in reference to yourself and my brother, I unhesitatingly recommend you to be privately united."

"No, Miss Osborne," interrupted Imogen. "I will not accompany your brother to the altar."

"What?" exclaimed Azaline, surveying her visitress with mingled surprise and compassion. "Ah! if you think of waiting to obtain my parents' consent," she continued, shaking her head deprecatingly, "I am afraid that hope will turn into the blight of disappointment."

"And I would never marry him without their consent," said Imogen. "I would not that——"

"Hush, my dear friend!" cried Miss Osborne. "If you marry him privately, an opportunity may be sooner or later taken to break the fact to my parents; and then, when they find that it is too late to retreat, they will grant their forgiveness—they will acknowledge you—and all will be over."

"Will not your brother some day be Lord Trentham?" asked Imogen.

"Yes, at our father's death. But why did you put a query to which yourself could have given an answer?"

"Your brother will one day be Lord Trentham," resumed Imogen,—"a peer of Britain—perhaps as proud as his father—perhaps conscientiously feeling that it becomes him to sustain the dignity of an ancient race——"

"And most likely a beggared one," interjected Azaline.

"No," said Imogen: "I feel convinced that Selina Casey will prove the salvation of your family in that respect. Not by marriage! No—for Launcelot will not espouse her: but by some means which she is gradually working out. Yes, this is my presentiment; and I feel convinced that it will be realized. So do not think, Miss Osborne, that your family will become a ruined one; for I am very much mistaken if the friendship of a devoted young woman will not save it."

"How is this possible, Imogen?" exclaimed Miss Osborne. "Do you not know—has not Launcelot told you—that my father owes the usurer eighty thousand pounds?"

"Yes," said Imogen; "and has not Selina Casey given your brother to understand that in respect to three-fourths of that sum her father has become powerless for mischief towards your father?"

"True," said Azaline. "But continue, my dear Imogen: What were you on the point of observing just now?"

"I was about to say," continued Miss Hartland, "that your brother will some day become Lord Trentham, and he might regret having married an actress from a second or third-rate theatre! And then I should be the cause of his unhappiness—whereas it is his happiness that I have at heart! Oh, you do not comprehend me, Miss Osborne! And it is no wonder! You think that such a creature as I can only be selfish and mercenary—interested and ambitious,—that in loving, or pretending to love your brother I can be thinking only of aggrandisement, rank, money—in short: that I am seeking to benefit myself in every sense! But, Oh! it is not so. I love him for himself alone: and the love which he gives me in return, can be a source of happiness to me only so long as I know how impossible it is for him to think me selfish or interested!"

"I believe you, Imogen—I believe you, from the very bottom of my heart!" cried Azaline enthusiastically. "Yes!—and I understand you too—because I feel that such would be my sentiments likewise if I were placed in a similar position!"

"Therefore," continued Miss Hartland, her countenance expressing delight at her motives being thus appreciated and understood, "you see why I would never espouse your brother—unless indeed it were when he should have succeeded to the ancestral title, and should have analyzed his own heart and studied the influences produced by an altered position."

"But do you not reflect," asked Azaline, "that many a long year may elapse before Launcelot finds himself in that position? Our father is only in his fifty-sixth year—he might live till seventy or eighty——"

"All this I know," said Imogen; and then she added hesitatingly and diffidently, "I do not mean that Launcelot is to be entrammelled in a long, long courtship——"

"You mean then—you mean," said Azaline, "that you would become——But no! I may perhaps insult you!"

"You have guessed my meaning, Miss Osborne," rejoined Imogen, holding down her head with a deep blush mantling on her countenance—then suddenly raising her looks, she exclaimed, "And yet I could feel a pride in being the mistress of him whom I love so well, because by this very sacrifice of myself I prove that I am worthy of all the devoted love he has bestowed upon me!"

It was not with disgust nor loathing, but it was with a surprise which speedily grew into admiration, that Azaline gazed upon her who enunciated so bold a doctrine of immorality. But Azaline was the very being to be struck by such a doctrine, and to be led into admiration of the woman who dared proclaim it as the rule of her own conduct.

"Would you esteem me most," asked Imogen, "if I demanded marriage as the proof of your brother's love, or if I consented to become his mistress as the proof of my own love?"

"By the latter course you prove, Imogen, how sincere and disinterested is the love which you bear towards my brother. And, Oh! for this reason I must love you in return!"

Thus speaking, Azaline wound her beautiful arms about Imogen's neck, and strained her to her bosom.

Meanwhile Launcelot Osborne had repaired to the drawing-room, where he only found his mother, Lord Trentham having gone to his club. Her ladyship's manner was habitually cold and severe even towards her own children; but of late it had become absolutely frigid and distant towards Launcelot, because he would not consummate his own unhappiness by leading Selina Casey to the altar.

Launcelot now approached his mother with his wonted demeanour of affectionate respect; and he said, "What! altogether alone?"

"Yes—alone," she responded with a severe look. "You know that Azaline retires to her own room of an evening to read or write, instead of sitting with me and doing some pretty little piece of embroidery. As for you, Launcelot, you have been out a great deal lately. I suppose," she added satirically, "it is with that unknown object of your foolish, insensate passion which threatens us with ruin——"

"Mother," interrupted Launcelot, "have I not assured you that you may put faith in Selina Casey's word?"

"Ah, if I thought so! But what suspense this keeps us in! There is your poor father, who has just gone to his club to divert his mind from the harassing perplexity of his affairs——"

"Mother, if everything can be settled somehow or another," interjected Launcelot, "without the sacrifice of myself, why will you not agree to the arrangement? Have I not received the positive assurance that so far as the sixty thousand pounds are concerned we have nothing to fear?"

"But there are twenty thousand more," said Lady Trentham.

"Oh," exclaimed Launcelot, with something like bitterness in his accents, "you would not sell me for twenty thousand pounds?"

"I am sure," said his mother, evading the question, "I do not know how it is all to end. What can Selina Casey be doing? how can she exercise this immense power on our behalf? If she be playing her father any trick, we ourselves may get into trouble——"

"Look you, mother," interrupted Launcelot; "I am not a villain nor a scoundrel—I flatter myself that I have some little principle and moral sense: but I declare that whatsoever means so good a young woman as Selina Casey may choose to adopt on our behalf, must not only be legitimate, but must also be looked upon as belonging to a sacred cause. So do not make yourself unhappy on that score."

"But why all this mystery? And who is it that has gained your heart? who is this unknown? Evidently some very low and unsuitable person——"

Launcelot started angrily at this slur which was thrown upon his Imogen; but before he had

time to make any reply, and before his mother had leisure to give utterance to another word, a footman entered, and then with a disappointed look was immediately about to retire again.

"What do you want?" asked Launcelot, who was struck by the domestic's manner.

"I thought his lordship was here, if you please, sir," was the response.

"He is gone to the Club," said Launcelot. "What is it, Charles?"

"Some one wants to see his lordship, sir——"

"I will come," interjected Launcelot: and he hastened from the room. "Now, Charles, what is it?" he demanded, as he closed the door behind him and they stood on the landing together. "Something is wrong, I see by your looks."

"Well, sir, I'm afraid that there is. Here's three men come to see his lordship—I've shown them into the library——"

"Not a word for the present!" interrupted Launcelot. "I will see to this at once."

He repaired to the library, where the first person who encountered his view was Mr. Bulteel; and as he happened to have met him once at Mr. Casey's house in Hutton Garden, and knew that he was the usurer's attorney, he instantly comprehended that a blow was about to be struck from that quarter. A glance at the other two persons only tended to confirm the suspicion; for one was a flashily-dressed, Jewish-looking individual, with the unmistakable air of a bailiff about him—and the other was a shabby man, with a sinister countenance, and who having sat himself down, seemed to be already making himself quite at home by not rising from his chair when Launcelot entered.

"I don't think I need to introduce myself, Mr. Osborne," said Bulteel, with a how that was half familiarly, half patronisingly polite. "We've met before—you know who I am——"

"Yes," interrupted Launcelot: "and now tell me, what have you come to do?"

Mr. Bulteel glanced at the Jewish-looking individual, who stood by with an easy familiar air; and said with a significant emphasis, "This is an officer. It is an execution, Mr. Osborne."

Launcelot felt as if all the blood was suddenly turning to ice in his veins: but conquering his emotions as well as he was able, he asked, "For how much?"

"Twenty thousand pounds in round numbers," replied Bulteel. "There'll be costs——"

"And my fees," added the bailiff, with a knowing wink at the lawyer.

"Good God! an execution for twenty thousand pounds!"—and Launcelot was tottering towards a chair, when Bulteel caught him by the arm.

"Just step aside with me for a moment, Mr. Osborne," said the lawyer: then drawing the young gentleman towards a corner, he assumed a look of mysterious friendliness, saying, "Now come, Mr. Osborne—I should advise you to settle this business off-hand. It may prove more serious than you think."

"What! do you think that I do not comprehend, and bitterly appreciate, all the seriousness of this step which Mr. Casey has taken?"—and Launcelot almost wrung his hands in despair. "Ruin—exposure—degradation!"

"Aye," interjected Bulteel; "and that's not all either."

"What do you mean?" asked Launcelot, bewildered and frightened.

"I mean, that if you let things go to extremes, young man," resumed the lawyer, in a mysterious whisper, "you'll have a criminal prosecution."

Launcelot started and looked indignant.

"Well, if you like to ride matters with a high hand," said Bulteel, shrugging his shoulders, "it's no business of mine. I only wanted to give you a little friendly advice. Casey is resolute—and you couldn't suppose that it was possible for him to remain ignorant of who got possession of the papers——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Launcelot, as a light began to dawn in unto his mind in respect to Selina's proceedings. "The papers?"

"Well, of course," said Bulteel "You are too young a hand, Mr. Osborne, to carry off such a thing with the necessary amount of effrontery. You betray yourself—and so now it is no longer doubtful—you *did* purloin the papers;—and by heaven! you will have to take the consequences."

Launcelot now comprehended it all: he understood what Selina had done, and how for *his* sake she had actually robbed her own father! He was almost overwhelmed by the young lady's magnanimity. But it was evident that *he* was suspected of the theft:—to *him* was imputed the deed which *she* had committed. How was he to act? Not for a moment did he hesitate. He could *not* prove less magnanimous than she:—he could not exonerate himself by betraying her. He must therefore remain under the suspicion and take the consequences.

"Now, Mr. Osborne," said Bulteel, "is this business to be settled amicably or not? Agree to marry Miss Casey—as indeed you have already once done—and all will be right. You may then keep the bonds and deeds and securities which you have purloined—excuse the word. On the other hand, if you refuse——"

At this moment the door of the library opened, and Lord Trentham hastily entered. A violent agitation seized upon him the instant that his looks were swept round upon those present; and striding towards his son, he said in a low deep voice, "Launcelot, do you mean to save us? or is it too late?"

The young man gasped for the power of utterance: despair was fast seizing upon his soul, and he shrank aghast from the thought that the moment was at hand when despite every hope that had been entertained, and despite everything Selina had done, he must renounce Imogen after all.

"The execution, my lord," Mr. Bulteel proceeded to say, "is for twenty thousand pounds."

"Twenty thousand?" echoed Lord Trentham.

At the same moment the door again opened, and Lady Trentham made her hurried and agitated appearance. The sum just mentioned by her husband struck her ears as the strange people present met her eyes: she comprehended it all—and with a moan she staggered to a chair, upon which she sank in a fainting fit.

"Good God, my poor mother!" exclaimed Launcelot, springing towards her and supporting her in his arms. "Ring for water! Call the maids!"

The bailiff's assistant hastened to open the

door: her ladyship's maids were quickly summoned; and while they were procuring eau-de-Cologne, sal-volatile, and other restoratives, the bailiff's man, affecting a commiserative mood, whispered to some of the servants who were now grouped in the passage outside, "What a pity if it's to be a reg'lar knock-up just for twenty thousand! I always thought such a sum wasn't nuffin to a great lord."

Azaline's own lady's-maid was on the point of hastening up to fetch her young mistress when she caught the words that were issuing from the lips of the bailiff's assistant; and having thus ascertained the extent of the calamity, she sped up to Azaline's boudoir, not knowing that any one besides the young lady herself was there. It was therefore with but little ceremony that she burst in, exclaiming, "Oh, Miss!"—and then she abruptly stopped short on perceiving a stranger, for Imogen instantaneously drew down her veil.

"Good heavens, Margaret! what is the matter?" cried Azaline, stricken with terror.

But still the maid hesitated to speak, as she glanced towards Imogen.

"Tell me—tell me!" exclaimed Azaline. "I see that something has occurred! You may speak before this lady! she is a friend of mine!"

"Oh, miss," cried Margaret, the tears bursting from her eyes, "that I should be the bearer of such ill news! But—but—the bailiffs are in the house!"

"Oh!"—and Azaline, becoming pale as death, clasped her hands.

"The bailiffs?" exclaimed Imogen, starting up from her chair.

"Alas, yes!" responded Margaret: "there's an execution—and her poor dear ladyship——"

"A seizure do you mean?" demanded Imogen, forcibly clutching the maid's wrist.

"Yes—a seizure, ma'am."

"For how much?" demanded the actress.

"I heard one of the men say it was for twenty thousand pounds."

Two cries burst forth at this announcement—two distinct ejaculations—one of despair from the lips of Azaline, one of joy from those of Imogen! Then forth from the boudoir rushed Imogen:—down the stairs she sped—she was inspired by only one thought—she had but one aim in view—she paused not to reflect upon anything else—stayed not to deliberate on the step that she was taking. With the veil still over her countenance she hurt into the library, the door of which stood half open, and there was a group of servants assembled near, so that the actress knew at once where the scene of her business lay. Azaline and Margaret were hastening after her, utterly bewildered what to think in reference to her strange proceeding; and they were only a few seconds behind her in reaching the library.

But we should observe that in the meanwhile Lady Trentham had been restored by the means so promptly adopted by her maids; and looking with appealing earnestness up into her son's face, she said, "Launcelot, is our ruin to be consummated when you can no doubt avert it?"

"It depends upon Mr. Osborne, my lady," said Bulteel, who now approached the chair in which Launcelot's mother was seated.

"You hear," said his father,—"you hear,

Launcelot, that on your decision now depends our salvation, or our destruction!"

"Consider, Mr. Osborne," said Bulteel, "the bailiff is in possession for twenty thousand pounds—everything will be sold off, even to the very plate and jewels—"

"No—nothing! nothing!" cried the voice of a female who came flying into the room with her veil over her countenance. "Here—here are twenty thousand pounds!"—and falling at Lady Trentham's feet, she presented a small packet which she drew forth from the bosom of her dress.

Ejaculations of astonishment were now heard bursting from many lips;—and as for Launcelot, he was so smitten with a bewildering amazement, that he stood riveted to the spot, unable even to stretch forth a hand to raise up Imogen from the kneeling posture into which she had thrown herself.

"Good heavens! who is this?" cried Lady Trentham: "what does it mean?"

"What did I hear?" exclaimed Azaline, who had now reached the threshold, on which she stopped short in astonishment.

"Open the packet!" said Lord Trentham, in all the excitement of the most feverish suspense, "Here! give it me! Hah! it is indeed so! Bank notes for thousands! Oh, we are saved!"

"Yes, we are saved!" cried Lady Trentham. "But who is she?"

"Rise, my well beloved," ejaculated Launcelot, and explain this miracle!"

But Imogen's head fell forward against Lady Trentham's knees; for overpowered by her emotions, the actress had fainted. Launcelot raised her in his arms: Azaline sprang forward to render her assistance; and as the veil was lifted, it revealed a countenance which was at once recognised by Lord and Lady Trentham. They knew it was she who a month back had found her way so singularly into their presence, and whom at the time they had taken for Selina!

"Why, may I be hanged," exclaimed Bulteel, "if it isn't Mademoiselle Imogene of the Circus!"

"To be sure!" added the bailiff: "the horse-riding gal."

It was almost a scream that burst from Lady Trentham's lips; but in a tone of thrilling fervour Launcelot exclaimed, "Think you not that I am proud to acknowledge that she is the object of my love, after the noble deed which she has just performed?"

"At all events," said Lord Trentham, who was too selfish not to be ready with the utmost avidity to avail himself of the means so strangely if not miraculously provided for ridding himself of his unpleasant visitors,—“at all events here is the wherewith, Mr. Bulteel, to satisfy your demand; and as for any other considerations,” he added, significantly glancing towards his son, “they must stand over at least until to-morrow. Come to another room, and we will settle the present business.”

The lawyer and the two bailiffs followed his lordship from the library. Launcelot made a sign for the servants who had entered or who had gathered at the door, to withdraw likewise; and Imogen therefore remained alone with her lover, his mother, and his sister. She was now regaining her consciousness: she sat up on the sofa

where she had been placed—she looked around—her recollections instantaneously flashed back into her brain—she knew all that had occurred.

"Imogen," said Launcelot, in the low deep voice which indicated a concentration of indescribable emotions, "you have done a deed the generosity of which is scarcely equalled by its miraculous associations!"

"You mean, Launcelot," she said, "that it amounts to a positive marvel how I, the humble actress, could have been in possession of such a sum. It was my fortune—no matter how obtained. You at least, Launcelot, know me well enough to be assured that it was not acquired by dishonourable means."

"And I," said Azaline fervently, "though almost as much overwhelmed by my wonder as by my gratitude, am convinced of the truth of the words which have just issued from your lips."

"I know not what to say to you," began Lady Trentham, who was immensely embarrassed by the present position of circumstances. "On the one hand I am at a loss for language to express all I feel for what you have done: but on the other hand I tremble at the claim that you may make—at the recompense that you may demand—"

"Tremble not, lady," interrupted Imogen. "Fear not that I have found my way hither for the sake of rendering you unhappy! Hear me while I swear that never without your consent and that of Lord Trentham—"

"Imogen, swear not!" cried Launcelot in an excited tone.

"Yes," she continued, "I will swear, and her ladyship will believe me. And after all," she added, in a tone which suddenly altered singularly and strikingly, "your ladyship may rest assured that I know my own position. I, the actress—perhaps scorned and looked lightly upon—I can never aspire to be more than I now am to your son! What that is—"

"Imogen! Imogen!" exclaimed Launcelot, becoming purple with shame and confusion.

"I need say no more—I am understood!" cried the actress. "And now farewell!"

With these words she glided towards the door; and so sudden was the movement that she disappeared before Launcelot even thought of following her. Then he darted towards the door—but he found that she had locked it on the other side. He leapt from the window—he regained admittance into the house from the back premises on which that casement looked—but Imogen was gone.

CHAPTER L.

THE FRENCH AMBASSADOR.

ANOTHER scene which requires our attention, occurred on this same evening of which we are writing. Thus, while the Caseys were engaged in the business which took them to Windmill Street—and while Imogen was displaying the blended generosity and singularity of her disposition at Trentham House—Count Mandeville was receiving a visitor at the Clarendon Hotel.



It was about nine o'clock when a plain carriage drove up to the door of that establishment—an elderly personage of distinguished appearance alighted—and although he came *incognito* as it were, yet was he received by the waiters with all the respect due to the French Ambassador at the British Court. His Excellency was immediately ushered up into the handsome suite of apartments occupied by Count Mandeville; and there the two were now closeted together. The demeanour of Mandeville was respectful towards the Ambassador; but it was not fawning nor servile: it showed that the adventurer felt more at his ease with the representative of King Louis Philippe, than he was with the colder and more austere diplomatist who represented the interests of the Russian Czar.

"And now, my dear Mandeville," said the French Ambassador, throwing himself into an
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arm-chair, "let us get to business at once. What have you to tell me?"

"There is not the slightest doubt," responded Mandeville, "of the accuracy of all the information I had previously obtained."

"Excuse me, my good friend," said the Ambassador; "but mere assertions will not suffice. We must have proofs."

"And proofs you shall have," answered the Count, with an air of confidence. "Now, look, your Excellency! When circumstances led me to offer my services some little time ago to the Government of his Majesty Louis-Philippe, it was not to peddle about in small things, or to take my rank along with the wretched herd of spies and *mouchards* whom your system maintains. No—I aimed at higher things—I sought a loftier position——"

"And you cannot accuse me, Count," inter-

jected the Ambassador, "of treating you otherwise than with all becoming regard and courtesy. As a matter of course I could not act in a direct and open manner as your reference or your guarantee in respect to whatsoever representations you have chosen to make concerning yourself:—but on the other hand I have tacitly and quietly countenanced you—I have visited you here at your hotel—I have spoken of you as the Count de Mandeville—"

"All true enough, your Excellency," interrupted the adventurer; "and this is as much as I could have possibly expected at your hands. I told your Government at the outset that I was tired of serving Russia, whose diplomatists are the haughtiest and most overbearing of mortals, and affect to scorn the instruments of whom they are compelled to make use. Therefore I was resolved to offer my services to France: they were accepted—the funds which I required for my immediate purposes were liberally forthcoming—and now I am about to give your Excellency a signal proof that I have not over-rated the utility of my services."

"And so there really is a conspiracy?" said the French Ambassador.

"A most dangerous one," replied Mandeville; "and the conspirators are as desperate and determined a set of characters as could possibly have met together."

"And their special objects?" asked the Ambassador.

"The death of King Louis Philippe," was the response.

"What!" ejaculated the Ambassador; "are they not deterred by the fate of previous would-be regicides?"

"Not they, your Excellency! I repeat, they are men of the strongest opinions and of the most determined dispositions. Ruined moreover in their fortunes, they have everything to gain from a convulsion in France; while on the other hand they have nothing to lose but their lives—and of these they are reckless."

"But does it not occur to them," asked the Ambassador, "that heaven itself protects King Louis Philippe?—that on every occasion the assassin's dagger has been turned aside and the bullet of the regicide bravo has missed its aim? Have these facts no awe-inspiring influence upon the minds of those wretched men of whom you are speaking?"

"They are impious enough, your Excellency," said Mandeville, with a slight smile of irony upon his lips, "to attribute the previous failures of patriots—for thus they term regicides—to accidental circumstances, or else to the nervousness of the individuals themselves at the moment. Thus, for instance, as illustrative of the category of accidental circumstances, in the case of Fieschi the infernal machine would not explode at the proper moment; and thus the delay of only a dozen seconds enabled the King's carriage to pass beyond its range. Then, in the case of Alibaud, it was nervousness—"

"Enough, Count!" interrupted the Ambassador. "If it be thus that the miscreants reason, they must indeed be beyond all the solemn warnings and influences which previous incidents might afford. We must therefore regard them in the light which you describe—namely, as a set of

desperate and most dangerous men. What is their number?"

"There are six of them," responded Mandeville,— "two Poles, three Frenchmen, and one Englishman. As a matter of course they look upon their party as consisting of seven—"

"How so?" inquired the Ambassador.

"Because they number me amongst them," replied Mandeville.

"Ah, true!" said the Ambassador. "You must have got in with them somehow or another, or else you could not possibly have gained possession of their horrible secrets. Might I ask how you were so fortunate as to contrive to find your way into their midst, and thus place yourself in a position to baffle one of the most odious conspiracies ever devised?"

"The explanation is easy, your Excellency," answered Mandeville. "The first inkling I had of this affair was a few weeks ago, when I was in Paris. There chance threw me in the way of a certain Iyan Zadouski—a Pole by birth, though at one time an officer in the Russian army. His name was familiar to me, and I was acquainted with all his antecedents—no matter how. We thus got intimate; and a word which fell from his lips, led me to question him. To be brief, I managed matters so cleverly that I elicited from him what was going on—but with the understanding that I should join in the conspiracy. I agreed; and it was then that I offered my services to the Government of his Majesty Louis Philippe."

"Tell me more about these conspirators," said the Ambassador. "You say there are two Poles?"

"Yes, your Excellency. I have already spoken to you of one of them—Ivan Zadouski. The other is a man of the most dauntless courage, and has figured in every Polish insurrection which has taken place during the last twenty years. He also fought desperately at the barricades in Paris in the revolution of 1830."

"The very revolution which raised up that great King whom the miscreant now seeks to assassinate!"—and the Ambassador turned up his eyes as if in mingled wonder and indignation.

"Ah! but I need not remind one who is so well informed on all subjects as your Excellency," said Mandeville, "that the republican Polish party is desperately embittered against the French King, because he has taken no active step towards the restoration of the nationality of Poland. They say that he has forfeited all the pledges which he gave to the liberal cause on ascending the French throne—"

"Ah!" said the Ambassador; "I know the pretext which these vile men bring forward for their iniquitous proceedings—"

"And therefore, your Excellency," interjected Mandeville, "it is useless for me to enter into further explanations on the point. There are two Poles; and if ever there were men resolutely bent on the consummation of the crime, even at the almost certain forfeit of their own lives, these are the desperadoes. Then there are three Frenchmen; and of them I may speak in terms as strong as those which I have just adopted in reference to the Poles. The sixth is an Englishman—"

"What earthly grievance can he have against King Louis Philippe?" asked the Ambassador.

Mandeville shrugged his shoulders, and said, "There are opinionated, selfish, and desperate men amongst the English as well as amongst other nations. Whether this person be sincere in his revolutionary sentiments or not, I cannot tell: but that he has abandoned himself to the wildest and insanest hopes in that respect, there can be no doubt. He has been taught to believe that the establishment of a Republic must follow at once upon the assassination of the King, and that all who have any hand in bringing about the catastrophe, will be rewarded with riches and lucrative situations. But I need not tell your Excellency how men of this class first delude themselves, and then succeed in deluding each other. However, so it is; and of all the conspirators the Englishman is the most dangerous."

"How so?" inquired the Ambassador.

"Because he is the only one who can command pecuniary resources. The others are penniless—and therefore, without him, powerless: for a conspiracy of this kind needs money."

"Who, then, is the English conspirator?" asked the Ambassador.

"I do not know his real name, nor where he lives, nor anything concerning his true social position. These particulars he himself has kept in the background. But he is heart and soul in the evil cause which he has adopted; and I repeat, it is he who holds the purse. But there is even something more."

"And what is that?" asked the Ambassador.

"This Englishman is in some way connected with a lady of the highest patrician rank—indeed nothing less than a Duchess; and she by some strange infatuation has been led to countenance the plot in which the man himself is engaged."

"What!" exclaimed the Ambassador; "an English duchess lend herself to the schemes of assassins? Impossible, Count! You are carrying the romance too far!"

"I shall be enabled to convince your Excellency that it is anything but a romance. There shall be proof for every detail which I am now giving you."

"Good heavens!" cried the Ambassador, "an English duchess the patroness of regicides!"

"It is even so. But perhaps there may be—and no doubt there is—a personal pique in the matter."

"In what form?" asked the Ambassador.

"Come, speak out—I see that you know."

"Some few years ago," resumed Mandeville, "the Duchess visited Paris. I know not all the circumstances of the case—I am therefore only able to give your Excellency a mere scanty outline: but certain it is that this duchess was shamefully outraged—I believe even violated—by one of King Louis Philippe's sons; and when she appealed to the King himself for redress, his Majesty treated the matter with levity, declaring that those sort of things were nothing in France, and that if she were a wise woman and held her tongue she could sustain no injury. So for her own sake she hushed it up: but she has ever since cherished a bitter burning hatred against King Louis Philippe and all his family."

"Are you quite assured, Count Mandeville,"

asked the Ambassador gravely and solemnly, "of the truth of this fact?"

"I am assured of it. And indeed it appears to be the only way to account for the vindictive hate of the Duchess towards King Louis Philippe, and the lavish manner in which she supplies the conspirators, through her English friend or paramour—or whatever he may be—with funds for the carrying out of their iniquitous design."

"Ah! then," said the Ambassador, "the funds come from her purse? Do you know who this duchess is?"

"I do," replied Mandeville. "But pray do not ask me to name her; for in the proceedings which I am about to suggest as the means of defeating this odious conspiracy, there is one point on which I must insist on a special stipulation; and this is that all which concerns the Duchess be carefully and religiously concealed."

"If by the destruction of the conspiracy," replied the Ambassador, "she herself be rendered powerless in respect to future machinations of the same diabolical sort, I have not the slightest objection to accede to the point for which you stipulate."

"Rest assured, your Excellency, that by the failure of the present conspiracy she will be sufficiently sickened of the whole affair, and will wash her hands of such proceedings for the future. At all events I promise that in case of necessity—of *absolute* necessity, mind—I will put you in possession of her name, and thus paralyse her altogether. But until such necessity should arise I must remain silent on that point."

"Agreed!" said the Ambassador. "And now for your projects, Count? How are the conspirators to be baffled?"

"As a matter of course," said Mandeville, "the whole affair is to be crushed silently and without noise."

"No doubt of it," answered the Ambassador. "In the first place Louis Philippe would not for the world have it known that such plots are hatched against him; and secondly it were vain to appeal to the English law, because without your evidence we could prove nothing—and as a matter of course you would not stand forward to give your testimony."

"Assuredly not," rejoined Mandeville. "I neither wish to obtain the reputation of a spy, nor to stand the chance of being assassinated by one of the desperadoes whom I should be betraying. But all my plans are settled in my mind, and the mode of action is easy."

"Proceed," said the Ambassador, drawing his chair closer to Mandeville.

"You have a steam-vessel," said the latter, "lying off Woolwich?"

The Ambassador answered in the affirmative.

"Now, as your Excellency may easily suppose," resumed Mandeville, "I have not been in the secret service of the Russians without gaining certain experiences and noting in my mind whatsoever is worth borrowing from their system of doing business. They have one very useful and convenient proceeding which they are wont to adopt in extreme cases. In short, it is nothing less than carrying off an obnoxious individual, neck and crop, despite the mawkish consideration of violating the laws of the particular territory where the thing may occur; and——"

"My good friend," interrupted the Ambassador, laying his hand upon Mandeville's arm, "this is nothing new which you are telling me: nor must you bestow upon the Russians all the credit of a proceeding which, as you term it, may on occasions be found very useful and convenient. His gracious Majesty Louis Philippe has on two or three occasions—perhaps more—caused the same thing to be done."

"I rather thought as much," said Mandeville; "but I was delicate in expressing my opinion point blank; and therefore I am glad you have put me at my ease upon the topic. Indeed, methought that those corps in Algeria which are called the *Condemned Regiments* might have their uses in more ways than one."

"You are right, Count," said the Ambassador. "All who are obnoxious to his Majesty, or become the objects of suspicion, are sent off, to join those ranks, wherein their names and identities are as completely lost as if they suddenly found themselves plunged amidst a chain of galley-slaves. The least act of insubordination is punished with death: and thus as remonstrance, or complaint, or entreaty, if too violently urged, are construed into insubordination, I can assure you there is very little of all that in the *Condemned Regiments*."

"I understand," said Mandeville. "The men all feel that they are doomed beings and that death only can rescue them from their present state."

"Precisely so. And now to what is all this to lead?" asked the Ambassador. "Would you have me seize on the whole six conspirators?"

"Nothing of the sort, your Excellency. I am not such an idiot," continued Mandeville, "as to suppose that the sudden and simultaneous disappearance of half-a-dozen individuals from the midst of the metropolis, could fail to excite the gravest suspicions and lead to the most searching inquiries. But in respect to the disappearance of one person, it is different. Therefore one person only is to be carried off!—and this circumstance, together with some other little device that may be adopted, will prove sufficient to break up the conspiracy, and disperse the conspirators, with a terrorism hanging over their minds sufficient to make them shrink from any meddling with such machinations for the future."

"I understand," said the Ambassador: "it is the Englishman who is to be thus disposed of?"

"It is he," rejoined Mandeville. "And now may I beg your Excellency to listen to the instructions which I have to give?—for according to certain information which I have succeeded in obtaining, the blow can be struck to-morrow evening."

"Good," said the Ambassador. "But still, my dear Count, let me remind you that down to this point you have not afforded me a single proof that the facts are precisely as you represent them. Not that I doubt your statement!—but remember that I shall have to give an account to others. The Minister of Foreign Affairs and King Louis Philippe himself—"

"Patience, patience, your Excellency!" interrupted Mandeville. "The very proceeding which I am counselling you to adopt in reference to this Englishman, will put you in possession of the most ample proofs."

"That is all I require," rejoined the Ambassador.

The two remained closeted together for about a quarter of an hour longer, during which Mandeville gave certain detailed instructions, of which the Ambassador made notes in his pocket-book. His Excellency then took his leave; and as the door closed behind him, Mandeville rubbed his hands as he chucklingly muttered to himself—"Thus far the plot is laid, and success is certain on that point!"

But almost immediately afterwards graver considerations came into his mind; and as he slowly paced to and fro in the apartment, he said to himself, "Although I have rendered this conspiracy available for the purpose of getting rid of that man, yet the conspiracy itself must be broken up, or I shall lose all credit with the Ambassador! Besides, he might discover likewise that the connexion of the Englishman therewith is all sheer invention on my own part. Yes—I can break up the conspiracy!—there is no doubt of that! The letter which I propose the Ambassador should write will have the desired effect. But what if by any chance I myself should be suspected as the traitor? what if those desperate men should have reason to suppose that I had only found my way into their midst for the purpose of betraying them? My life would not be worth a moment's purchase! Ah, and life is becoming dearer and dearer than ever; for I am rising in the world! I must therefore protect myself—I must surround that valuable life with all possible defences. There is only one of those fellows whom I dread—only one who is at all likely to settle his suspicions upon me!—and that is Ivan Zadoski. Yes—him only need I dread; for by the very manner in which I became acquainted with him in Paris, may he come to the conclusion that I am not what I represented myself to be. But how to dispose of him?"

At this moment the door of the apartment opened; and Edmund Vaughan, Count Mandeville's valet, made his appearance.

"Well, what is it?" inquired the Count.

"If you please, sir, I have succeeded in another little piece of business which you entrusted to me."

"Ah! And what may that be?"

"You know the lady that you ordered me to make inquiries about, sir—who disappeared so suddenly from the little lodging-house in Camden Town about three weeks ago—"

"Ah! Ethel Trevor?" ejaculated Mandeville. "What! is it possible—"

"I have found out, sir, where she is living. I employed an underling to follow up the clue which I had obtained—"

"And what was that clue?"

"I saw the young lady this afternoon in a very handsome carriage, with another young lady and a fine-looking gentleman; and so I got this underling to follow her; and lo and behold! he has just now been to give me the information—for he could not very well come earlier."

"Where does she live?" inquired Mandeville impatiently.

"At Count Olonetz's, in Grosvenor Square."

"At Count Olonetz's?" exclaimed Mandeville in astonishment.

"It is as I tell you, sir; and from the inquiries which have been made, I learn that the young lady only arrived there this day."

"You are an invaluable fellow," cried Mandeville; "and here are ten guineas as a trifling reward:"—then, as the valet gathered up the gold coins, the Count turned aside, mentally ejaculating, "Ethel at the house of Count Olonetz! And Ethel knows Mildred! What on earth can be afoot? This is something which I must inquire into.—Ah! Ivan Zadouski! To be sure!—that name occurs most appropriately at the moment! I have an excuse for presenting myself to Count Olonetz."

Mandeville's mind being made up, he ordered his carriage to be gotten in readiness: and in the meanwhile he made some change in his toilet, attiring himself in full evening costume.

"By the bye, Edmund," he said, as he was about to leave the dressing-room and descend to his carriage, "you will proceed to Miss Alice Denton's lodgings with my compliments, and she must keep herself entirely disengaged for to-morrow, as I purpose to pass some considerable portion of the day with her. You ordered the wine and other things to be sent her this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir: I myself saw the things sent off to her new lodgings."

"Good," said Mandeville. "Ah! do you know whether she likes her new abode?"

"It is impossible she can fail to like it, sir—such a handsome suite of apartments in a nice genteel quarter of the town, very different from the cheap rooms in the York Road which that miserable upstart Mr. Sylvester Casey allowed her! But you, sir, do everything so handsomely."

Mandeville smiled, but made no answer; and descending to his carriage, was in a few minutes at the mansion of Count Olonetz in Grosvenor Square. The moment the equipage dashed up to the entrance, a footman in gorgeous livery, and with powdered hair, hastened down the steps; and as Mandeville alighted, the lacquey inquired, "What name shall I have the honour of announcing?"

"Count Mandeville," was the reply.

"Count Mandeville," shouted the lacquey up the steps.

"Count Mandeville," echoed another lacquey on the threshold.

"Count Mandeville," cried a third at the bottom of the staircase.

By this time Mandeville had become aware that Count Olonetz was receiving company, and that he had been very naturally taken by the domestics to be one of the invited guests. Some elegantly-dressed ladies were ascending the staircase—all within the mansion was a blaze of light—numerous domestics were hurrying to and fro—and the sounds of music were wafted to the ear. For a moment Mandeville stopped short: he had fancied to find Count Olonetz alone—it had never for an instant occurred to him that he might be plunging into such a scene as this. But what was he to do? how could he possibly retreat? His name was being shouted up the staircase, and nothing could be more ignominious than to turn tail and beat a retreat. Besides, such a course was but little consistent with Mandeville's self-possession and hardihood. So, after that single moment's hesitation, he continued his way up the staircase.

"Count Mandeville," shouted a lacquey at the

entrance of the gilded saloon: and the daring adventurer entered upon the brilliant scene.

As by far the greater portion of the company consisted of English people, Mandeville's name was not only familiar to their ears; but he himself was personally known to them; and, being extremely popular, as well as much courted in the highest circles, he was at once accosted by several personages of the British aristocracy—while, as he looked around, he received bows and smiles from several ladies of the highest title. He thus felt himself completely at his ease, for he knew full well that Count Olonetz would not venture to give him a disagreeable reception in the presence of such a demonstration as this. Nor was his calculation erroneous. Count Olonetz, on hearing his name announced, was astounded at his insolence, and was preparing to overwhelm him with his cold haughty dignity, when the Countess Olonetz hastily accosting her lord, inquired in a whisper, "Did you invite him?"

"No, not I," responded the Count. "It is a bold game that he is playing; for he no doubt calculates that it will be of immense advantage to him if he can get his name into the newspaper as one of the guests admitted within our exclusive circle."

"What will you do?" asked the Countess.

"Confront him—overwhelm him—But stay! What numbers press forward to greet him! And those ladies too who seem to welcome his presence! He must be a great favourite! And perhaps after all, he may have come for some special object—he is a very clever fellow—by no means likely to commit an error and place himself in a false position—"

"And then too he is acquainted with many secrets," suggested the Countess.

"True," said Olonetz, whose mind was now made up in a moment. "Let us act cautiously. He approaches—we will receive him with a suitable degree of courtesy."

Mandeville now advanced with that elegant ease of manner which was his principal characteristic; and he made his bow to the Count and Countess with the air of one who was an invited guest. They received him in a similar manner; and as the Countess then moved away in another direction, the Count said in a low but significant tone, "Perhaps, Monsieur de Mandeville, you wished to speak to me about something important?"

"It was for that purpose I came, my lord," was the response; and Mandeville assumed an air which might lead all who were looking on at the time to suppose that he was on terms of most perfect friendliness with the Russian Plenipotentiary.

"Step a little aside," said Olonetz: and he drew him towards a large pillar supporting an arch which separated the grand saloon from an apartment communicating with another suite. "I think we may speak here at our ease," continued Olonetz, glancing around,—“unless indeed your business be of an importance rendering it desirable that we should retire to my private cabinet?"

"Not at all, my lord," rejoined Mandeville; "and first let me acquit myself of the imputation of brazen impertinence and consummate rudeness, by giving your lordship the assurance

that I had no idea of finding company here this evening——”

“No farther apology is necessary, Monsieur de Mandeville,” interrupted Count Olonetz; “and now proceed.”

“I need but mention the name of Ivan Zadouski——”

“I know it,” interrupted Olonetz. “He was the aide-de-camp with whom a certain female escaped from Tobolsk—her paramour in a word.”

“The same, my lord,” said Mandeville. “I do not know whether the Russian Government cares anything about that man at present, or whether it be perfectly indifferent in respect alike to his whereabouts or proceedings.”

“Why do you ask?” inquired Olonetz.

“Simply, my lord, because I know where this Ivan Zadouski is, and can lay my hands upon him at any moment.”

“Indeed?” said the Count: and then after a few moments’ reflection, he added, “Perhaps he is looking after his former mistress?”

“Candidly, my lord,” said Mandeville, “I believe that Zadouski is very capable of hatching any mischief if the opportunity should serve. I have made inquiries concerning him. He is poor and desperate——”

“And being acquainted with so many secrets,” muttered Olonetz between his lips.

“Is therefore all the more dangerous,” added Mandeville.

“True,” said Olonetz. “I must think over it. I am infinitely obliged to you, Monsieur de Mandeville, for bringing me this information.”

“And perhaps your lordship will no longer consider my presence here an intrusion?”

“By no means,” responded Olonetz, who was too diplomatically cautious to give offence to one who might in any way serve his purposes. “I beg you to remain, Monsieur de Mandeville; and in the name of the Countess I ask you to partake of the banquet which will be presently served.”

Mandeville bowed; and as he was about to turn away to another part of the room, he stopped short, and looking Olonetz full in the face, he said in a low impressive tone, “Perhaps your lordship will remember my proper designation when next addressing me before the company. I am Count de Mandeville.”

“I shall not forget it,” responded the Russian Plenipotentiary, not altogether able to repress a smile at this new stroke of bold dexterous policy which the adventurer had just played.

Mandeville then lounged away from the spot where the preceding colloquy had taken place; and he was gazing about in every direction in search of Ethel, when he felt some one touch him on the elbow; and glancing round he beheld a tall distinguished-looking personage, about forty years of age, with light brown hair, auburn whiskers, and large blue eyes. This was the Grand Duke; and Mandeville at once recognised him by means of a portrait which he had seen; for this was the first time that he had ever set eyes upon his Imperial Highness in person. Mandeville’s first impulse was to apologise for having abstractedly run against the Grand Duke, as he thought that he must have done: but his Imperial Highness, at once raising his finger to his lip, beckoned him to follow.

“Ho! ho!” thought Mandeville to himself; “I am wanted by the Grand Duke now—am I? So much the better. But I must be cautious though; for it will not do to play any tricks with Count Olonetz.”

The Grand Duke led the way to a little room opening from the inner apartment, and where prints and books lay upon the table for the recreation of those who might temporarily choose to adjourn thither.

“We have no time to lose in useless discourse, sir,” the Grand Duke at once began speaking in a low but quick tone, and keeping his eyes fixed upon the door with a visible anxiety lest the present interview should be interrupted. “I happened to pass behind the pillar just now, while you were conversing with Count Olonetz—I caught a name, and nothing more——”

“And that name, your Highness?” asked Mandeville.

The Grand Duke looked cautiously around, and then breathed the name—“Ivan Zadouski.”

“True, your Highness, I mentioned that name.”

“Where is the man?” asked the Grand Duke.

“In London,” was Mandeville’s response.

“I know not, sir, to what extent,” resumed the Prince, “I dare make any claim upon your goodnature: I equally ignorant am I whether I shall be insulting you by promising to hold in grateful remembrance the boon which I seek at your hands. I may add that I am perhaps still more in the dark as to what your views and intentions may be in communicating with Count Olonetz in reference to that person——”

“Would your Imperial Highness at once favour me with your commands,” said Mandeville; “and I shall then be better enabled to reply frankly and candidly to your Highness.”

“Well spoken,” said the Prince. “I heard you announced as Count Mandeville. Surely a nobleman of your distinction can have no sinister dealings with Count Olonetz?”

“Your Imperial Highness only does me justice,” said Mandeville, thinking it fit to draw himself up with an air of dignity. “Accident made me acquainted with Ivan Zadouski, and circumstances led me to mention his name to my friend Olonetz——”

“Count Mandeville,” interrupted the Grand Duke, “I do not know what those circumstances could be—I do not ask you—I will not seek to penetrate into your secrets. Neither will I inquire what you may know, or how you may be mixed up——But no matter! To the point! Will you—will you serve me by procuring for me a secret interview with Ivan Zadouski?”

“I will, your Imperial Highness,” answered Mandeville.

“A secret interview, mind!” continued the Prince, who was becoming nervous and agitated, —“an interview at which none else shall be present, but where he and I may be alone together—in some lonely place—in the Park—on one of the bridges—in the middle of the night—anywhere!”

“Good heavens!” said Mandeville, affecting a sudden uneasiness as a means of drawing the Prince out, “does your Imperial Highness seek a hostile encounter——”

"No, no, Count Mandeville!" interrupted the Grand Duke, with a smile: "nothing of the kind!" Then instantaneously becoming serious again, he said, "I take God to witness that I have no such intention. Ah! perhaps that man may fear to meet me. Tell him he is wrong to entertain any such apprehension. I seek to do him no harm: I merely wish to put a few questions to him—yes, a few questions, on a point of vital importance to myself. But need I say any more?"

"Not another word, your Imperial Highness. I will make the appointment which your Highness desires. I shall most probably see him to-morrow night."

"Good," said the Prince; "and you will send me a note next day, stating where and when I am to meet the individual. Ah! by the bye, if your writing be known to Count Olonetz, I beg you to disguise it; and as a gentleman and a man of honour you are appealed to by me not to betray the boon which I have besought at your hands."

"I am incapable of doing so," answered Mandeville.

"And I on the other hand," rejoined the Prince, "am incapable of ingratitude towards those who render me a service."

This was said with an unmistakable significance; and the Grand Duke hurried out of the little room where the colloquy had taken place.

"The friendship of a Russian Imperial Prince cannot possibly do any harm," said Mandeville, as he complacently caressed his moustache.

He then lounged back into the grand saloon; but vainly did his eyes search for Ethel Trevor: she was not to be seen. The fact is, she was with the Princess Roxana, who was not permitted, by the severe restrictions of etiquette, to mingle in the gay scene, because it was under an *incognito* that she had come over to London on the present occasion.

Mandeville found Count Olonetz in the midst of a listening group, in the card-room. His Excellency was telling some capital diplomatic anecdote, which was of course listened to with the most admiring attention, and which at the conclusion elicited a peal of laughter. Mandeville, who was now lounging with fashionable ease against the table, caressing his glossy whiskers, made some remark which was not merely appropriate in a complimentary sense to the anecdote itself, but which likewise contained a witticism which evoked fresh laughter.

"Count de Mandeville's joke is even more pointed than my own," said Olonetz, with a good-humoured smile.

Mandeville was elate, though outwardly he betrayed not any unusual excitement. Everything seemed to favour him. There he was, within the choice select circle of the Russian Plenipotentiary's guests; and this same exalted functionary had addressed him as Count de Mandeville! He passed a most pleasant evening: he rendered himself most agreeable at the supper-table; and on taking his leave at about two o'clock in the morning, he returned in the highest possible spirits to the Clarendon Hotel.

CHAPTER LI.

THE CONSPIRATORS.

It was verging towards eight o'clock in the evening of the following day—namely the 1st of June—when a cab turned from Piccadilly into Lower Regent Street, proceeding in the direction of Waterloo Place. Inside this vehicle a female, in somewhat mean apparel, and with a dark green veil folded over her countenance, was seated next to a gentleman. This gentleman was Count de Mandeville: but as for his companion, it would have been impossible for the eyes of even the most scrutinizing observer to penetrate through the folds of that veil and discern the features behind.

"Now, Alice, my dear girl," said Mandeville, "are you sure you've got your cue properly and can go through with the business?"

"I am sure of it, Count," was the reply of Miss Denton: for she the young lady was.

"And you will wait, recollect! until you hear the Horse Guards' clock strike eight."

"Oh, I know very well what I have to do," she exclaimed, laughing; "and you shall see how well I will acquit myself—though I cannot for the life of me comprehend what object the proceeding is to serve, whether farce or tragedy."

"A little bit of both, my dear girl. But do not be nervous. Ah, by the bye, you have got the packet of papers safe?"

"Quite safe, Count. Here it is," responded Alice.

"Then here I shall leave you," said Mandeville; and pressing the girl's hand, he added, "Remember to acquit yourself well, dear Alice, and I shall know how to be grateful."

He pulled the check-string—the cab stopped—and as he alighted, he said to the driver, "You will set down this lady near the Duke of York's column. Draw up, by the side of the pavement, about twenty yards from the column, and put her down there. You must then wait for her."

"All right, sir:" and the cab drove on.

It stopped in a few minutes at the place indicated by Count Mandeville; and Alice Denton alighted, but taking very good care to keep the veil over her countenance as she slowly approached the column. Nevertheless, though her own features could not be seen through the folds of the green veil, its thickness was not so great as to prevent her eyes from embracing all the features of the scene. It was still quite light at that hour in the month of June; and, as usual, there were several persons lounging about the neighbourhood of the column. There was another cab at a little distance; and the driver thereof, while lounging against the side of his vehicle, was holding a familiar chat with a short thickset man in a soiled shooting jacket and drab small-clothes. Seated on one of the steps leading down into the Park, were two men, one of whom looked like a journeyman carpenter, and the other a mechanic whose avocation lay in a somewhat dirty line, such for instance as gasfitting, or plumbing, or bell-hanging; and both seemed as if they had stopped there to rest themselves for a few minutes and light their pipes while returning home from work. A little lower down the steps was a foreign sailor, who appeared

to be fast asleep, and whose very red face and somewhat disordered toilet seemed to afford huge delight to a parcel of little boys who were playing about, and who felt convinced that the snoring mariner was drunk.

Up the steps, coming from the Park, an old gentleman was painfully toiling. He was very much bowed, and his limbs were so infirm that when he had managed to plant one foot upon a step, he could scarcely drag up the other after him. He supported himself on a stick; and his capacious shoes seemed to indicate that he was gouty. He was dressed in an old-fashioned style: he wore no whiskers—and his face seemed to be marked with wrinkles. He had on a pair of green spectacles, of that kind which is provided with shades, so that the eyes themselves were altogether concealed. His long grey hair hung from beneath a low broad-brimmed hat; and there was something so comical in his appearance that the attention of the little boys was for a moment diverted from the drunken sailor to himself. The old gentleman, however, appeared very good-natured; for with difficulty thrusting one of his gloved hands into the pockets of his curiously cut coat, he thence extracted some halfpence, which he tossed down the steps, so that all in a moment there was a regular scramble for the booty on the part of the joyous urchins. Indeed such was their uproarious clamour, that they awoke the drunken sailor, who sat up for an instant, took a sleepy look at the old gentleman, muttered three or four imprecations in a foreign tongue, and then sinking back again, began to snore louder than ever.

The old gentleman looked at his watch, and continued to ascend the steps with perhaps a trifle more ease if not alacrity than before. Just as he reached the base of the column, the clock at the Horse Guards began to strike eight. Alice Denton, who was about half a dozen paces distant from the column, at once dropped her kerchief; and a handsome well-dressed gentleman, who was passing, courteously stooped to pick it up for her. She had advanced a pace or two; but, dear me! how awkward! she dropped her kerchief a second time. On this occasion she had to stoop to pick it up for herself: but as she raised her eyes, she beheld the infirm old gentleman standing before her.

"That will do," he said quickly. "It is I, Duchess——"

"Yes. Hush!" answered Alice, in a low and subdued tone. "Here is the packet."

"It is well," was the response. "You have kept your word, Duchess."

Alice Denton left the packet in his hand; and according to the instructions which she had received, glided away towards the cab which was waiting for her.

The infirm old gentleman hastened to consign the packet to his pocket: then he cast a furtive anxious look around: and behold! the foreign sailor was close at his elbow! Neither drunken nor sleepy now was the mariner—but sober and broad awake, and with a purpose and meaning in his looks too, as he caught hold of the infirm gentleman's arm, saying, with a slight French accent, "You must come with me!"

At the same instant the journeyman gasfitter—as he seemed to be—also appeared upon the spot; and he whispered in the infirm gentle-

man's ear, "Sir Abel Kingston, I know you—and you must yield to your destiny!"

"Who are you?" asked the miserable man, clutching the arm of the seeming mechanic

"No matter. I know *you*! The others do not know who you are. It will be your own fault if they learn your true name. Take any name you like."

"But what is the meaning of this?" asked Sir Abel tremulously.

"You will see:"—and the grimy-looking mechanic stood back, while the French sailor on one hand, the journeyman carpenter on the other, and the short stout man in the soiled shooting-jacket and drab shorts, closed in upon the wretched baronet, whom they hurried to the cab which was waiting, and into which they thrust him, they themselves entering with him. The blinds were drawn down; and away the vehicle drove. Three or four persons stood to look on: but the whole proceeding was very short, and they could make nothing more of it than the circumstance of an infirm old gentleman being hurried by some strange-looking men into a cab.

"What is it?" said some one to the seeming mechanic, who stood loitering at a little distance.

"Merely an old gentleman who managed to sneak out of his lunatic asylum, and so the keepers have been obliged to be up to all sorts of dodges to nab him again:"—and having given this reply, which was evidently perfectly satisfactory, the seeming mechanic turned upon his heel and continued his way.

Proceeding to a small coffee-shop in an obscure street in the neighbourhood of the Haymarket, the mechanic quickly made a signal change in his person, by putting on clean clothes and linen, and washing the grime from his face and hands. Thence he bent his way towards Bond Street, and in a few minutes reached the Clarendon Hotel.

"It is all right, sir," he said, as he entered his master's sitting-room. "The capture was made as neatly as possible. Miss Denton did it beautifully."

"And how was Sir Abel disguised?" asked Mandeville.

"He was capitally *got up*, sir—as they would say at the theatre," replied Edmund Vaughan. "An infirm old gentleman—whiskers and moustache shaved off—and with some dye or tint he had made his cheeks look all wrinkled."

Edmund proceeded to give his master the remaining particulars; and Mandeville then stepped into his carriage, which was in readiness, and drove away to the mansion of the French Ambassador. On announcing his name, he was at once conducted up into the private cabinet of the great diplomatic functionary, whom he found there alone.

"It is done, your Excellency," said Mandeville.

"I know it," replied the Ambassador: and unlocking a drawer in his desk, he produced a sealed packet. "This has just been delivered by one of the men."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mandeville: "then your Excellency now possesses the proofs of the whole conspiracy—unless indeed I am very much mistaken."

"I would not open the packet until you came, Count," said the Ambassador. "But, Ah! what if these documents be written in cipher?"



Mandeville smiled and said, "Of course they will be, your Excellency. It is always so amongst conspirators as well as with diplomatists. But I can furnish you the key; for am I not one of the conspirators myself? Ha! ha!"

"Ha! ha!" echoed the Ambassador: and they both laughed with the air of men who could afford to make themselves merry on the strength of having achieved some grand success.

The French representative then proceeded to open the sealed packet, on the envelope of which there was no address. The contents were found to consist of Bank-notes to the amount of a hundred pounds, and a letter written in cipher: but in respect to the latter, Mandeville as a matter of course at once furnished the key. The correspondence was soon deciphered; and we need hardly add that it completely corroborated every state-

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ment or representation which the Count had thought fit to make to the French Ambassador.

"And now your Excellency is satisfied," said Mandeville, "of the exact truth of every tittle of intelligence which you have received through the medium of my lips?"

"I am completely satisfied," answered the Ambassador; "and in the name of his Majesty Louis Philippe I thank you, Count Mandeville, for having discovered one of the most diabolical conspiracies that have been formed during the seventeen years that the great Citizen King has occupied the French throne. But as you are well aware, your recompense will not be confined to mere verbal expressions of gratitude. A substantial reward——"

"Patience, your Excellency!" interrupted Mandeville, with a smile. "Let me finish the work

which I have so successfully begun; and then you shall talk to me of a recompense for my services. As you may judge by that correspondence, we have got rid of one of the most dangerous individuals of the whole set."

"Yes—that is evident," said the Ambassador. "Who could have thought that an Englishman would have shown such a bloodthirsty and implacable disposition in respect to the King of a foreign country! Ah, by the bye, Count, are you certain that the Duchess will not find other instruments of her vengeance, by the aid of that powerful talisman which she possesses—I mean gold?"

"Rest assured, your Excellency," said Mandeville, "that when this conspiracy is completely broken up, the Duchess will have no heart to enter into another. Leave me to manage this much."

"Good," said the Ambassador. "You manage everything so well, Count, that I am perfectly agreeable to leave the whole business in your hands. And now what is next to be done?"

"Be pleased," responded Mandeville, "to write a letter to my dictation. You will find that its purport explains the final object."

"Proceed," said the Ambassador, arranging the writing materials before him.

Mandeville accordingly dictated the terms of the epistle which the Ambassador was to pen; and when it was finished, the address, which the envoy also wrote to dictation, was as follows:—"To Monsieur Borel, No. —, Granby Street, Waterloo Road, Lambeth."

"And now," said Mandeville, "let one of your Excellency's servants go and leave this letter at the address indicated. Let him simply knock at the door, place the letter in the hand of whomsoever may answer the summons, and then hastily depart without giving utterance to a word."

Count Mandeville now took his departure; and the French Ambassador lost not a moment in sending off the letter to Granby Street, where it was delivered by about ten o'clock on that evening.

We may now look into the interior of the house to which we have just been alluding. Perhaps however we should observe for the benefit of those readers who are not well acquainted with the metropolis, that Granby Street bears an infamous reputation; and as at the date of which we are writing all the houses in that street were of an equally had repute, without a single favourable exception, there was no chance of the neighbours of any dweller there being inconveniently curious or prying in respect to whatsoever sinister proceedings were carried on. It might however be different on the part of the public; and we shall now see whether any precautions were taken to provide against this latter contingency.

It is to a back room in one of the houses in the street, that we are about to introduce the reader. The place was meanly furnished: the floor was dirty—the walls and ceiling were blackened with smoke. The shutters were closed, and a massive iron bar was fastened across them inside the room. Slips of green baize were nailed over the joints and chinks, doubtless to prevent any prying eyes from peering into that room from outside. The door was faced with iron plates;

and it was likewise defended by an iron bar, so that it could not be very easily broken open by any persons bent upon a hostile invasion from without. A trap-door communicated with a cellar, whence there was an entrance into the front kitchen, which had a means of egress into a narrow alley running between that and the adjacent house. We may here as well explain that the stronghold was originally placed in such a defensive condition for the use and behoof of a gang of coiners, and the arrangements were so devised that the shutters and door might be strong enough to resist the police in case of an attack, while the criminals themselves were making their escape by means of the trap-door and the secret avenue into the adjoining lane. The gang of coiners had become dispersed—it matters not how; and the "strong room" at present served as the meeting-place of certain conspirators: for the groundwork of the tale which Mandeville had told to the French Ambassador was strictly correct, though everything he had said of the connexion of Sir Abel Kingston and the Duchess therewith was a pure fiction.

The house which contained the strong room we have been describing, was kept by two old women who were sisters; and as it was a place of immoral resort, there was nothing remarkable or extraordinary that several persons of foreign appearance should occasionally be seen gliding into the premises between eleven and twelve o'clock at night. The old women did not know what the object of their meeting might be, and did not care so long as they punctually paid the rent of the room. They might have taken the foreigners for coiners, forgers, swindlers, or evil-doers of some complexion or another: but it scarcely entered the old crones' heads that the men would in reality have scorned any such disgraceful pursuit, and that they were political conspirators.

It was verging towards midnight at the time when we are about to look into the strong room, as it is called. One person only had as yet arrived; and he was a man of about five-and-forty years of age, with a countenance that must have at one time possessed a rare masculine beauty, but which now bore all the evidences of strong fierce passions, of dissipation, and of struggles with the world. The features were somewhat delicately formed; the complexion was dark: he wore a long beard, which was only just beginning to show a few white threads amidst its glossy blackness; and the moustache gave effect to a set of teeth that were well-preserved. This individual—whose figure we should remark was finely formed and well knit—was dressed in apparel a little the worse for wear; and as he sat smoking a blackened clay pipe, his contracting brows and the sinister lowering of the expression of his countenance showed that the tobacco exercised not a wholesome sedative influence over his mind, but that it actually aided him to give a fuller scope to his dark thoughts. Presently rising from his seat, he opened a cupboard, and thence took forth bottles, glasses, and a jug of water; and just as he had mixed for himself a glass of brandy and the limpid element, in equal proportions, a knock was given in a peculiar manner at the door. The individual rose and opened it; and the gentleman who now entered laid aside a long muffling cloak in which he was disguised, and the collar of which

came half-way up his countenance, while the brim of a sort of wide-awake hat shaded the upper part of the face.

"Ah, Zadouski," exclaimed Mandeville—for this was the new-comer. "You are first here at the meeting to-night? And the very person, above all others, whom I wished to encounter alone for a few minutes!"

"Indeed?" said Ivan Zadouski. "What secret can you have for me, Mandeville?"

"Nothing that concerns the objects of our meeting here," replied the Count. "But as you are aware, I move in the very best circles of society; and therefore you will not be astonished to hear that I received a card of invitation to the *soirée* given by Countess Olonetz last evening."

"Well," said Zadouski; "and what next?"

"I got into conversation with the Grand Duke," continued Mandeville; "and I happened to mention that I had heard tidings of the death of the Polish General, Daboyar, the other day in Paris. The Grand Duke asked me quite in a casual way from whom I received the intelligence?—and I said, 'From a friend of mine, a Polish gentleman named Zadouski.'—Really, my dear fellow, I was quite unprepared for the effect which this announcement seemed to produce upon the Grand Duke; but he started, and then inquired if the Christian name of the friend to whom I alluded was Ivan?"

"And what did you tell him?" asked Zadouski, with mingled interest and anxiety.

"I began to think that I had better be cautious, and that I had possibly let out something which you would have wished to be kept back. So I said that I really did not know what my friend's Christian name was; and when the Grand Duke pressed me for a personal description, I answered him so generally and vaguely that I suffered him to arrive at no positive opinion on the subject. Then he expressed his anxiety to meet this M. Zadouski: he begged me to arrange an interview. But whether he perceived by my manner that I was disposed to be guarded and cautious, or whether other motives were floating in his brain, I cannot tell: certain however it is that he pledged his word, on the honour and faith of a prince and a gentleman, to the effect that he had no hostile nor sinister intention towards you, but merely wished to put a few questions."

"And you are utterly ignorant of everything that concerns myself and that Russian Prince?" asked Zadouski, fixing his dark eyes with penetrating keenness upon Mandeville.

"Utterly ignorant," replied this personage, in an easy off-hand manner, and with an air of the most genuine truth. "The Grand Duke told me nothing more than I have stated to you."

Zadouski reflected for upwards of a minute; and then he said, "I will meet the Russian Prince."

"Ah, hy the bye," added Mandeville, "I forgot to say that the appointment must of course be of a secret nature."

"That is exactly how I intend it," rejoined Zadouski. "It shall be some place where I can look round and see that the Duke comes alone—that my movements are neither dogged nor watched—and that no treachery is intended."

"Good," said Mandeville. "Tell me where you choose to meet the Prince, and I will make the appointment for you."

"Well," said Zadouski, after another brief interval of reflection, "I will say on Waterloo Bridge—between eleven and twelve o'clock at night. The place is pretty clear then."

"To-morrow night?" asked Mandeville.

"To-morrow night?—no. Nor yet the night after," responded Zadouski, in a musing strain. "But the night after that. Let me see—this is the 1st of June. Well then, the appointment is for the night of the 4th, at half-past eleven o'clock."

"Good," said Mandeville: "I will arrange with his Imperial Highness to that effect."

"And now let me tell you one thing, my dear fellow," pursued Zadouski, with a sinister look and a sort of sarcastic politeness; "if I find that any treachery is contemplated towards me by this Grand Duke, I will manage to send a bullet through your brains as certain as you are now here."

"These threats are stupid, Zadouski," said Mandeville, coolly, and with a slight tincture of contempt in his tone. "What earthly object could I have in doing you an injury?"

"I do not know," answered the Pole doggedly.

"It is sometimes difficult enough to tell men's motives, or even to discern what the persons themselves really are. I know little or nothing of you—"

"And I little or nothing of you," rejoined Mandeville.

"Well, this is strange!" said Zadouski, as if struck by the reflection: "and yet here we are, rowing in the same boat—embarked on the same venture—having the same object in view—"

"Yes," interjected Mandeville; "because we are the haters of tyrants—because at the bottom of our hearts we cherish the fervent desire to behold the glorious republican institutions upraised in France—and because likewise," added Mandeville, lowering his voice to a confidential whisper, and bestowing a significant look upon the Pole, "we are men of desperate fortunes, and we know that amidst the ruins of a monarchy, the upheavings of a revolution, and the raging of the political storm which we are about to conjure up,—we know, I repeat, that we must inevitably become the gainers."

"True!" said Zadouski. "Here's my hand upon it, Mandeville!—and if I have said anything to wound your feelings or give you offence, I crave your pardon."

"Tis granted," replied the Count. "We shall know each other better some day, Zadouski; and then you will learn how fervid I can be in my friendship."

"And I also, Mandeville. And as a proof of it, I will take an early opportunity of telling you how it was that I ever came to know anything of the Imperial Prince—how I left the Russian army—By Jupiter! it was a perfect romance!"

"Hush! there is a knock at the door!" interjected Mandeville, who could scarcely repress a smile as he turned round to answer the summons, and said to himself, "Ha! ha! my friend! you little conjecture that I am as well acquainted with all those antecedents as you yourself are."

Mandeville opened the door, and another conspirator made his appearance. This was Ivan Zadouski's fellow-countryman—a Pole, of desperate character and courage, as Mandeville had

described him to the French Ambassador. Almost immediately after the arrival of this individual, two more of the gang were introduced—and these were Frenchmen.

"We only want Borel now," said Zadouski, "and our number will be complete."

Scarcely were these words spoken, when there was another knock at the door, and M. Borel made his appearance. He carried in his hand a letter; and when he had hastily greeted his comrades, he said in allusion to the missive, "This was just given to me by one of the old women. It seems that it was delivered nearly a couple of hours ago by some person who instantaneously took his departure again. Here it is, friends; and according to the agreement which we have between us, to the effect that no letters coming for me as the secretary here shall be opened but with the general consent, and in each other's presence, I place it at your disposal."

"Then I vote that it be opened at once," said one of the French conspirators, who was now cutting a lemon, and mixing himself some cold punch.

"I second the proposal," said Mandeville.

M. Borel accordingly opened the letter; but he started on glancing at its contents.

"What!" he ejaculated, "from the French Embassy!—and directed to me *here!*"

"The French Embassy?" echoed all the other voices.

"Yes," continued Borel; "and the letter is from the French Ambassador too! there is his signature! By heaven! everything is discovered!"

"Discovered?" echoed the others; and Mandeville's voice was the loudest amongst them.

"Discovered! betrayed!" cried Borel. "Yes—everything known! Ah, by heaven! all our names mentioned!"

"There must be a traitor in the camp!" exclaimed Mandeville, glancing around him.

"Yes—a traitor!" echoed other voices: and for a few moments the conspirators surveyed each other with looks full of doubt, suspicion, and distrust,—Mandeville's being the only glances whose sinister expression was thus feigned.

"Stop, my friends!" said one of the Frenchmen: "let us not be hasty in forming judgments, but let us curb our impatience while Borel reads the letter."

"Ah! let us have the letter," said Mandeville, now resuming his seat and crossing his arms over his breast as if with an air of dogged determination.

The conspirators also sat down, with the exception of Borel, who remained standing to read the letter. We may as well observe that he was an elderly man, with grey hair, but with a determined expression of countenance, and with a sinister light gleaming in the eyes that were overhung by shaggy ragged brows. The contents of the letter ran as follow:—

"French Embassy, June 1, 1847.

"The evil designs of the persons meeting at the house to which this letter is presently to be forwarded, are known to the Ambassador of France, who from the information already obtained, might, if he thought fit, invoke the aid of the English law to punish the wretches, but who

cares not to give such a colour of importance to the miserable plottings of such despicable characters. The Ambassador has therefore contented himself with forwarding a list of their names and a complete description of their persons to the authorities of every frontier-town of France, so that each and all may hereby receive due warning that at their peril will they set foot on the French soil. Therefore, when this letter presently falls under the eyes of Karl Petronoff, once a jeweller in Warsaw, but for twenty years past an itinerant agitator and revolutionist throughout Europe—of Ivan Zadouski—of Tristan Borel, formerly a captain in the French army, but who was cashiered for deeds of infamous cruelty in Algeria—of Hippolyte Mandeville, a miserable adventurer for whom the galleys in France are yawning and whose forgeries and frauds will now quickly hurry him to the hulks or penal colonies of England—of Henri Ponchard, once established as a surgeon at Lyons, but who took part with the insurgents in that city several years ago and was compelled to fly—of Louis Cailliez, a bankrupt merchant of Marseilles, who for the last fifteen years has seemed to delight in living in hot water—when this letter falls under the eyes of the individuals thus enumerated, they may rest assured that their trade as political conspirators is ended, and that they will never succeed in their infamous ambition of becoming regicides. It is not such reptiles as these on whom the fate of a great nation depends. *Their* place is in the dens and stews and loathsome resorts of a foreign metropolis, where in due time their offences against society will receive some signal punishment. The Ambassador experiences the utmost reluctance and repugnance in addressing even so much as a line to the objects of his unmitigated contempt and abhorrence: but still he feels that he is bound to make some sacrifice of his own sentiments in order to put a gang of miscreants to a well-merited discomfiture and confusion.

"(Signed) _____,

"The Ambassador of France."

Nothing could exceed the sensation produced by the reading of this letter. Borel's countenance became alternately white and livid with rage as he read the document; and with all the characteristic vehemence of a Frenchman he clenched his fist, gesticulated violently, and stamped his feet in the fury which seized upon him. Each individual started at the mention of his name; and Mandeville played his part to perfection. He affected to be overwhelmed with confusion at the manner in which his own name was stigmatized; and fierce glances were suddenly turned upon him, as if all the conspirators were outraged to think that there should be amongst them such a character as an adventurer, swindler, and forger. In the terrible state of excitement to which the reading of the letter lashed them up, they needed some object whereon to vent their wrath, their rage, their spite, and all the savage fierceness of the worst passions of their nature; so that when Tristan Borel had finished the reading of the letter, Ponchard the surgeon turned sharply round upon Mandeville, demanding, "Is it true that you are all the Ambassador represents you?"

"It is easy to call people by hard names," replied Mandeville; "and thus for instance the

letter charges you, Captain Borel, with being a cashiered officer—and you, friend Cailliez, with being a bankrupt merchant——”

“But I honourably got my certificate,” vociferated Cailliez.

“And if I roasted a few wretched Algerines alive,” added Borel, “I was not the first officer in the army who had done so.”

“At all events,” exclaimed Ponchard, “there was nothing degrading in your failure in business, Cailliez—nor in the cause for which you left the French army, Borel. Perdition take it! I thought we were all men of honour here!—and if so, we might afford to laugh at the spiteful outpourings of the Ambassador; and though the game is all up, we might send him an indignant reply. But, death and furies! if there is a veritable felon amongst us, I confess, friends, I for one shall wince and writhe under the terrible taunts contained in that letter!”

“Speak, man!” vociferated Karl Petronoff, fixing his flaming eyes upon Mandeville; “is it true that you deserve the character with which that letter invests you?”

“Just as if he would tell the truth in the matter!” said Ivan Zadouski, with a look of sneering contempt at Mandeville.

“I tell you what, gentlemen,” said the Count, rising from his seat, “I think I had better leave you. I see you purpose to make a dead set at me—and I therefore bid you farewell.”

“Ah, the sooner you get out of the company of honourable men, the better!” muttered the surgeon Ponchard, grinding his teeth, and fixing a look of dark sombre menace upon Mandeville.

“Yes—let him go, in the devil’s name,” said Borel, with a sound like a growl; “or else I shall be inclined to do him a mischief.”

Mandeville put on his cloak and hastened to quit the apartment, with the well-assumed air of a man who was glad to escape from a company in whose presence his character had been exposed. But as he went forth from the house, he chuckled inwardly, as he said to himself, “It was a masterly stroke of policy on my part to make the Ambassador put in that sentence concerning myself! Never mind what the rascals now think of me! At all events they do not entertain the slightest suspicion that it is by me they have been betrayed.”

But let us return to the interior of the room which Mandeville had just quitted.

“By heaven!” cried Ponchard, grasping his hair with both hands as if he meant to tear it out of his head,—“I feel as if branded by that terrible letter!”

“To think that we should have had a forger and a swindler as one of our comrades!” cried Borel, striking his clenched fist violently upon the table.

“But who the deuce could have betrayed us?” demanded Karl Petronoff: and his fierce looks wandered suspiciously and mistrustfully around.

“I am ready to make oath that I am staunch,” said Louis Cailliez.

“And, by heaven!” exclaimed Ponchard, “if I thought that any man even so much as required from my lips an assurance to that effect, I would teach him a lesson that he should never forget.”

“At all events one thing is very certain,” said Borel,—“and this is, that the game’s up—our

plans are knocked on the head—and so far as any of us are concerned, there will be no revolution, and the Citizen King may die safe and comfortable in his own bed.”

“Right enough,” said Cailliez. “And now, it seems that the only thing we can do is to pay what is owing for the room, give it up, and separate, wishing each other good luck elsewhere.”

“What! separate,” cried Karl Petronoff, “before we satisfy ourselves as to who the traitor was who betrayed us?”

“And whom do you suspect?” demanded Ivan Zadouski of his fellow-countryman. “Why the devil do you rivet your eyes on me? If you had settled them mistrustfully on Mandeville before you let him leave the room, I do not think you would have been far astray of the mark.”

“No, no!” cried Ponchard: “that will not do for a moment. Mandeville is a miserable adventurer, there can be no doubt: but he is no traitor towards us. If he were, the Ambassador would not have lashed him so frightfully in the letter.”

“To be sure not!” interjected Karl Petronoff: “that stands to reason. The letter speaks likewise of me and my concerns, in addition to mentioning my name.”

“And of me too,” said Ponchard.

“And if you come to that, it speaks of me too,” said Cailliez.

“And you will admit, friends,” added Borel, “that the letter has not spared me.”

Ivan Zadouski alone remained silent. He was suddenly struck by the fact, which in the excitement of the scene he had not thought of before, that his name was the only one that was simply mentioned in the letter without any associated slur, charge, or imputation. The same circumstance simultaneously struck the others present; and their looks were all in a moment concentrated upon that individual.

“What the devil do you mean by this, friends?” said Ivan Zadouski with a fierce air of defiance.

“You are spared in that letter!” ejaculated Petronoff.

“Well, I know it,” answered Ivan doggedly.

“And what then?”

“We suspect you, Zadouski!” cried Petronoff.

“If you say that, you lie!” retorted Ivan.

“What! I lie?”—and it was a fierce yell of rage, hyena-like and terrible, that burst from the lips of Karl Petronoff. “Villanous traitor!”—and springing forward, he seized Zadouski by the collar.

“Traitor in your teeth, liar!” exclaimed Ivan: and at the same time he dealt his assailant a terrible blow with his clenched fist upon the month.

Fiercer still was the yell of rage which now escaped from the bleeding lips of Karl Petronoff; and in the excitement of the ungovernable passion which had seized upon him, he caught up the knife from the table—it gleamed in the gaslight—and the next instant it was plunged deep down into the heart of Ivan Zadouski.

The blow was fatal—the work was done—Ivan had ceased to exist!

“Good heavens, Petronoff!” said Cailliez; “you have killed him!”

“And so much the better!” was the murderer’s brutal reply. “Was he not a traitor? did he not betray us?”

"There can be little doubt of that," said Borel, shaking his head gloomily.

"And if you had not done this, Karl," said Ponchard, savagely, "I would have done it myself!"

"Well, well, friends," said Cailliez, "I have no doubt the chastisement was just—but now what are we to do with the dead body? These old women will never suffer themselves to be compromised—"

"Hush!" said Borel: "let us first make sure that nothing has been overheard."

"No fear of that," replied Ponchard, "with these shutters and that door. But listen if you like."

They listened accordingly—but they heard nothing; and then Ponchard said, "We must conceal the body below for the present; and I think I know of a means of disposing of it to-morrow night."

"Not before to-morrow night?" ejaculated Louis Cailliez, who seemed somewhat timid on the point.

"No—not before," answered Ponchard. "I must speak to the people of the place that I am thinking of. We have got ourselves into a scrape, and we must get out of it in the best way that we can."

"Now look you, my friends," said Karl Petrovoff, "it is I who have done this—and I do not want any of you to stand any risk, or take any unnecessary trouble on my account—"

"We all row in the same boat," said Borel; "and we will stick together in the present business."

"That is also my determination," said Ponchard; and then looking at Cailliez, he added with a sinister significance, "So I hope we shall have no pusillanimity or mandlin weakness—"

"If you mean your remark for me, Ponchard," interjected Cailliez, "it is unnecessary—it is insulting—and you'd better take care of yourself."

"Come, come," said Borel; "no more quarrelling! And as for friend Ponchard's proposition in respect to the disposal of the corpse, let us accept it thankfully."

"Then down into the cellar with it!" said Ponchard; and he stooped for the purpose of raising the trap-door.

"Remember," said Cailliez, "that there is a means of communication betwixt the cellar and the front kitchen, so that if the old women should happen by any chance to take it into their heads to have a peep—"

"That matter is soon settled," interjected Ponchard. "We can fasten the door of communication on this side—"

"Well, but we cannot fasten down the trap-door," observed Cailliez.

"No, but we can lock the door of this room, and take away the key with us," said Ponchard, "and an extra half-crown dropped into the hand of either of the old crows will hush all suspicion asleep."

The corpse was accordingly lowered into the cellar below: Ponchard satisfied himself that the door of communication between that place and the front kitchen was safely secured; and shortly afterwards the conspirators separated,—Ponchard having made an appointment to meet Karl Petrovoff at that place on the ensuing night, and at

the same time intimating to Borel and Cailliez that their presence would not be needed on the occasion.

CHAPTER LII.

MANDEVILLE'S VISITS.

On the following day, immediately after breakfast, Count Mandeville penned a note to the Russian Grand Duke, informing his Imperial Highness that an appointment was made for him to meet Ivan Zadouski on Waterloo Bridge at half-past eleven on the night of the 4th of June. This billet the Count addressed in a feigned hand, and at once sent to the post. He presently entered his carriage, and drove to the mansion of the French Ambassador.

"What tidings, Count?" asked this diplomatic functionary.

"Everything has succeeded according to the representations I made to your Excellency. The conspiracy is completely broken up—the conspirators themselves are as it were annihilated—"

"And did you escape suspicion, Count?" inquired the Ambassador.

"Perfectly. I knew exactly how the whole affair would turn out. The rascals all mistrust each other;"—and then Mandeville added with a laugh, "They look upon me as a consummate scamp and adventurer; but they believe that I was stanch to their own cause. And now, will your Excellency tell me whether you have received any further tidings in respect to the Englishman whom we caused to be carried off—"

"Rest assured, Count," interrupted the Ambassador, "that you will never hear any more of that individual. The steam-vessel which bears him is ploughing the seas—it will only touch at a French port for the purpose of taking in fuel—and it will make the best of its way to Algiers. There the prisoner will be at once drafted into one of the Condemned Regiments which are now engaged in fighting against the Kabyle tribes."

"Then your Excellency does not know what the fellow said?—whether, in short, he asked any questions—made any confession or admissions—"

"I know nothing on the point—and it is really of no consequence," responded the Ambassador. "You are aware of the instructions that were given to the second lieutenant of the steamer who superintended the carrying off of the culprit—that no unnecessary word was to be spoken, and not the slightest heed to be taken of anything that the fellow himself might say. And now, Count, I think it is time we should speak of your recompense."

"I leave myself in the hands of your most gracious monarch King Louis Philippe," said Mandeville. "If the reward be a pecuniary one, your Excellency knows who my bankers are, and you can have the money remitted through a Parisian banker, in order that there may be no suspicion as to the source whence it emanates and the service which it is to recompense. Ah! by the bye," added Mandeville, "if his Majesty would add the Cross of the Legion of Honour, it would bind me to his interests for ever and ever, and he

would have no cause to regret his bounty towards me."

"Well, Count," said the Ambassador, "I will do my best for you. Yes—you may reckon upon me."

Mandeville then took his leave; and he drove towards Grosvenor Square. But he alighted from his carriage in an adjoining street, and thence proceeded on foot to the mansion of Count Olonetz; for he did not wish to make his appearance with a pomp and ceremony that might be calculated to attract the notice of the Grand Duke, who if he found Mandeville so frequently conferring alone with the Plenipotentiary, might fancy that he was playing him false in respect to the appointment with Ivan Zadouski.

Mandeville was at once admitted into the private cabinet of Count Olonetz, who happened to be alone when his visit was announced. Olonetz received him with a sufficient degree of civility; and pointing to a seat, at once said, "Have you called in reference to the business which you mentioned to me the evening before last?"

"I have come to speak to your Excellency," responded Mandeville, "in reference to Ivan Zadouski."

"I thought so," said the Russian Ambassador. "I myself have been thinking of what you told me; and while I admit that the coincidence is somewhat singular that Mildred and Zadouski should both be visiting London at the same time, yet I do not mean to go to such an extreme as to confess that I am particularly uneasy on the subject—"

"Then your Excellency *may* be—and with reason too," said Mandeville.

"How? what mean you?" demanded Count Olonetz.

"I mean, my lord," resumed Mandeville, "that Zadouski is playing some deep game; for he has by some means or another succeeded in inducing his Imperial Highness the Grand Duke to grant him an interview."

"What!" ejaculated Olonetz. "Impossible! You must be mistaken!—or else you must entertain the design of imposing upon me!"

"Ah! this is too strong, my lord!" cried Mandeville, rising from his seat with an air of indignation. "Such language as this to me!"

"And pray, sir," asked Olonetz, with all his haughtiest dignity, "since what date is it that you have discovered any reason for me to observe such particular niceties of language towards yourself?"

"Since the other night, my lord," replied Mandeville, with a self-complaisant smile, "when you gave me my title of Count in the presence of your guests, and therefore acknowledged me to be all that I have passed myself off as."

Olonetz bit his lip for a moment; and then, forcing himself to smile, he said, "Well, I must confess, Count, that you are no mean diplomatist."

"At all events, my lord," added Mandeville, still maintaining an air of the utmost confidence and self-possession, "I am not any longer to be looked upon as a miserable spy—a mere dirty agent in the pay of Russia. I will continue to serve the Russian interests to the utmost of my power, on condition that my good offices shall be recognised and rewarded in a genteel and liberal manner."

"Proceed, Count," said Olonetz, who felt him-

self compelled to humour an individual who on former occasions had proved himself so serviceable, and who indeed was all the *more* useful because he was thoroughly unscrupulous. "You were telling me that his Imperial Highness the Grand Duke has actually given an appointment to Ivan Zadouski?"

"Such is the fact, my lord."

"But for what earthly purpose can this be?" asked Olonetz.

Mandeville shrugged up his shoulders, saying, "Ah! there I am at a loss to throw any light upon the subject. One thing is however certain,—and this is that the Grand Duke has no hostile intent towards Zadouski."

"But the motive of Zadouski himself?" said Olonetz, who was evidently bewildered.

"Rest assured, my lord," responded Mandeville, "that Zadouski is playing some deep, wily, cunning game; for, as I told your Excellency the other night, he is a man of desperate fortunes—"

"Count Mandeville," interrupted Olonetz, speaking very seriously, "you will not be offended—you *must not* be offended if I ask you to afford me some proof of these bewildering facts which you are mentioning."

"Your lordship shall behold the meeting with your own eyes, if you think fit," answered Mandeville.

"Ah? Then you are indeed well informed!"

"As I will hasten to convince your Excellency," rejoined Mandeville. "But I must first stipulate for certain conditions."

"Name them," said Olonetz.

"In the first place, my lord," pursued Mandeville, "you will not mention one syllable of all this to the Grand Duke—you will not by any means or at any time suffer his Imperial Highness to learn—no, nor even to suspect that it is I who have betrayed him in this proceeding?"

"Ah, then," said Olonetz, who was as sharp and keen-witted as any living mortal, "you have had some communication with his Imperial Highness?"

"No," said Mandeville, without changing a muscle of his countenance. "But knowing what I *do* know of Russian power, policy, and capabilities, I should be loath enough to offend a Russian Grand Duke."

"I understand," said Olonetz, whose suspicion was subdued, though not altogether allayed. "I promise that the Grand Duke shall know nothing of you in the business. What further stipulation have you to make?"

"That your Excellency suffers the interview to take place," rejoined Mandeville, "and that you will not act until afterwards. For if this be not so, treachery will be suspected somewhere—"

"It shall be so," said Olonetz. "But answer me,—have you any objection that Ivan Zadouski should be seized upon immediately *after* the interview?"

"On the contrary, my lord," responded Mandeville, "it is the very course which I myself would have suggested."

"Then be it so. And now for the remainder of the information which you have to give me?" asked Olonetz.

"The appointment, my lord, is made for half-past eleven on the night of the 4th of June."

"The day after to-morrow," said Olonetz. "Where?"

"On Waterloo Bridge."

"Good," said Olonetz. "A watch shall be set—"

"Beware, my lord!" interjected Mandeville. "Zadouski will be upon his guard—he will look about him—and if he sees that he is watched or dogged—"

"I am not accustomed to conduct my proceedings in a careless or incautious manner," said Olonetz, with a smile. "Rest satisfied on this head, Count Mandeville. If everything takes place as you have informed me, Zadouski shall be seized upon immediately *after* the interview: and on the following day you may call upon me and name the recompense which you seek for the service that you will have rendered."

"Good, my lord," said Mandeville. "This is fairly spoken. I now beg to take my leave."

He bowed and retired, inwardly chuckling at the success which, as he supposed, must attend upon his double-faced policy.

"I have made a friend of the Grand Duke," he said to himself; "and I have more than ever convinced Count Olonetz how necessary my services are to the Russian Government and how well they ought to be recompensed. But more than this—I shall get rid of Zadouski! Ha, ha! he will go back in due time to Siberia!"

Mandeville issued from the Russian Plenipotentiary's mansion—where, by the bye, he caught the slightest glimpse of Ethel; and retracing his way to his carriage, he proceeded to pay some other visits, which occupied the time until about three o'clock, when he drove to Arleigh House.

It was originally the intention of the young Duchess to return to Thornbury on the day after the masked ball at Lady Todmorden's; but the incidents which there transpired in reference to Sir Abel Kingston, had determined her to remain in town to await the issue of whatsoever proceedings Count Mandeville might adopt to rid her of the persecutions of one whom she dreaded and abhorred.

She was seated in a small but elegantly furnished apartment; and though she had placed the most implicit reliance on Mandeville's promise that he would save her from the persecutions of her enemy—aye, and though she even entertained a species of religious faith in his power to do so—yet she was naturally a prey to a certain amount of suspense, and she had been uneasy and agitated until the door was thrown open and the name of Count Mandeville was announced.

"Dear, dearest Mary!" he said, with impassioned looks and accents, as he took her hand and pressed it in his own the instant the domestic had withdrawn.

"Hippolyte, you have saved me!" said the Duchess, in a tone which showed that she was asserting a fact rather than putting an inquiry. "I am sure you have! A secret voice speaks in my soul, telling me that it is so!"

"And it is so, dear Mary," responded Mandeville.

"Ah! I knew it! But, Oh! what a relief from suspense!"—and the superb bust of the Duchess swelled with a long deep-drawn sigh.

"Did I not tell you, Mary, that from the very moment the clock struck eight on the evening of

the 1st of June—that is to say, last evening—your persecutor should trouble you no more?"

"Yes—such were the words you spoke, Hippolyte," murmured the Duchess: and she abandoned to him her fine form as his arms circled her waist.

"Well then, dearest Mary," he said, "I have accomplished my pledge. Never again shall that man trouble you!"

The Duchess shuddered for a moment; but still she clung all the more tightly to Mandeville, as she said in a voice that was half hushed with terror, "What have you done? how have you rid me of that man?"

"Do not think, dearest," replied Mandeville, with a reassuring smile, "that I have taken his wretched life—no, neither have I caused it to be taken. He lives!—blood has not been poured out—"

"Heaven he thanked!" murmured the Duchess; "for that would have been terrible!"

"And yet I would even have done *that* for your sake!" answered Mandeville: and now he pressed his lips to hers.

"What has become of him?" she asked.

"He is on his way to a foreign country, whence never shall he return to molest you, Mary. He is bound for Africa's torrid clime and arid wastes; and there, in one of the Condemned Regiments of France—fulfilling a felon's doom—herding with miscreants as vile as himself—must he linger out his wretched existence, unless death in mercy should send the shot of an enemy to cut him prematurely off."

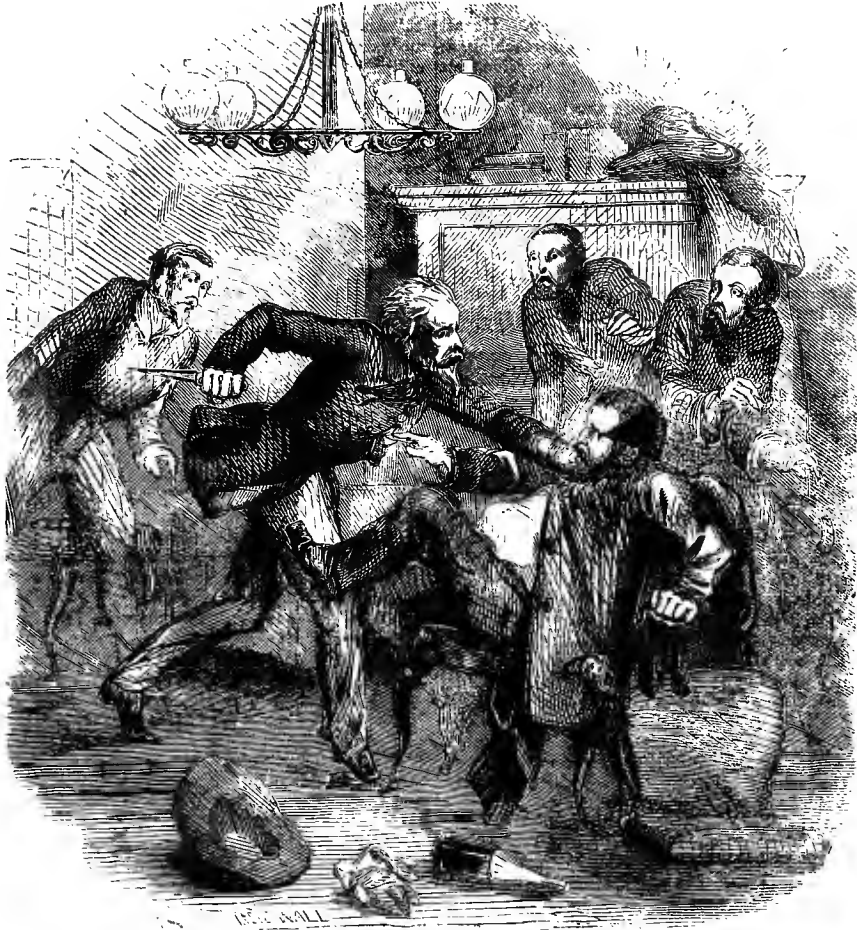
"But, good heavens!" cried the Duchess, "how is it that you possess a power so terrible as this?"

"My influence is all-powerful with the French Government," responded Mandeville, "and therefore with the French Ambassador. It was thus that the whole proceeding was accomplished; and you, Mary, need now no longer fear the wretch who threatened to become so virulent a persecutor. No—neither are you in any way compromised—"

"But if he should tell the tale to those who have now got him in their power?" said the Duchess.

"He will tell nothing, Mary. He will not even declare what his proper name is; and those who have him in their power are ignorant of it. He will be only too glad to conceal his identity beneath some feigned name which he must take, or which will be bestowed upon him if he choose to remain silent. To speak seriously, Mary, do you think for a moment that he will enter upon explanations—how he was an English baronet—how he was arrested for forgery—how it was supposed he had died in Newgate—how he became resuscitated—and how he was endeavouring to extort an enormous sum of money from a young and beautiful lady at the very instant that he was captured and carried off for some unknown crime? No, no! he will tell nothing of all this! He knows full well that not for a single instant would one tithe of so extravagant a tale experience belief, or do other than provoke jeering outbursts of incredulous laughter. In one word, Mary, make your mind easy upon every point."

"I will—I do, Hippolyte. Oh, what power do you possess!—power of action—power of persuasion! You are truly wonderful!"



"And you, Mary, supremely beautiful! And now, dearest," continued Mandeville, straining her to his breast, "you know how deeply and devotedly I love you—how sacredly I have vowed to prove your champion and friend in all difficulties—"

"I know it—I know it, Hippolyte!" she murmured. "You have already given me such proofs of friendship—of love—"

"And you, Mary?—you?"

"I have not forgotten the pledge that I gave you," she murmuringly replied, and now unasked did she offer her lips for his caresses.

"You will be mine, Mary?—mine?" he repeated, intoxicated with passion and with exultation.

"I repeat, Hippolyte, I will fulfil my pledge. There is now nothing that you may ask me that I will not grant!"

The beautiful Duchess was all agitation as she

thus spoke: her cheeks were suffused with blushes—and her heart was palpitating audibly. Mandeville strained her again and again in his arms,—until at length she, whisperingly reminded him that at any moment some one might enter the apartment. But a tender appointment was given; and Mandeville took his temporary leave of the Duchess of Arleigh.

Half an hour afterwards she rang the bell, ordered the horses to be put to the travelling-carriage, and set off for Thornbury.

It was eleven o'clock at night: the stars were shining—the heaven was clear—the atmosphere was fresh and pure—it was June's loveliest weather—when the form of a man emerged from amidst the verdure of the garden attached to the ducal country-seat, and drey near towards the mansion. Skirting the extremity of the building; this individual approached a small door so shaded by two large trees as to envelope the spot in the

completely dark. Count Mandeville—for he it was—unlocked that door by means of a key with which he had been provided, and he passed into a vestibule where a lamp was burning. He at once ascended a staircase; and on reaching a landing, which was also lighted, he perceived at a glance which door it was that he had now to open. Thither he proceeded: the handle turned in his grasp—he crossed the threshold, and entered a room where the atmosphere was warm and perfumed. This was the ante-chamber leading to the sleeping apartment of the Duchess; and there was the beautiful Duchess herself, in a most voluptuous *deshabillée*, waiting to receive him.

Mandeville strained her in his arms. She hid her blushing countenance upon his breast, and she murmured a few words of welcome. At that very instant hasty footsteps were heard rushing along the passage outside; and the Duchess ejaculated in an access of terror, "Good heavens! what can this mean?"

Mandeville, without for a moment losing his presence of mind, rushed to the door and turned the key.

"It must be Lavinia coming for some purpose or another!" murmured the young Duchess.

There was now a violent knocking at the door: the countenance of the frail patrician lady indicated a strange bewildering terror: but Mandeville whispered, "It must be your husband! it must be the Duke!"

"No, no! he would not do this!" responded the Duchess, in a quick agitated whisper. "Surely it cannot be——"

The knocking continued; and now a voice was heard exclaiming, "Open, my dear Mary! do open the door! I am frightened to death! there are ghosts and spectres!—Oh, good God! and skeletons! Open! open!"—and while there was an accent of anguish and almost of mortal terror in the tones of that female voice which was thus speaking, the knocking was redoubled.

"Ah! I suspected it!" said the young Duchess. "I must admit her!—it is the Duke's mother! I will soon get rid of her! There!"—and opening the door of the bed-chamber, she pushed Mandeville into it.

Then the young Duchess flew to open the ante-room door; and her mother-in-law rushed in, fingering her terrified looks over her shoulder, for she evidently thought that she was being pursued by some objects of ghastly horror. She had nothing on but her night-gear; and throwing herself upon the sofa, she began giving vent to all the strange ideas that came into her head at the time; and she shivered visibly—not with the cold, for it was the month of June—but with the effects of the fright which through her disordered imagination she had sustained.

She was a woman of about forty-six years of age—of tall stature, and full proportions. Previous to the loss of her intellect—when she had carried her head high, and felt herself the Duchess—she was of a grand commanding figure, superbly handsome, and of a splendid symmetry. But though many evidences of that beauty remained, the lapse of time and the influence of her mental malady had failed not to show their ravages: for the hair was streaked with white—there were wrinkles upon the brow—the eyes had a peculiar look, and also an incipient glaze—the figure had

lost its plumpness and the rounded symmetry of its proportions. Yet the brilliancy of the teeth remained.

"Ah, my dear Mary, you should not have kept me waiting!" cried the unfortunate lady. "It is so unlike you! you are generally so good and kind! Ah, those horrid spectres!—they chased me with whips of scorpions! But have I ever done any harm? No, never! It is true there was a time when I did not want Herbert to marry you—but he did at last—and so much the better. Don't let the ghosts come here! For heaven's sake lock the door, Mary! I know that Mrs. Quinlan is nothing but an old ghost herself——"

"My dear mother," interrupted the young Duchess, speaking in the most soothing and affectionate terms to her who was only her mother-in-law,— "Mrs. Quinlan is very kind and good to you—you used to be very fond of her——"

"I only love you, Mary," replied the unfortunate Dowager-Duchess. "I mean to remain here with you——"

At this moment there was another knock at the outer door: the young Duchess flew to open it—and Mrs. Quinlan, the unfortunate lady's keeper, made her appearance. She was a woman of about fifty, with a determined, though by no means repulsive or disagreeable, much less a cruel expression of countenance: but she had the air of one in whose disposition firmness and benevolence were blended. She was in her night-dress, with a flannel wrapper thrown over it.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the young Duchess somewhat angrily; "how did this happen?"

At that same instant the Dowager-Duchess, who had flung a glance of affright upon Mrs. Quinlan, flew towards the bed-chamber, into which she rushed, locking the door against her daughter-in-law and Mrs. Quinlan, who bounded after her. The young Duchess was suddenly transfixed with consternation and dismay: for her mother-in-law had locked herself in the chamber along with Count Mandeville!

"I am sure, your Grace," said Mrs. Quinlan, "I am very sorry this should have happened. I always lock the outer doors of our suite of apartments, as your Grace knows; and I hide the keys under my pillow. But somehow or another I quite forgot to do it this evening—and then I must have slept so sound—or perhaps the poor lady glided away so softly——"

"No matter!" interrupted the young Duchess angrily, as she almost stamped her foot with rage: "the mischief is now done!"

"Well, your Grace," said Mrs. Quinlan, somewhat surprised at the vehemence of the young Duchess, "I don't think there's so much mischief done after all. Accidents will happen—and this is pretty nearly the first time that ever such a thing has occurred to me during the four years I've been in attendance on her Grace."

"True!" said the young Duchess, now recovering somewhat of her presence of mind, and perceiving that her anger might well be regarded as utterly incommensurate with the actual character of the incident itself. "I did not mean to speak harshly, Mrs. Quinlan—Only I have been terribly frightened—my mother-in-law knocked so furiously at the door—but, Ah! how is it that she seems to have taken a sudden dislike towards you?"

"Oh, my lady, there's no telling what strange ideas mad people may take into their heads. But if your Grace would just go and speak coaxingly at the door, your mother-in-law would come out, and I would take care your Grace shall not be disturbed for the rest of the night."

The young Duchess had for the last few minutes been so confused and bewildered by the perilous aspect which circumstances had assumed, that she had not known how to act; but now completely regaining her self-possession, she approached the door, and said in a coaxing, cajoling voice, "Do let me in, dear mother!—unlock the door! You know I would not hurt you!"

At that moment a violent scream burst from inside the bed-chamber; and the young Duchess felt as if all the pains and horrors of pandemonium itself were fastening upon her. Scream after scream pealed forth from the lips of the Dowager-Duchess; and Mrs. Quinlan exclaimed in a determined voice, "We must break open the door, your Grace!"

But scarcely were the words spoken, when the key was suddenly turned in the lock—the door was opened violently—out rushed the Dowager-Duchess, with the direst terror depicted upon her countenance—and closing the door with violence again, she thrust the key into the lock, turned it, and then tottering towards the sofa, sank down upon it, crying, "The ghost! the ghost!"

It struck the young Duchess that at the very instant when the door was burst open, by her mother-in-law, she caught the sound of a window closing inside the bed-chamber. A sensation of relief was thus suddenly experienced by her mind, which an instant before was suffering tortures that harrowed and excruciated it; and now flying towards the Dowager-Duchess, she wound her arms about her neck, saying everything soothing and endearing and tranquillizing that she could think of.

"The ghost! the ghost!" exclaimed the unfortunate lady, with passionate vehemence. "I saw it! a horrible dark shape gliding through the room! Oh, yes! I saw it!—it was wrapped in a pall! A demon! a demon! Good spirits are white—evil spirits are black! Oh, if it should come again!"—and the Dowager-Duchess flung her shuddering looks towards the door which she had so carefully locked.

"What shocking hallucinations!" whispered the young Duchess to Mrs. Quinlan, at the same time bending a searching look upon this female's countenance to ascertain whether she suspected anything sinister or not.

"Let me try, your Grace, to get her away now," said the keeper, whose looks expressed nothing calculated to trouble the young Duchess.

Mrs. Quinlan accordingly began to practise her own wonted wheedlings and cajoleries with the demented lady; and it now seemed as if a complete revulsion of feeling had taken place within her in respect to her keeper; for she no longer seemed afraid of the woman, nor to entertain an aversion towards her; but on the contrary she turned to her as if to one who had the power of protecting her from harm.

"That's right, my dear mother," said the young Duchess, speaking to her as if it were a mere child whom she was thus soothing: "go

with dear Mrs. Quinlan—she will take care of you—leave these disagreeable rooms as soon as you can."

"Do you want me to go, Mary?" asked the Dowager, now playing caressingly with the long luxuriant masses of her daughter-in-law's light brown hair.

"I wish you to return to your own chamber, dear mother—and I will come and see you early in the morning."

"But I can't leave you *there*!" suddenly exclaimed the Dowager, her voice well-nigh swelling into a scream as she pointed towards the door of the bed-chamber.

"It's always better to prove to persons in her Grace's state of mind that there's really nothing to be frightened at," whispered Mrs. Quinlan to the young Duchess: then at once turning towards the Dowager, she said in her usual coaxing tone, "You remain, dear ma'am, with your daughter just for a minute—only a minute!—and I'll go and look into that room."

"No, no—you shan't!" shrieked the Dowager, recoiling in visible horror from the idea. "The ghost is there, I tell you!—an evil spirit!—a fiend! a fiend!"

"I am afraid," hastily whispered the young Duchess, "you will only be frightening her Grace more and more."

"Not I, my lady," responded Mrs. Quinlan. "I know best how to manage her."

Having thus spoken, she moved towards the door of the bed-chamber: the young Duchess made one slight gesture as if she would have held her back; but then suddenly recollecting the sound of the closing window, she felt reassured, and she said to herself, "He is gone! All is safe!"

She then resumed her soothing and tranquillizing efforts in respect to her mother-in-law, while Mrs. Quinlan opened the door of the bed-chamber and crossed the threshold. It was a large room and furnished in the most elegant style; it was however only now dimly lighted by two tapers on the toilet-table, which was near the further extremity. Mrs. Quinlan had left the door wide open; but in the position where the young Duchess now was—namely, bending over her mother-in-law who was lamenting and whining upon the sofa—she could not command an entire view of the interior of the sleeping-apartment. Thus there was still a certain amount of suspense and uncertainty in the mind of the young Duchess, notwithstanding the incident of the closing window with which she sought to reassure herself; for the recollection forced itself upon her mind that the height from the window to the ground was at least twenty feet—and who could tell but Mandeville was even then lying maimed, and with broken limbs, beneath the casement?

While continuing to speak in a soothing tone to her mother-in-law, the young Duchess listened with the keenest attention to the movements of Mrs. Quinlan in the adjoining room. Never had her power of hearing been more keen—more vivid—more acute! She could almost comprehend how it was that a sharpened and refined sense of hearing on the part of the blind materially compensated them for the loss of their eyesight. She could follow as it were the footsteps of Mrs. Quinlan throughout the adjoining room—now towards this corner, now towards that—now to

the windows—— Good heaven! if Mandeville should be groaning beneath one of them!—now towards the couch——Ah! and thence on towards an immense mahogany wardrobe of magnificent workmanship, in which some of the robes and dresses of the young Duchess were suspended. Mrs. Quinlan was opening the doors of that wardrobe; and now all in a moment a terrible suspicion flashed to our heroine's mind. Did Mrs. Quinlan actually conjecture that there was something wrong? and was it on this account she was making the search under a pretence of doing so for the mere purpose of satisfying the Dowager-Duchess? A ghastly pallor seized upon the countenance of the frail patrician lady as these thoughts struck her; and then, as if this blow were not sufficient to overwhelm her, she fancied that the sound of a low quick whisper passing in the next room reached her ear. She was ready to sink under the weight of a thousand terrors, when Mrs. Quinlan came from the sleeping-apartment.

"There, my dear ma'am," she said to the Dowager-Duchess, in her wonted soothing tone—but at the same time it struck our frail and trembling heroine that the woman darted a peculiar look upon herself,—“you see, dear ma'am, there is nothing in that room. I have looked everywhere—there is no spirit or spectre, white or black.”

“Are you sure?” asked the Dowager, now passing her hand across her brow, and looking as if her thoughts and ideas were all falling into confusion.

“Yes—I'm sure, my lady. And now do come with me!—you must stand in need of repose and rest! Do come!—and to-morrow morning we will take such a nice walk in the garden—and your Grace shall pick such a beautiful nose-gay!”

“Oh, then I'll come!”—and the poor demented lady sprang up from the sofa; and having affectionately embraced her daughter-in-law, she followed Mrs. Quinlan from the ante-chamber.

But as they paused a moment at the door, Mrs. Quinlan turned and bent so strange and peculiar a look upon the young Duchess that the latter shrank back aghast, dismayed, and full of guilty terror, as if the woman's tongue had proclaimed her secret in accents loud enough to be heard by all the inmates of the mansion. The door closed behind the Dowager and her female-keeper; and then the young Duchess, unable to endure for another moment the tortures of this horrible suspense, rushed into the bed-chamber.

At the same instant Count Mandeville came forth from the wardrobe; and with a wild and mournful cry the Duchess sank upon the nearest seat.

“Do not despair, Mary!—for God's sake do not despair!” cried Mandeville. “The secret is safe!”

He advanced towards her, and made a movement as if to take her in his arms; but she passionately waved him back, murmuring, “I am lost! I am lost!”

“Lost? No, no, dearest! no!”

“Yes—lost, I say!” exclaimed the unfortunate creature in the accents of despair; “and to-morrow all the world will know that I had a lover concealed in my room!”

“Again I conjure you to compose yourself, dear

Mary! Again too I tell you,” added Mandeville urgently, “that your secret is safe!”

“What do you mean? Safe! How so? Think you that I understood not that woman's glance?—aye, and my ears had previously caught the whisper in this room!”

“'Twas she who whispered,” interjected the Count. “On my soul it was, Mary! Not for worlds would I deceive you! She opened the clothes-press—she discerned me:—not for a single instant did she lose her presence of mind—but she hastily whispered, ‘*Remain! be quiet! the secret is safe with me!*’”

“Oh, but to be in the power of such a woman!” moaned the young Duchess, wringing her hands: but still there was a slight—though *very* slight—sense of relief in her soul. “Methought at one time that all was safe!” she suddenly ejaculated. “I fancied you had lowered yourself from the window?”

“I opened it with that intention,” answered Mandeville. “God knows, I would have done any desperate deed or run any risk for your sake, Mary!—but that would have been mad and useless! A glance showed me that the window was too high from the ground—I should have broken my limbs—and there remaining, unable to crawl away, I should have been found——”

“Yes, yes,” said the Duchess; “it would have been impossible—and I was mad to think of it! But what happened with my mother-in-law?”

“To tell you the truth, Mary,” responded Mandeville, “I had half a mind to lock that door the instant you pushed me into the room: but a second thought told me I had better not, and that I should leave everything to your discretion and ingenuity. But scarcely had I thus made up my mind how to act, when in rushed your mother-in-law. This irruption was so suddenly made that I had not time to conceal myself, otherwise than by gliding into the nearest dark corner. Then your mother-in-law hastened towards the toilet-table—I know not what for—but it struck me that her object was to take one of the tapers; and then I, perceiving the necessity of some desperate effort for my perfect concealment, sped on tiptoe towards the nearest window-draperies. But her Grace saw me—and then you may guess what followed.”

“Oh, there is a fatality in all this!” moaned the young Duchess.

“Compose yourself, dear Mary! take courage!” said Mandeville: and again he offered to approach her.

But once more did she passionately wave him back: and then suddenly starting up to her feet, she drew the disordered wrapper over her bosom—flung back the glossy tresses that had fallen over her face—and looking Mandeville full in the countenance, with a frank earnest expression of her large liquid blue eyes, she said, “Hippolyte, I beg you to leave me now. I owe you a thousand obligations:—add one more to them by granting the boon that I now ask. I am your's, body and soul, if you insist upon it!—but I appeal to your generosity for a brief delay. Oh, compel me not to say more!—but I am ill—I am agitated—I beseech you that I may be left alone!”

The Count thought that there was indeed nothing unnatural or astonishing in the present

conduct of the young Duchess, after all the exciting and terrifying adventures through which she had passed. Besides, had she not acknowledged that she was in his power, and that she was his, body and soul, if he chose to be inexorable in the assertion of his rights and claims? Thus, though fired with passion, and burning to possess that being of a beauty alike so brilliant and so seductive, he felt that it would be only politic to yield, with every appearance of a generous readiness and magnanimous forbearance, to the demand which she had made.

"Your will is my law, dear Mary," he accordingly said; and then, as this time he only made a movement to take her hand, and not to embrace her, she abandoned it to him, and he raised it to his lips with as much respectfulness as tenderness.

The Duchess conducted him as far as the outer door of the ante-room; and he took his departure by means of the private staircase and the small door whereof he had been furnished with the key.

On the following morning, between seven and eight o'clock, the utmost excitement, consternation, and horror were prevailing throughout Thornbury mansion: for Mrs. Quinlan had been found dead in her bed—foully murdered, by means of a sharp-pointed carving-knife that was sticking in her bosom!

CHAPTER LIII

HESTER.

THERE were however other incidents which occurred on the night whereof we have been specially writing; and in order that we may properly pursue the thread of our narrative, we must take a temporary leave of Thornbury Park and return to London.

It was between ten and eleven o'clock in the evening—and therefore at about the time when Mandeville was making his way to his appointment with the brilliant Duchess in the country—that Henri Ponchard, the surgeon, was speeding along a maze of narrow, obscure, and villanous streets in the spacious district of Lambeth. Presently he stopped at a particular house which has before been mentioned in our narrative; and the door was opened by a pale-faced young girl, about sixteen years of age.

"Ah, monsieur," she said, "is it you?"—and a smile of satisfaction appeared upon a countenance which though very far from ill-looking, yet wore an expression of hardened depravity. "Pray walk in."

Ponchard entered the house accordingly; and patting the girl's face with the familiarity of one who knew her well, he asked, "Is Mother Grills in?"

"No: she and her husband are both out," was the reply.

Ponchard made a gesture expressive of annoyance; and the girl, pouting her lips, said, "Oh, then, you have not come to see me, monsieur?"

"Yes—to see you, Hester," replied Ponchard, instantaneously throwing off his abstracted mood

and putting on a kind and affable demeanour towards the girl. "I came to have a chat and drink a glass of wine with you, Hester: but I also wanted just to say a word or two to Grills and his wife—it's of no great consequence——"

"They will be back presently," said the young female; "and therefore," she added coaxingly, "you can wait with me till their return?"

"Are you all alone in the house, Hester?"

"Yes—all alone. There's been no company here this evening; and I was dull enough when you knocked at the door. You know that Mr. Jasper—that's Mr. Grills' brother——"

"Well, what of him? By the bye," said Ponchard, "if Jasper is at home, I may speak to him—it will be just as well——"

"But he is not at home, Monsieur Henri," interrupted the girl, now familiarly pulling the Frenchman's whisker. "I was going to tell you about him. He was knocked down and run over by a cab yesterday, and taken to Charing Cross Hospital. So Mr. and Mrs. Grills have gone to leave him a few little things in a basket: but they cannot be long before they are back, for they set off at eight——but then they meant to drop in and take a friendly glass with some cronies of theirs in one of the streets leading out of the Strand. But pray step in! Here we are, standing in the passage all this while!"

"Well, Hester," said the Frenchman, producing a sovereign from his purse, "go and fetch a bottle of wine or brandy—or anything you like; and—and, my dear girl, you may keep the change for yourself."

"Oh! you are always generous to me, Henri," cried Hester, again caressing his cheek. "And now wait a few moments while I run and fetch the wine."

Ponchard sat down in the parlour; and Hester, hurrying up-stairs, threw on her bonnet and shawl. She then issued from the house; and the moment the front door had closed behind her, Ponchard caught up a candle from the table, and descended into the lower region of the premises. He looked into the kitchen, and then in the scullery; the survey was only the work of a few moments—but evidently being quite contented with it, he quickly retraced his way up the stairs again; so that when Hester returned and let herself in with the latch-key, she found the Frenchman quietly seated in the parlour as if he had never for a moment quitted his chair during her absence.

We have on a former occasion spoken of this young female as being very slight in figure and pale in complexion, with her dark hair arranged in plain bands, and with a simple and neat attire. There was nothing flaunting or gaudy in her dress: but it was cut meretriciously low in the *corsage*, so as to display her white neck, and the contours of a bust which was well formed though on a scale proportionate to the slightness of the entire figure. She had good features; and her dark eyes might be termed handsome. But whatsoever was good-looking in the face, was marred, if not actually spoilt, by the bold gaze of those eyes, and the unmistakable expression of an inveterate profligacy and hardened depravity which characterised the entire countenance. Although only sixteen, her voice sounded like that of a woman of six-and-twenty. Not that it was rough or coarse;

but it exhibited this precocity as one of the usual evidences of an early acquaintance with crime and a career of dissipation already pretty well entered upon. One thing was particularly observable about this girl: namely, that though she was forward and familiar, there was nothing absolutely vulgar in her manner. Her language was grammatically correct; and beneath the bold veneering of depravity, a glimpse might be caught of a gentility bearing reference to other and better times, and engendering the suspicion that the creature was a lost star fallen from some superior sphere.

The wine was drawn—Ponchard filled the glasses—and Hester drained at a draught the one which he presented to her.

"You seem thirsty, my dear," said Ponchard, smiling; for he did not think it was greediness on the girl's part.

"No, I am not thirsty," she replied, also smiling, but with a certain degree of bitterness; yet the smile displayed a very excellent set of teeth. "But drinking drives away care, you know; and therefore, to tell you the truth, I was almost inclined to bring brandy instead of wine, as you appeared to leave the choice to me."

"I wish you had done so, Hester, if you prefer brandy," said Ponchard.

"No matter now! Another time! This wine is strong enough for the present. Besides, when you are with me I do not feel dull."

"Little flatterer!" ejaculated Ponchard. "Do you say the same thing to every gentleman who visits you?"

"No!—that I swear I do not!" replied Hester, almost indignantly. "Do you think that it is not permitted for such as I to entertain a preference—a caprice—perhaps a sentiment?—Ah! you may laugh at the idea of sentiment in such a place as this—"

"I will not laugh, Hester, at anything you tell me of a serious character."

"There! that is like yourself, Henri! It is because you are always so good and kind towards me, and so considerate that—that—But no matter! It is of course ridiculous! Come, fill the glasses."

Ponchard gazed upon the girl with a certain amount of mingled surprise and interest for a minute; and then he obeyed her request by replenishing the glasses.

"So you are dull here sometimes, Hester?" he said.

"Who could help being dull? I cannot settle my mind to needlework, because *that* leaves one to the mercy of one's own thoughts."

"But you can read amusing books," suggested Ponchard.

"No," rejoined the girl; "because nearly all novels end by making the heroine marry happily as a reward for her virtue; and then—and then—Ah! now again you will think me very foolish, Henri; but I cannot help it."

"Well, what were you going to say?"

"That when I read of virtue's reward, after all kinds of trials, temptations, and difficulties, it seems as if it were pointing a moral that comes terribly home to myself; and then I sit down and cry—But how I am going on!" exclaimed Hester, thus suddenly interrupting herself: and she tried to force a laugh of hardihood and defiance. "Here, give me some more wine, Henri!"

"Somehow or another," said Ponchard, "I do not think you are altogether happy here?"

"Happy?" and it was almost a veritable scream of mockery to which the girl gave vent: it was certainly far more than a mere laugh of derision. "Happy?" she repeated: and then all in a moment the tears gushed forth from her eyes.

"Hester, my dear girl—"

"No excuses! no apologies!" she cried, hastily dashing away these tears with her kerchief. "I am as foolish as I can be to-night—and I shall plague you to such an extent with my silliness that you will never come and see me again."

"On my soul I will!" replied Ponchard. "And to tell you the truth, Hester, I am rather interested in the turn which the conversation has taken. I have more than once been going to ask you two or three questions; but I did not like to put them."

"Well, now you shall put them," said the girl: and then, as an idea struck her, she hastily added, "But don't ask me anything about my earlier years!"

"Ah, then, I must remain silent," said Ponchard, with an air of disappointment; "for those were the very topics on which I was going to question you."

"Were they? Well then," continued Hester, in a sort of musing strain, though she spoke audibly, "you *must* experience some little interest for me after all;—and God knows it is pleasant to entertain the idea that any living soul sympathises on behalf of a poor miserable cast-away!—And now, Monsieur Henri," she added, suddenly turning towards him, "put your questions!—yes, as many as you like; and I will answer them truly and faithfully."

"I do not think, Hester," said Ponchard, "that you could have been born and bred in an inferior class of life?"

"As to the class to which my parents belonged, I have no idea," responded the girl, "seeing and considering that I never knew them. But as for the sphere in which I was bred, of this I can speak with certainty; because I was educated at a very excellent boarding-school until I was between twelve and thirteen."

"Well, and then?" asked Ponchard.

"And then," replied Hester,—"and then—You will say that the transition was as ludicrous as it was painful!—and *then* I was sent to the workhouse!"

"Good heavens! The workhouse?" ejaculated the Frenchman, with the most unfeigned astonishment.

"Yes—the workhouse," repeated Hester. "No remittances had reached the schoolmistress on my behalf for a couple of years—no one claimed me—no one seemed to care for me—the schoolmistress did not know where to write to the person or persons who had at one time made their remittances with regularity—perhaps they were tired of paying for a poor forlorn creature whom they knew not—but no matter what the reason was, the schoolmistress could not afford to keep me any longer, and so she did the only thing that under the circumstances it was possible to do—namely, to fling me like an outcast upon the poor-rates."

"But before you went to that school?" said Ponchard inquiringly.

"Oh, you wish me to go back to the very be-

ginning of my history—do you?" said Hester. "Well, give me some more wine. There!—thank you. My earliest recollections were associated with a couple of elderly ladies, a neat residence somewhere down in the country, and half-a-dozen little playmates, boys and girls. Those ladies, who were two maiden sisters, kept a sort of little preparatory school—though it might be more properly termed an asylum for the children of parents going out to India, or for any children in fact whom it might suit the purpose or convenience of people to place there at a certain moderate stipend. Well, there I found myself as early as I could have any ideas, recollections, or reflections of my own: but who put me there, I never learnt. Sometimes I heard other children asking the ladies about their papas and mammas; and then I inquired about mine also: but the elderly ladies always gave me some reply which though it satisfied me and saved my feelings at the time, I now of course know to have been evasive. I remained with them until I was seven years old; and then I was sent to the boarding-school at Brompton of which I have already spoken."

"But when the mistress of this boarding-school found that the remittances did not arrive," said Ponchard, "did she not—"

"I know what you are going to ask me," interrupted Hester. "You mean whether the schoolmistress did not write to the two elderly ladies to see if they could give any useful information concerning my parents, friends, or connexions, whoever they might be, and if I possessed any at all? Yes—the schoolmistress *did* write: but she learnt that the two elderly ladies had met with misfortunes—a malignant fever had broken out in their establishment, so that the establishment itself was broken up in consequence. Then, what became of the poor maiden sisters, or whether they had gone, no one could tell."

"And what name may you have borne, Hester?" asked Ponchard.

"Name?" repeated the girl. "Well, I don't know," she went on to say with a tone and air of hardened indifference, "that there is much harm in telling you the name; for though I have disgraced it, the dishonour is never likely to be reflected on any parents, friends, or connexions, because no one will ever claim me now. So I may without hesitation inform you that my name is Hester Sergeant. Thus you have got all my history up to the point when I was suddenly plunged into the workhouse, between twelve and thirteen years of age."

"Perhaps you would not like to tell me any more, Hester?" said Ponchard, who though he had many other subjects for his thoughts—and one especially of a deep and well-nigh all-absorbing importance—nevertheless experienced a considerable interest in the tale of the unfortunate girl.

"Oh, I have no hesitation in telling you the entire truth, Henri! Why should I have?"

"Because you have reached a point at which somehow or another women seldom do tell the truth."

"I know what you mean!"—and Hester's eyes flashed angry fires for a moment. "You had it in your head that when once a young female has strayed from the path of virtue, as they call it,

and become a disgrace and a lost one, she endeavours to indemnify her own feelings as it were, by giving as grand and important an appearance as possible to the circumstances attending her first error; so that she is sure to make it out that her seducer was some nobleman or person of rank; and she refers to the pages of some old romance for a few touching incidents wherewith to embellish her narrative. Now, is not this what you meant?"

"I must confess, Hester, that something of the sort was passing in my mind at the moment."

"And yet," continued the young girl, her tone and look gradually losing their hardihood and bold callousness, and becoming mournful and touching, "if the wretched creatures who strive to deceive others, and perhaps even to delude themselves with these imaginative and romantic inventions, were only to adhere to the real truth, they might tell tales that would be strange and affecting enough. I am convinced, Henri," pursued Hester, her tone and manner now becoming serious and argumentative, rather than mournful, "that most of the poor fallen creatures who fill the streets were at the outset made the victims of their own hearts' affections, rather than of any innate wantonness and depravity. I do not believe in so ridiculous a theory that all the seducers belong to the higher and richer classes: but I do believe that in nine cases out of ten there has been treacherous seduction and then cruel abandonment. But I do not want to moralise on the point," ejaculated Hester, thus suddenly interrupting the seriousness of her discourse; "neither do you want to listen to a sermon. So fill the glasses, and I will go on with my story."

More wine was poured out; and Hester Sergeant resumed her narrative in the following strain:—

"There was in the workhouse a young lad, three or four years older than myself, and who had been brought up there from his very earliest infancy. In fact, when only a few days old, I believe, he was left at the door of the establishment, abandoned by his unnatural parent—though heaven knows whether it might not have been the only alternative besides that of infanticide on the part of some wretched creature who in shame and misery had become the authoress of that child's existence! But no matter: the truth is as I tell you: the child was found at the workhouse door; and the meanness of the clothes that enveloped it seemed to indicate a humble parentage—though *that* is not always a sign, inasmuch as it may be a precaution and a stratagem to envelope the affair in a still deeper cloud of mystery. The workhouse authorities had to give the child a name; and he was called Thomas Robinson—why or wherefore I know not. He grew up in the workhouse: the chaplain and the schoolmaster took a fancy to him; he was marvellously clever, and speedily devoured all the books that fell in his way. So the guardians, instead of apprenticing him in the usual manner, to learn some trade when he reached the proper age, determined upon keeping him in the workhouse as assistant-schoolmaster; for the schoolmaster himself was very old and feeble, but his services had been long and valuable, and the guardians did not choose to superannuate him. And now to make a very long story short, Thomas Robinson and I were thrown

occasionally together; and the meetings which were at first accidental, were soon followed by interviews purposely arranged and brought about. Time passed; and I had been about two years in the workhouse, so that I was between fourteen and fifteen, when there was one day a fearful explosion. Thomas Robinson, whom the master and matron, the schoolmaster and guardians, the chaplain and the surgeon all thought such a saint, or at least such a pattern of morality, was accused of having led me into error. The charge was true enough: we were fond of each other—and contriving to obtain another interview, we resolved to escape from the workhouse. This we did; and as Robinson had received some occasional little *douceurs* from his admirers and patrons, he had about three pounds in his pocket. This money enabled us to purchase other clothes instead of our workhouse garbs, and to pay the first week's rent of a very humble lodging. You may suppose how utterly inexperienced in the ways of the world we both were, when I tell you that we buoyed ourselves up with the hope that we might get a living,—Thomas by teaching, and I by my needle. But at the end of the week he had not a single pupil, nor I a stitch of work to do. Another week passed, and our hopes were sadly damped. A third—and utter destitution stared us in the face. We were starving; and our landlady threatened to turn us adrift into the street unless we liquidated the arrears of rent. I could not bear to see him weeping and pining on my account:—he on the other hand could not endure the thought of my cheeks turning pale through want. We both went out at the same time,—he declaring to me that he would make one more effort to obtain employment; and I affirming that I should do the same towards procuring needlework. Yet we seemed to mistrust each other, and our hands remained clasped, and our looks continued a long time mingled in mournfulness and in doubt ere we separated. But at length we tore ourselves, as it were, asunder, and went different ways. Two hours afterwards I returned with gold in my hand. I cannot describe the conflicting sensations which filled my soul: it seemed as if I were a prey to the excitement arising from a wild unnatural joy strangely and fearfully blending with the harrowing torture of a breaking heart. I reached the lodging: a constable had just called to know whether it was true that a certain Thomas Robinson lived there, or whether he had given a false address at the station-house? He had been caught in the act of endeavouring to steal a ring while asking to be shown some articles of jewellery at a goldsmith's shop. And thus," added Hester, abruptly, and at the same time her voice grew thick and husky as if it were struggling with the emotions that rose up into her very throat,—“and thus,” she said, “we both fell into the path of crime on the same night and within the same hour!”

“And what became of him?” asked Ponchard.

Hester did not immediately answer the question: her countenance remained averted for nearly a minute; but the Frenchman could tell by the quick heavings of her bosom that she was a prey to feelings that were agitating her profoundly. Suddenly she looked towards him again: for an instant it seemed as if she ground her white teeth in

a paroxysm of concentrated rage; and then she abruptly ejaculated, “More wine!”

Ponchard filled her a bumper, which she at once tossed off; then with a forced laugh, she exclaimed, “I wish it was brandy!”

“Would you like to go and get yourself some?” asked the Frenchman.

“No, no—not now. I prefer being with you.”

“I should think the people of the house would soon return?” said Ponchard.

“Why do you seem so anxious for them to come back?” demanded Hester sharply.

“Oh, nothing particular. I told you just now that I had a word or two to say to them—and that’s all. But come,” continued Ponchard, “you have not finished your narrative, Hester. What did they do to the unfortunate young fellow?”

“I did not know at the time whether the constables made a mistake, or whether they were telling wilful stories,” resumed the young female, “when on the following day, they coolly told the magistrate that they knew the prisoner well, that he was a notorious young thief, and had been lurking about the neighbourhood after no good for some time past. I was in the court; I endeavoured to speak, but I could not:—the very rage which impelled me to give utterance to an indignant denial of those charges, also had the effect of choking my voice. As for Thomas himself, he maintained a profound silence: he would not speak a word. He afterwards told me, when I visited him in Newgate, that he thought it better that as little as possible should be known in reference to our antecedents and all the circumstances connected with us;—for who could tell how both or either of us might some day be recognised and claimed by parents, relatives, or friends? Well, Thomas was committed for trial, and was sentenced to four months’ imprisonment in the City Compter, to be afterwards transferred for a term to the Parkhurst Reformatory in the Isle of Wight. So the poor fellow was doomed to a felon’s gao!; and I—”

“And you, Hester?” asked Ponchard, speaking in a low and hesitating manner, as if from motives of delicacy he more than half feared to put the question.

“And I? Oh! I,” added the girl, now bursting out into an hysterical laugh, “I adopted the only course that was open to me. The young lad to the gao!—the young girl to the streets! What other end could the story have?”

There was a deep silence for more than a minute; and then Hester Sergeant cried, with a strange, wild, unnatural abruptness, “What a fool I am to suffer myself to get so maudlin and sentimental! I have made you dull too! Come, let us drink.”

Ponchard was about to ask her whether all the details of her story were really true, when on bending his eyes upon the girl, he saw that there was something in her looks which testified unmistakably to the genuine veracity of all she had told him. So instead of putting the question he at first meditated, he simply asked, “Have you ever since seen the unfortunate lad?”

“No—nor have I ventured to inquire after him,” she responded. “Whatever he may be, it is utterly impossible that I could ever have the courage to carry my own polluted self into his presence. Perhaps he may still be in Parkhurst:



—perhaps he may have quitted the establishment, thoroughly lost instead of reformed—contaminated instead of purified—mingling perchance with the low thieves of London, and steeped to the very brim of his youthful lips in vices and profligacies. But still a man may never fall so utterly low as a woman. You know what I mean. Well then, debased though he may be, yet should I feel ashamed to appear before him: for whatever abyss he may have sunk into, I have fallen into a still lower one. On the other hand, his condition may be altogether different. He may have found friends—he may have made them by his pleasing manners, his intelligence, and the natural frankness of his disposition—his good principles may have survived all contaminating influences—he may now be eating the bread of honest industry—he may be thriving—he may be on the high road to prosperity. Heaven grant that it may be so! And if it be, how could I ever dare think of throwing

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myself in his way? Oh, if he be now well to do in the world, he will not be regarded as a lost creature on account of that *one* fault committed under such circumstances! But I—I—*am* lost beyond redemption—irreclaimably! Therefore," added Hester, in a voice which sank to so low a tone that it was scarcely audible, "under no circumstances can I ever dare inquire after him of whom I have been speaking."

There was another pause, which was at length broken by Ponchard, who inquired, "Do you think that the policemen wilfully misrepresented the young lad when before the magistrate?"

"I am now certain that they did," answered Hester vehemently. "I was in doubt on the point at the time, because I could scarcely conceive that there was so much wickedness in human nature. But Ah! that ignorance of the world was quickly succeeded by the knowledge of experience—a horrible clearness, which brings the most fearful ob-

jects into the strongest light! Yes, the police-constables wilfully misrepresented the poor lad; and this is generally their custom under such circumstances; for they are anxious to establish a reputation for being very sharp and keen-witted, and for having an eye constantly on all bad characters.—But look, Henri! there are two glasses more in the bottle, and we will drink them. Come, we have had enough of the dismal: let us laugh and be gay!"

"Your spirits are naturally good, then, Hester?" said Ponchard inquiringly.

"Good? They are excellent!" cried the girl, now forcing herself to laugh with an appearance of heartiness. "Good, indeed? What a question!"—and she continued laughing. "Why, I've nothing to do but to amuse myself; and when I think of such poor wretches as seamstresses and needlewomen, I bless my stars that I am not doomed to such a fate as their's. Ha! ha! Henri, isn't this thought alone enough to make one cheerful? And then too, when I look back to the period when I was in that dreadful workhouse, with its monotony and its imprisonment—Oh! why, I ought to be as happy as a bird liberated from its cage! So you see my spirits are capital!"—and then, as she affected another laugh, it rapidly became hysterical; she tried to recover herself,—but she could not—and she burst into tears.

"My poor girl," said Ponchard, "why have you worked yourself up to this pitch of excitement?"

"Because I often endeavour to delude myself with the idea that I am happy; and if I could have succeeded in deluding *you*, I should have joyously hugged the result as a proof that I really felt as I pretended. But no, no!—the mask falls from the face! Besides," the girl abruptly ejaculated, "I remember that you just now asked me if I was happy, and then I treated the idea as a mockery—almost as an insult. No, no, Henri Ponchard! *you* would not believe that I was happy, or gay, or naturally cheerful, even if I were to go down upon my knees and affirm it with all the most solemn oaths. *You* know," she added, in a low hoarse voice, "that happiness with such a condition as mine is impossible!"

Hester paused: Ponchard would have said something soothing—but the truth is that he knew not what to say: and he held his peace.

"I tell you what it is," continued the young female; "you men are apt to fancy that when such creatures as I have bold looks and wear an expression of brazen hardihood, we are callous—indifferent—reckless. But we are not. We endeavour with all our might and main to become so; but we never succeed further than acquiring the outward appearance thereof. Our looks may lose all their modesty—but our hearts cannot lose their feelings, nor our consciences their remorse. And it is from these horrors that we seek refuge in drink and in ribald discourse, and in boisterous mirth, and in empty boastings of that gaiety and cheerfulness which we would give the very world to be enabled to experience in reality! But now enough, Henri! I have torn the mask from my own face; and you see me as I am. You may judge all the other unfortunates of my class by this example. But enough, I say! I know not how the conversation arose, or how it

took such a turn: but I am not sorry that I should have spent one evening thus. Never before to any man have I betrayed myself in all my natural weakness to this extent; and perhaps never again shall I do so. So now it's all over—and pray think no more of it!"

"Will you have some more wine?" asked Ponchard.

"Yes—to be sure!" and the girl started up from her seat.

The Frenchman gave her some more money: she sped forth—and returning in a few minutes, placed the bottle upon the table, saying, "This time I have brought brandy."

"And so much the better," cried Ponchard.

"There, drink, Hester!"

"But you—do you not mean to drink also?"

"The truth is, I must keep my head clear—I have got some business on hand—"

"What! at this time of night?" ejaculated the girl. "Ah! is the business which you have with Grills and his wife so very important?" and she fixed her eyes upon the Frenchman with an air which showed that her curiosity was more or less excited on the point.

"No—I didn't say that my business with them is so important.—But good heavens, Hester! can you drink raw brandy like that? Well, if you wish me to keep you company, here goes!"

"That is only a mere sip," cried the girl, laughing; "whereas I took an entire glassful."

"Hark!" ejaculated Ponchard; "there are people stopping at the front door:"—and then as a bell rang, he added, "I hope these are the Grills."

"You are very anxious to see them!" muttered Hester, as she proceeded to open the front door; and she gave admittance to Mr. and Mrs. Grills, whom she at once informed that M. Ponchard was waiting to speak to them.

Mr. Grills was an elderly man, of very sinister appearance, his grizzly hair standing out stiff all over his head, the natural magnitude of which it seemed considerably to increase. Mrs. Grills has been previously described as a woman of most unwieldy size, and with no appearance of any neck to support the head, which, with its flabby overlapping cheeks and its voluminous double chin, seemed to rest only upon the enormous and revolting exuberance of the bust. Her voice was rough and hoarse: she had a look which proved her to be capable of any iniquity, no matter how deep, how horrible: but she had also a smirking, leering air of familiarity, when welcoming any of the male visitors to her house of infamous repute.

In this style was it that she greeted Ponchard as she turned into the parlour; while her husband, sitting down at the table, unceremoniously helped himself to a glass of the brandy that had so recently been fetched.

"I suppose," said Hester, lingering upon the threshold, "I must leave you three alone together, as you have some business to transact."

"Well, my dear girl," answered Ponchard, "it is a little private matter—"

"Oh, I am sure I do not wish to pry into your secrets!" cried Hester, with a slight air of pique and annoyance: and then hastily turning away, she disappeared, closing the door behind her.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE CORPSE.

Mrs. GRILLS threw off her bonnet and shawl—she adjusted her wig, or false front, whichever it might be—and then she drained at a gulp, and without winking, the glass of brandy which Ponchard had just set before her. Mr. Grills helped himself to a second; and then they both looked at the Frenchman as if to ask him to explain his business.

“The matter must be entirely between us three,” said Ponchard; “and I should not like to have that girl Hester listening to what we say.”

“I’ll tell her to go to bed,” said Mrs. Grills, rising from her seat.

“Do nothing that may tend to excite her suspicions,” interjected Ponchard, “or make her curious to penetrate into what is going on. I think she already seemed to eye me strangely when I expressed a wish that you two would return.”

“Leave me to manage the girl,” said Mrs. Grills: and she issued from the room.

“Is it very important?” said Mr. Grills, fixing his eyes upon the Frenchman.

“Most important,” was the response. “And money to be earned by it!”

“That’s your sort then,” said Grills. “Anything for money!”

“Anything?” repeated the Frenchman: “did you say anything?”—and now in his turn he looked very hard at his companion.

“Well, anything—yes—all according to the price,” rejoined Grills. “You know that I’m not very partikler; for when you had that bit of a surgery—place down in the Old Kent Road—”

“I was just thinking of it, Grills,” interjected Ponchard. “I remember the night you brought me the dead body—”

“Ah! and a precious stormy night it was too,” said the hideous-looking man. “Me and my brother Jasper was wet through to the skin. Bless me! how it did rain—and thunder and lighten too!”

“Rather a nasty night for you to transact your body-snatching business; and rather an awful one,” added Ponchard, “for me to make the discovery that I did. Murder’s work—eh?—unmistakable symptoms of death from poison?”

“Well, sir,” interrupted Grills, “when you came and told me about it, I was smoking my pipe with Jasper—you recollect—and what you said struck us both all of a heap—”

“And yet you must have been prepared for some such a result,” exclaimed Ponchard. “You know, my good fellow, you never played the resurrectionist with *that* corpse at all: but the man died here—in this very house!—and how he *did* die, I failed not to discover.”

“And like a good gentleman as you are,” said Grills, “you promised not to make any stir about the business—you didn’t want to get me, or Jasper, or the old ’ooman into trouble; so you just quietly held your tongue.”

“And you promised,” said Ponchard, looking Grills again most fixedly in the face, “that if ever I should want a friend to render any ticklish

bit of service, or help me out of a trouble, I might come to you. Well then, I am now here to put you to the test. But still I do not ask you to serve me for nothing—you shall have twenty golden sovereigns for your help in the business.”

The ruffian’s eyes twinkled joyously at this announcement; and he helped himself to another glass of brandy. Just as he had tossed it off, his wife re-entered the parlour; and as she resumed her seat, she said, “I have made that matter all right. Hester is more than half tipsy—and I have persuaded her to go to bed.”

“So much the better,” observed Ponchard. “I am half afraid of that girl.”

“The gentleman has got summut of a werry partikler nature for us to do, my dear,” said Mr. Grills to his better half; “and what’s more agreeabler tidings still, is that there’s twenty yellar boys to be got by it.”

“And a good night’s work too!” said Mrs. Grills.

“I think that it will be more than one night’s work,” observed Ponchard. “But this must depend upon circumstances. Now, are you sure that girl is not listening?—for she is of such a strange flighty disposition, I would not for the world have the secret entrusted to her keeping!”

Mrs. Grills cautiously opened the door—likened—shut it again—and then returning to her seat, assured the Frenchman that all was quiet and safe.

“Now, then, for explanations,” said Ponchard. “Last night there was some quarrelling amongst a few of us; and a friend of mine—a gentleman who has been two or three times to this house with me—”

“You mean the Pole with the handsome beard?” asked Mrs. Grills. “What’s his name again? Ivan something—I always liked that name of Ivan—It’s a sweet pretty ’un. Ah! Zadooski!”

“Zadouski—that’s it,” rejoined Ponchard. “Yes—I mean him. But I’m afraid he was a sad scoundrel—and therefore I am not at all likely to weep when I tell you that he is gone!”

“Run away?” asked Mrs. Grills.

“No—gone out of the world.”

“Oh! that’s different,” she said, coolly referring to the brandy-bottle.

“The gentleman observed there was quarrelling,” remarked Mr. Grills; “and so I suppose the truth is the Pole with the handsome beard got a topper on the head—”

“No—it was a knife in the heart,” interrupted Ponchard: “but it’s of no consequence how he *did* die, since dead he is. Ah! I should add that I do not exactly want to usurp the merit of having put the fellow out of the way; and therefore I should like you to understand that it was not my hand which dealt the blow—but it was a certain Karl Petronoff, whom you are likely to see presently, Mr. Grills, when you come to take your share in the business.”

“And what share is that?” asked the man.

“But I s’pose I can guess. It’s to get rid of the stiff ’un? Well, if that’s all, and twenty pounds is the reward, I say *done*, and let’s shake a hand on it at once.”

“To be sure,” said Mrs. Grills; “and wet the bargain with a drain:”—whereupon she suited the action to the word.

"I do not know whether you have any knowledge," inquired Ponchard, "of two old women named Morphew, that keep a house in Granby Street, Waterloo Road? No—you have not heard of them? Well, they are two poor old creatures who are loose enough in their morals to keep a house of this description; but they would go into fits, call in the police, and expose everything if they only entertained the slightest suspicion that there was a dead body in their cellar. However, there it is—and the sooner it's removed away the better."

"Any back entrance to the premises?" asked Grills.

"No," replied the Frenchman: "but there's an entrance from the cellar into the front kitchen, out of which there's a well-contrived means of egress into a narrow alley running between that house and the adjoining one."

"Then the business can be easily managed," said Grills; "and whenever you like, sir," he added, rising from his seat.

"What do you propose?" inquired Ponchard.

"At the back of these premises of our'n," rejoined Grills, "there's a stable which is let to a cab-driver, a werry intimate friend of mine; for I often put a guinea or so into Nat Bulmer's pocket. If there's a young gal to be carried off, or anything of that sort, Nat's by no means partikler—"

"Ah! but that's a different thing altogether," exclaimed Ponchard, shaking his head deprecatingly. "I should not like too many persons to be engaged in this piece of business which we have now in hand."

"No—and I didn't mean anything of the sort," interjected Mr. Grills. "But this is what I do mean. I can go and have the use of Nat Bulmer's cab, for which I shall give him a yaller boy, and tell him it's to run off with some squeamish young damsel, or summut of that sort. So Nat will never be any the wiser, and will never ask to be. Look you, sir—just name your own time, and at the werry moment you may expect to see a cab drive up to the entrance of that alley you spoke about. So you must be upon the alert and have everything ready, that the cab mayn't be kept waiting an instant longer than is necessary, for fear any rascally Bluebottle should take it into his head to peep into it just at the moment when peeping would be most inconvenient."

"What o'clock is it now?" asked the Frenchman.

"It must be about a quarter of an hour past midnight," responded Mrs. Grills.

"Well then, in three-quarters of an hour—that is to say, exactly at one o'clock—let the cab drive up. Jump down—have the door open—and reckon upon everything being conducted with such despatch that you will be able to start again in the twinkling of an eye."

"So far, so good," said Grills. "And now for an earnest to seal the bargain. In the first place I shall want a sovereign to give Nat Bulmer—which is of course over and above the twenty pounds I'm to have clear for myself."

"No doubt," said Ponchard, producing his purse. "Here is money for the cab—here are ten pounds on account of the sum promised to yourself."

"Quite fair and straightfor'ard," said Grills,

as he counted the gold, which he then handed to his wife.

"Now lend me a sack and a piece of cord to tie the mouth of it," said the Frenchman.

This request was promptly complied with; and having folded up the sack in the smallest possible compass, he secured it about his person, buttoning his coat over it. He then quitted the house, and made the best of his way towards Granby Street, pondering all the details of the business which he had in hand, and which, as the reader may have seen, he treated with all the coolness of one who had been accustomed to encounter the storms, the perils, and the difficulties of life, and who knew that they were only to be weathered or surmounted by means of a calm head, an intrepid heart, and a steady hand.

It was about twenty minutes to one o'clock when he reached the house in Granby Street; and the front door was immediately opened by one of the old women, who were not in the habit of retiring very early to bed, by reason of the infamous occupation which they followed.

"Any one here, Dame Morphew?" asked Ponchard of the elder sister, who thus gave him admittance.

"Yes, monsieur—I think there is one of your friends," was the reply given by the old woman, who spoke with a grammatical precision and correctness which showed that she was by no means an uneducated person.

"Please to attend to me a moment, ma'am," said Ponchard, thus stopping to converse with the dame in the passage. "It may suit me and my friend to remain a long time in consultation to-night; and as you will presently be wanting to go to bed—"

"I can sit up to let you out," said the old woman, who was exceedingly civil because she was very well paid by the conspirators.

"Why should you sit up for us? Not a bit of it! We can let ourselves out through the secret passage; and in fact we would rather have the command of that avenue, because it renders us more independent of any strangers who may chance to be in your house."

"Well, just as you like, monsieur," answered the dame, receiving at the same time a couple of half-crowns which Ponchard slipped into her hand. "I will go and lock the door of the front kitchen, so that nobody shall be able to enter it: for some of these unruly young people who come here at times—especially the girls—will insist on going down there to have supper, or to get hot water—"

"Well, my good woman," interjected Ponchard, "go and lock the kitchen-door, as you say—and get to bed when you like. We shall not disturb you."

Ponchard then passed on towards the back room, and knocked with the usual peculiarity at the massive door. This was at once opened by Karl Petronoff, who was as perfectly cool and collected as the Frenchman himself, so that he exhibited no suspense, nor any particular anxiety to learn from his friend whether all the promised arrangements had been made for the disposal of the corpse.

"Everything is settled," said Ponchard, closing and fastening the iron-plated door; and then, as he leisurely took a seat, he entered upon explanation.

tions, to which Petronoff listened with the most perfect calmness, smoking his pipe, and occasionally giving a slight nod of approval.

"It must be close upon one o'clock," said Petronoff, when the Frenchman had finished speaking.

"Yes—and therefore we must get to work at once," replied Ponchard.

They raised a trap-door, and descended into the cellar. There lay the corpse precisely as they had left it the night before, with the knife still sticking in the breast. They listened at the door of communication with the kitchen—and all was still. Ponchard proceeded to extract the knife, the blade of which was deeply stained with blood; but no blood now flowed from the wound itself, for upwards of twenty-four hours had elapsed since the death-blow was stricken.

"Here," whispered Ponchard to Petronoff, as he produced a small phial containing some very potent acid, "clean that knife—it will not take you above a minute—and we must not leave a single trace of this night's business anywhere upon our path."

Karl Petronoff hastened to obey the instruction of his comrade, while Ponchard himself proceeded to examine the pockets of the murdered man. He found an old pocket-book tied round with a piece of string, and which evidently contained letters or documents of some kind; and this pocket-book Ponchard at once secured about his own person. He next produced a clasp-knife, the blade of which was of formidable length, pointed like a dagger, and so made as to keep open with a spring and thus serve all the purposes of a poniard at will. There was a small bunch of keys, and a purse containing two sovereigns and a few shillings.

"The knife is now quite clean," whispered Petronoff, as Ponchard finished his search of the deceased's garments.

"Good," said the latter. "Lay it on the table above. Now, here are these things—the keys, the knife, and the money. For my part I will have nothing to do with either of them!"—for with a singular fastidiousness Ponchard recoiled from the idea of an act which might savour of plunder in respect to the murdered man; but on the other hand he said naught in reference to the pocket-book—for by another inconsistency, contradiction, or idiosyncrasy in his nature, he did not conceive it to be anything like plundering at all to take possession of a lot of private papers.

"As for the keys and the knife, and the purse likewise," said Petronoff, "give them to me and I will drop them over one of the bridges as I return presently to my lodgings. But as for the money, we may as well leave that in the dead man's pockets, to become the booty of the fellow—what's his name?"

"Grills," replied Ponchard. "Well, your suggestion is a good one, and shall be followed out."

Petronoff accordingly took possession of the knife, the keys, and the empty purse, while Ponchard placed the coin in the waistcoat-pocket of the deceased Ivan Zadouski. The next proceeding was to thrust the corpse into the sack—which was quickly done; and then the mouth of the sack was securely fastened by the string that Ponchard had brought for the purpose.

"Now," said this individual, "for the most

difficult part of the entire enterprise! It must be close upon one o'clock—but we shall hear it strike by the church in the Waterloo Road."

He now proceeded to unfasten the door of communication with the front kitchen; and entering that place, he soon satisfied himself that the outer door—that is to say, the one more directly communicating with the house—had been locked by Dame Morpew according to promise. There was a cupboard, or rather a closet, in one corner, apparently intended to contain coals, firewood, or kitchen utensils; and indeed there were now some of these articles there. But at a height of about four feet, a part of the wall began to slant outward; and overhead there was a large iron trap, which was secured by a hook and a chain below, and which could be also raised from beneath. This was the communication with the narrow alley before alluded to; and persons passing along that alley would naturally fancy that the iron trap was merely a place where coals might be shot down into the cellar of the house.

Ponchard took the management of the whole proceeding,—Petronoff silently obeying his instructions in all things. The sack containing the corpse was so placed in the closet that it might be raised up the trap-door at a moment's warning; and Petronoff remained with it, while Ponchard cautiously lifting the iron trap, passed himself through the aperture. All was still—a profound darkness prevailed in the alley: but when Ponchard, gliding down to the opening of it, peeped forth into the street, the starlight showed him that the coast was entirely clear. There were sounds of uproarious revelry in two or three neighbouring houses; but there was not a human being at the moment to be discerned in the street itself. In less than a minute Ponchard's ear caught the sounds of a vehicle; and he beheld a cab turning into the street at the further extremity.

At that moment the clock of the church in the Waterloo Road proclaimed with its iron tongue the hour of one.

Ponchard disappeared in the darkness of the alley: the iron trap was again raised—the sack containing the corpse was drawn through the aperture, the Frenchman pulling it from above, the Pole pushing it from below. The cab stopped at the entrance of the alley: down leapt Grills and opened the door—at the same instant two forms emerged from the dark entry—a heavy object was thrown into the vehicle—Grills sprang up to the box—Ponchard closed the door—and away went the cab. So rapidly was this portion of the exploit performed, that the halt of the cab scarcely extended to a minute; so that any person observing it from a distance, might have fancied that it had just stopped to take up a fare according to previous order.

The knife with which the murder was committed, had been laid upon the table in the back room; and the trap in the floor thereof had been closed by the foreigners over their heads before they had passed from the cellar into the kitchen. They had also extinguished the light just before they thrust the corpse through the iron trap; and having lowered this trap, they had nothing more to do at the house when once their burden was consigned to the cab and this had driven away. They therefore at once separated, — Ponchard

taking a circuitous route in order to reach the habitation of Grills, and Karl Petronoff bending his way towards Waterloo Bridge, over the parapet of which he threw the keys, the empty purse, and the clasp-knife belonging to the deceased.

Mrs. Grills was sitting up for her husband's return; and by way of beguiling the time, she more than once applied herself during the interval to the bottle of brandy which remained upon the table. She made sure that the girl Hester Sergeant was by this time sleeping profoundly; and she did not therefore take the trouble to convince herself on the point. The brandy had this effect upon the odious woman—that while it only slightly intoxicated her (for she was well seasoned and inured to drink), it tended to harden her—to inspire her with a boldness that defied all consequences—and to prepare her for plunging headlong into any iniquity, no matter how enormous, so long as it produced merriment.

It was about a quarter past one when Mrs. Grills, who was listening attentively, heard the sounds of a vehicle turning in towards the stable-yard which communicated with the back of her own premises. The distance from Granby Street might really have been accomplished in about ten minutes; but Grills had purposely taken a somewhat circuitous route—for he was cunning enough to adopt every imaginable precaution to destroy a clue or break a trail in case any should be by a possibility discovered. Mrs. Grills rose from her seat in the parlour—took the candle in her hand—and cautiously descending the stairs into the scullery, opened the door leading into the yard. Leaving the candle in the scullery itself, she traversed the yard—opened a back gate—and joined her husband, who was just taking the horse out of the cab and leading it into the stable.

"It is all right," he whispered, in a low tone, to his wife.

To remove the burden from the cab into their own back-yard, was now the work of a very few moments: the horse was stabled—the cab was wheeled into the coach-house—the doors were fastened—and Grills concealed the key in a place where his friend Nat Bulmer might find it when he rose to prepare for the avocations of the day. All these arrangements being completed in a far shorter space of time than it has taken us to record them, Mr. and Mrs. Grills conveyed the horrible burden into the scullery. There, having locked the outer door, she held the candle while her husband, having thrown off his coat and waistcoat, prepared to drag the corpse out of the sack.

But was Hester Sergeant sleeping all this time? No—she was broad awake: she had not even undressed herself, nor made the slightest preparation for retiring to rest. She had noticed that there was something peculiar in Ponchard's manner—that he had been evidently very anxious for the return of Grills and his wife—but that he had pretended it was of no importance when Hester had questioned him on the subject. She was somewhat attached to the man—and perhaps more so this night than ever, inasmuch as he had listened with so much interest to those personal revelations into which she had been betrayed by a current of unusual feelings. Now, under all these circumstances it was natural that she should experience a sort of jealousy at being excluded

from the knowledge of Ponchard's secrets after she had so confidentially unbosomed her own. And then, too, it seemed strange that the Grills might be entrusted with matters which were to be kept secret from herself. What could it be? Had Ponchard taken a fancy to some other female? and was the aid of Mr. and Mrs. Grills required to further his designs with regard to this supposed new flame? Such were the questions which Hester very naturally asked herself; and even if they were not the conclusions to which she positively came, they were at all events sufficiently strong in the shape of conjectures to excite her jealous curiosity and determine her to fathom the mystery.

The reader has seen that it was with an air of pique and vexation the young girl turned to quit the parlour at the request of Ponchard. Then, scarcely had she ascended to her own chamber, when Mrs. Grills made her appearance; and fancying from Hester's manner that she was somewhat intoxicated—though the girl was in reality perfectly sober, notwithstanding the wine and the brandy she had drunk—Mrs. Grills had adopted a coaxing and cajoling manner to induce her to go to bed. Hester had affected compliance; but she was now more than ever resolved to fathom the mysterious proceedings which were evidently in progress and from all share in which it was so studiously sought to exclude her. By dint of listening she heard Ponchard leave the house: she likewise heard Grills go forth—then the cab shortly afterwards rolled out of the stable-yard at the back—and Hester's curiosity was more than ever excited. She waited with impatience, in suspense, and with fullest wakefulness, to see what would follow. After a while the cab returned: she heard Mrs. Grills descend the stairs to the lower region of the habitation—and then the opening of the back door reached the girl's ears.

"Ah!" she thought to herself, "I was not wrong in my conjecture! The cab has been to fetch some one—perhaps to carry a victim off by force? It would not be the first time. Witness the scene of the other night, when they thought they were bringing Imogen the actress here, but it turned out to be some one else—though who it really was after all I have not been able to learn. No matter! my business is now for the present arrival! Is it possible that Henri Ponchard could pretend so much sympathy for me while meditating the whole time the abduction of some one else and the bringing of her to this place? If he had not spoken in that way to me, and made me tell him my story, and listened with such an air of compassion and interest, I should not care. But now—but now, it is different!"

Such were the thoughts which swept rapidly through the girl's mind as she glided towards a back window, whence she could obtain a view of the yard. The night, or rather morning, was clear; but the shades of the buildings enveloped the yard in comparative obscurity—yet not so deep as to prevent Hester Sergeant from discerning that Grills and his wife were hearing something between them towards the back-entrance of the house. Hester's first impression was that the object thus borne was the inanimate form of some female who had fainted: and yet she was not confident in this surmise—but a certain vague presentiment that the mystery might be otherwise

explained, began to take possession of her soul. A sensation of awe came over her; it even partook of the nature of an unknown mysterious terror; and, she vainly endeavoured to shake it off—she fruitlessly strove to reassure herself by saying inwardly, "How foolish I am! It is nothing more than what I first supposed,—some girl who has been carried off and who has fainted through fear or brutal usage!"

The reader may now easily comprehend how the state of Hester's feelings was such as to sustain, or even sharpen her curiosity to a degree impelling her to penetrate farther into the mystery. Whether she did so, we shall presently see; for we must now carry the reader's attention once more to the lower part of the house.

Scarcely had Grills and his wife conveyed their dreadful burden into the scullery, when there was a ring at the front bell; and the man ejaculated, "That's Ponchard come back!"

"Shall I take the light to let him in, or leave it here?" asked the woman.

"Take it, to be sure," replied her husband, with a brutal chuckle. "You don't think as how I'm afeard to be left with a stiff 'ur?"

"I should hope not:"—and thus saying, Mrs. Grills issued from the scullery, leaving it in total darkness.

She sped to the front door, and gave admittance to Henri Ponchard,—to whom she at once conveyed the intelligence by means of a significant nod that all was right. Ponchard beckoned her into the parlour, and hastily inquired, "Have you stripped it?"

"No—it is only just brought into the house."

"Then go and do so at once. We cannot dispose of it completely to-night—there are precautions to be taken! The identity of the deceased must be thoroughly destroyed! There's a copper below?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Grills. "But how did you know it?"

"I took a peep down stairs before you came home, and while the girl went out to fetch some wine. There is likewise a hatchet there?"

Mrs. Grills nodded an affirmative; but she looked puzzled to comprehend the foreigner's meaning.

"Go and get the body stripped—and by the time you have done it I will come down to you. No, no—don't light the other candle! I care not for being here in the dark for a few minutes. I am tired of the excitement—I want to rest myself. There! just put the brandy within reach, and now go."

Mrs. Grills accordingly issued from the parlour; but for precaution's sake she stopped for a moment in the passage to bolt the front door. She then stole again down to the scullery, where she communicated to her husband the instructions she had received from Ponchard.

"A hatchet? To be sure, here's the hatchet!" said the man, grasping it. "Ah! I know now what he means!—it's all right. But let's get the stiff 'un out of the sack. There! put that piece of a broken bench slantwise. That's right!"

Then, while the woman held the candle, the man drew the corpse out of the sack, raising it partially up against the board, so as to be in a more convenient posture for the process of stripping off the clothes. And just at that instant a

pale face peeped in at the doorway; and thers upon the threshold stood Hester Sergeant, transfixed with horror—entranced by the appalling spectacle which met her view! But she herself remained unobserved—her presence unsuspected—so noiselessly and in such spirit-like silence had she glided down the stairs. She had heard the front door open—she had heard Mrs. Grills give admittance to some man whom she supposed to be Ponchard—then a few moments afterwards she had heard the bolting of the front door and the woman of the house descending alone to the scullery. So the girl fancied that Ponchard, or whoever it might be, had taken his departure; and she had no longer hesitated to obey the impulse of her curiosity. What she saw has already been described.

She was transfixed upon the threshold of the place—but only for a few moments. A terrible revulsion took place within her. Accident had rendered her the witness of those unmistakable evidences of a stupendous crime having been committed:—if she were seen, therefore, by Grills and his wife, her own moments might be numbered—her life would be sacrificed to the necessity of securing their own safety! This idea suddenly galvanized the girl as it were; and she stole away from the threshold whence she had beheld so appalling a spectacle. As noiselessly ghost-like and as spiritually airy as before, were her steps as she ascended the stairs. Thus, though the parlour door was open, and Ponchard's ears were keenly alive to any passing sound, he heard naught to disturb him as he sat there, meditating in the darkness upon all that had occurred.

Hester gained her own room; and the courage which had hitherto sustained her in beating so guarded a retreat from the presence of those who might in an instant have become her murderous enemies,—all this self-possession, we say, suddenly abandoned her, and she threw herself upon the bed overcome by horrible consternation and dismay.

CHAPTER LV.

THE MURDER.

We must now speak more particularly than we have hitherto done of the internal arrangements of the mansion at Thornbury Park, as well as of the junior branches of the Ardleigh family.

One suite of apartments was devoted to the special use of the Dowager-Duchess and her keeper Mrs. Quinlan. This suite consisted of a handsome sitting-room, a dining-room, a sleeping apartment, and a dressing-chamber. There were two beds in the sleeping-apartment—one being placed in a sort of alcove or recess; and it was this couch which was occupied by Mrs. Quinlan. The rooms communicated from one another in the order in which we have described them: but there was a door opening from the dressing-room upon a passage whence a staircase led down to the vicinity of the servants' offices. The reader will therefore understand that while the principal entrance to this suite of apartments was the sitting-room door opening from a wide landing, there was another means of communication—

samely, by the outer-door of the dressing-room; and this latter was used only by the servants in the performance of their accustomed offices.

The suite of apartments which we have been describing, was in the same wing of the building as those of the young Duchess herself; for the latter had always chosen to be in the vicinage of her mother-in-law's dwelling-place, so that she might be enabled to run in and see her at any moment, and be close at hand in case of any accident or emergency arising from the disordered state of the unfortunate lady's intellects. We should add that by the strict command of the young Duchess herself, Mrs. Quinlan always locked the outer doors of the suite of apartments at night—that is to say, the door of the sitting-room opening from the great landing, and the door of the dressing-room leading towards the staircase that was used by the servants. Mrs. Quinlan was likewise wont to sleep with the keys under her pillow; and often in the course of conversation, when the topic of the Dowager Duchess's malady was referred to, the female-keeper had been wont to affirm that from a long habit she slept so lightly that the slightest sound or touch would awaken her.

We must now proceed to inform the reader that at the other extremity of the building there were two suites of apartments devoted to the younger branches of the Arleigh family; for the Duke had several brothers and sisters. Between himself and the eldest of these there was however an interval of about ten years, so that young Lord Dalrymple was between sixteen and seventeen—though he scarcely seemed to be more than fourteen, for he was slight and diminutive in form, childish in pursuits, and of a very backward intellect. There were a couple of brothers younger than himself; and there were two sisters,—the youngest of the entire family being about ten years old. The young gentlemen—or rather the young lords, as we ought to call them, occupied one suite of apartments under the special jurisdiction of their tutor, the Rev. Mr. Condamine,—a worthy and excellent man, of about sixty years of age. He was a scholar, but an enlightened one: he knew something more than the classics;—he had travelled—and he was exactly the sort of person fitted to have the care of the younger male branches of that aristocratic family. He was, properly strict without being severe; for even when performing the conscientious part of a disciplinarian, he had the tact of displaying so much kindness as to prove how he felt himself to stand in *loco parentis* towards his fatherless pupils. He never troubled himself with the affairs of others:—indeed he had really no curiosity on that score; and thus, even if the conduct of the young Duchess had been far more indiscreet than it actually was, in respect to either Sir Abel Kingston or Count Mandeville, the Rev. Mr. Condamine would have been the very last beneath that roof to notice the circumstance. Not that he wilfully blinded himself to anything—nor that he was a sycophant or a parasite—nor that if he *did* see aught improper he was capable of winking at it. Nothing of the kind!—but he was a thoroughly good man, feeling the responsibilities of the position in which he was placed, and knowing that they demanded all his care, so that he never gave his attention negligently or thoughtlessly to anything else.

The young Duke's two sisters—Lady Emma and Lady Jane Dalrymple—respectively ten and twelve years old—were under the special tutelage of their governess, Mrs. Boyle. This lady was a widow, verging close upon her fiftieth year, and in disposition very much resembling the tutor of the young lords: that is to say, she was properly firm while she was indulgent, thoroughly upright and well principled, utterly above all gossip and scandal, feeling that she had a particular part to perform, and never overstepping the limits of her proper sphere. Mrs. Boyle and the young ladies had likewise their own special suite of apartments, in the same portion of the building as those of Mr. Condamine and the young lords. Let it not however be supposed that the brothers and sisters were kept rigidly apart. Nothing of the kind. They took all their meals together, at the same time with the tutor and governess: they walked or rode out together; and in the evening, when the studies of the day were over, they all assembled in one of the drawing-rooms of the mansion, where they were generally joined by the young Duchess, and often by the Dowager herself, when her mind was sufficiently settled as to be sure not to shock her children with any gross or grievous evidence of her unfortunate malady. As for the young Duchess, she had endeared herself to her husband's brothers and sisters; and for this reason she was especially admired and beloved by Mr. Condamine and Mrs. Boyle. The reader is aware that for some time past the young Duke and Duchess had been much separated, and the latter had passed a considerable portion of her time at Thornbury almost deserted as it were by her husband. This was a circumstance which the worthy preceptor and the excellent governess could not of course help observing: but they made no comment upon it, not even to each other. They felt assured that it arose from no ill-conduct on the part of the young Duchess; and while they scarcely allowed their minds to speculate in secret upon what might be the behaviour and proceedings of the Duke, they experienced a boundless compassion and a deeper affection for the young Duchess herself.

It is not however necessary to enter further into this description of details, inasmuch as neither the tutor nor the governess, nor the young lords or ladies have very much to do with the thread of our story. We will therefore resume it without any more digression or delay.

It was the custom of Mrs. Quinlan to rise in the summer at about seven o'clock, and in the winter about eight, to unlock the outer door of the dressing-room, in order to admit the female servants to sweep out the sitting-rooms, lay the breakfast, light the fires if the weather were cold, and perform their habitual duties. It was now the summer time; and therefore the female domestics ascended the back stairs as usual a few minutes past seven o'clock in the morning. The door was unfastened—they entered the dressing-room—and one of them stooping to pick up a towel which lay on the carpet, ejaculated, "Why this is blood!"

"Yes," said the other handmaid. "And look! the water in this basin is all red! I suppose some one's nose must have been bleeding?"

Her companion naturally came to a similia:



conclusion; and they passed into the bed-chamber, treading lightly as was their custom, in case the Dowager-Duchess should be asleep. A glance showed them that this was the case; and then, as they happened to cast their eyes towards the alcove, they were indeed little prepared for the horrible spectacle which was to appal their vision. For there lay the unfortunate woman, her face marble white, the bedclothes crimson with gore, and a knife sticking in her bosom!

The alarm was quickly given; and it was Lavinia herself who rushed to the apartments of her young mistress, at the door of which she knocked loudly in the terrible excitement of her mind. The summons was almost immediately answered by the young Duchess, who, unlocking her door, cried, "Good heavens! what is the matter, Lavinia? what has happened?"

No. 37.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS

"Oh, your Grace! something horrible, horrible!"

"But tell me——"

"Mrs. Quinlan——"

"What of her, Lavinia? For God's sake tell me! Do not, do not keep me in this frightful suspense!"

"She—she—is murdered!"

The young Duchess recoiled as if stricken a sudden blow; she did not immediately answer; and Lavinia uttered a cry, for she thought her mistress was about to faint.

"Murdered?" the young Duchess then said. "Lavinia, are you in your senses?"

"Would, to heaven that it was only a dream, your Grace, and that I was mad but for the moment! It's all too true!—the poor woman is murdered!—murdered in her bed!"

"Good God! this is horrible!" said our heroine in a deep hollow voice. "But my mother-in-law?" she suddenly ejaculated.

"Is sleeping as soundly and softly as a lamb," replied Lavinia.

The young Duchess raised her hand to her brow, as if to steady the thoughts which were making her brain reel; and then she abruptly exclaimed, "Help me to put on some clothing, Lavinia!—quick! quick!—and let me go and investigate this dreadful tragedy!"

In a few moments the young Duchess was hastening along the passage towards the suite of apartments which during the past night had become the scene of such a dreadful deed. On penetrating into the bed-chamber a glance showed the young Duchess that a sheet had been thrown over the corpse in the alcove—that her mother-in-law was now sitting up in her own bed, gazing vacantly upon some half-dozen female servants who were gathered about her—and that these young women were exchanging awe-struck and mysterious looks amongst themselves.

"Have you breathed a word to her Grace?"

asked the young Duchess, in a low quick whisper.

"Not yet, my lady," was the reply given by the senior handmaiden. "We thought we had better wait till your Grace should come. We covered the body over so that her ladyship"—thus alluding to the Dowager—"should not be seized with a sudden affright when she awoke."

"And who think you could have done it?"

asked the young Duchess. "Is it possible——" and she glanced towards her mother-in-law.

"Heaven knows!" said the lady's-maid solemnly.

"For my part I can't tell what to think!"

"Has any one been to fetch a surgeon?" demanded the young Duchess, as if suddenly struck by the idea. "Who knows that life is extinct?"—and hastening towards the alcove, she partly raised the sheet, though taking care to interpose her own form between the hideous spectacle and her mother-in-law who was still sitting up in her own bed. Pale as the countenance of our heroine previously was, it now became ghastlier still; and having laid her hand upon the cheek of the deceased Mrs. Quinlan, she shook her head.

"It is useless I suppose, my lady," said Lavinia, "to send for medical assistance?"

"Yes—useless," resumed the young Duchess; "for the flesh is marble cold!"

At that instant ejaculations of terror burst from the lips of the female servants who were near the bed of the Dowager;—the young Duchess glanced round with a startled air, but in the twinkling of an eye her mother-in-law was by her side. The Dowager, who had been gazing in listless and idiotic vacancy upon the persons present, had leapt from her couch with an abruptness that elicited those ejaculations from the lips of the young women; and before a hand could be stretched out to retain her, or an arm extended to hold her back, she was by the side of her daughter-in-law.

"Good heavens, dear mother!" cried the young Duchess, letting the sheet fall from her hand; but the face and bust of the murdered woman, with the knife sticking in her bosom, remained uncovered.

"It was the ghost that did it!" said the Dowager-Duchess.

"The ghost?" was the hollow echo given by

the tongue of the young Duchess; and with a strange wild horror did she gaze upon her mother-in-law.

"Yes—the ghost," repeated the Dowager. "You know, Mary, that dark shape—a fiend—a spirit of evil——But where was it that I saw it?"—and now she raised her hand to her brow with a bewildered and vacant air.

"Come away with me, mother, from this horrible scene," said the young Duchess. "Here! into the dressing-room!"

Thither our heroine led her mother-in-law, followed by Lavinia and the other handmaidens.

"Now," said the young Duchess, closing the door of communication with the sleeping apartment, "let no one enter there—let nothing be disturbed until the proper authorities arrive to investigate the lamentable transaction. Lavinia, go and send off messengers at once,—one to fetch a surgeon—another to the coroner—and another to his Grace, the Duke, in London. Quick, quick, Lavinia! there is no time to be lost!"—and our heroine now seemed to be inspired with a self-possession and firmness that were rendering her equal to the present emergency.

So soon as Lavinia had disappeared to execute the orders she had received, the young Duchess left her mother-in-law in the care of the handmaidens, while she repaired to the other wing of the building, to speak with Mr. Condamine and Mrs. Boyle, whose ears she had no doubt the appalling rumour had by this time reached. She met the tutor hastening along the passage communicating with his suite of apartments; and on beholding her Grace's troubled looks and disordered dress, the worthy preceptor clasped his hands, exclaiming, "I need not ask your ladyship if it be true! Alas, I see that it is! and Robert"—thus alluding to one of the footmen—"has not deceived me!"

"It is indeed too true!" answered the young Duchess. "Have you yet broken it——"

"To my young pupils? No," continued the worthy Mr. Condamine: "I was determined to go and satisfy myself of the truth of the report—and—and—learn some particulars ere I shocked their ears with the tale. For Robert was so excited, I knew not what amount of faith to put in his statements."

At this moment Mrs. Boyle was seen hastening along the passage. She had just heard the report: she likewise could scarcely put faith in the horrible tale—she had been equally guarded in keeping it from the ears of the young ladies, as Mr. Condamine had from the ears of the young lords, until fully assured upon the dread subject; and she was now hurrying forth from her apartments to seek this information, when she fell in with the young Duchess and the tutor in the passage.

"And thus it is all too true!" said the good widow, fearfully shocked.

"All too true!" replied the Duchess.

"But, good heavens! what are we to think, your Grace?" asked Mr. Condamine, with horror depicted upon his countenance: "what dreadful tale am I to prepare my young pupils to hear?"

"Ah! and what am I to say to the dear young ladies?" asked Mrs. Boyle, fearfully excited and deeply distressed; "they who entertain so much love and sympathy for their afflicted mother!"

"Alas!" said Condamine, "I suppose that we must not for a single minute attempt to blind ourselves to the real truth? But your Grace's unfortunate mother-in-law is not responsible for her actions!"

"My God!" groaned the young Duchess, "do not rush to hasty conclusions!"

"What! is there any doubt?—any mystery?" asked Condamine, while the governess manifested an equal degree of awful suspense and fearful interest in respect to the tragedy.

"I know not what to tell you—I am at a loss how to answer you," said the young Duchess, who was terribly agitated. "It would be horrible to suspect any one unjustly!"

"Good heavens!" murmured Condamine, shocked and appalled; "is there any reason to suppose that another hand than that of your Grace's unfortunate mother-in-law could have dealt the blow? Has Murder been stalking through this mansion during the night? Dreadful as it would be to find ourselves forced to look upon the Dowager as the authoress of the deed, yet 'twere better far that such should be the solution of the mystery, inasmuch as with her, poor creature! it cannot be looked upon as a crime!"

"You are right, Mr. Condamine—you are right," said the young Duchess hurriedly. "With her it cannot be accounted a crime!—she is not the mistress of her own actions—and therefore she is not responsible for them!"

"Assuredly not, your Grace."

"Ah, reverend sir," exclaimed the young Duchess, "you may conceive how awful a thing it is for me to associate the name of even my poor demented mother-in-law with this shocking deed! And therefore if I hesitated at first to proclaim the sad truth—if I could not bring my lips immediately to shape the words which should bid you go and strike the pointed daggers of affliction into the hearts of your young pupils—"

"Oh, dear lady," cried Mrs. Boyle, weeping, "we are at no loss to understand all the delicacy and generosity of your conduct!"

"Enough, dear madam," said the Duchess. "Go—and you too, dear sir—and to your respective charges break the horrible tidings as cautiously and as considerately as possible! I have sent for my husband—Tell them therefore that their brother will be here presently to comfort and console them; and you may add that if they wish to see me, I will come to them."

The tutor and the governess bowed respectfully to the young Duchess, and retraced their way slowly along the passage, whispering mournful comments upon the horrid tragedy that had taken place, and upon the sad task which it now remained for them to fulfil. As for the young Duchess herself, she returned to her own apartment,—where, with Lavinia's assistance, she performed her morning toilet. At first there was a long and profound silence between the patrician mistress and the maid, until it was at length broken by the former, who said, "This is a fearful occurrence, Lavinia!"

"Fearful, indeed, my lady. Might I venture to ask what your Grace thinks—"

"Alas, Lavinia," replied the Duchess, as for an instant she flung a searching look upon her hand-maiden, "what can I think, but the same that everybody else must think! My unfortunate

mother-in-law—doubtless in some terrible aberration of the intellect—But run, Lavinia, and see how her Grace is!—inquire of those who are attending her toilet! I feel that an awful responsibility now rests upon me; and if there should be any danger of my poor mother-in-law breaking out into some paroxysm of insane passion, or being seized upon by some fearful hallucination, I must not expose the lives of those comparatively helpless young women who are now attending upon her! Go, for heaven's sake, Lavinia!—and bring me back word; for I am nervous and agitated—I feel as if this excitement would drive me mad!"

Lavinia sped from the room; and in about ten minutes she returned, saying, "Her Grace seems to be perfectly quiet and harmless: but I think there is a more marked peculiarity in her gaze—she looks strange—half vacant—half wild—though her air is listless, languid, and drooping—"

"I will go to her the moment my toilet is finished," said the young Duchess. "Where is she now?"

"They have taken her away from the scene of the shocking occurrence," responded Lavinia; "and they are now giving her Grace her breakfast in the Green Drawing-room."

"Did the maids discover any traces of the deed?" asked the young Duchess, hesitatingly, and with a visible shudder,— "I mean, any marks of blood upon the hands or night-dress of the unfortunate Dowager?"

"Nothing of the sort, my lady," answered Lavinia. "But then your Grace must recollect that blood-stained hands had been washed in the basin in the dressing-room and wiped upon the towel that was picked up."

"Ah, true," said the young Duchess; and again she flung a rapid but searching glance upon Lavinia.

"Every now and then," continued the abigail, who did not seem to notice that she was thus scrutinisingly regarded by her mistress, "the Dowager murmurs, '*The ghost! the ghost!*'—and then she appears as if she were shuddering with a cold terror. One would really think she had seen something—"

"What do you mean, Lavinia?"—and the young Duchess stooped to pick up her kerchief as she put the question.

"I mean nothing particular, your Grace—I can mean nothing," replied the young woman. "Indeed I daresay it is only an illusion on the part of her ladyship,"—thus alluding to the Dowager. "But one gets bewildered with barely thinking of the hideous circumstance—and that while we were most of us, if not all, quietly sleeping in our beds, a life was being taken—a knife was being driven deep down into a human heart—"

"Yes—my God! it was shocking!—terrible!" murmured the young Duchess in a hollow tone. "I will go and see if my unfortunate mother-in-law—"

At this moment there was a knock at the ante-room door; and Lavinia hastened to answer the summons. It was a maid-servant who came to announce that Mr. Brooks, the surgeon of Beaconsfield, whom a mounted messenger was sent off to fetch, had just arrived, in company with the

local Inspector of Police, whom the medical man had accommodated with a seat in his gig.

"Go and keep an eye upon my poor mother-in-law," said the young Duchess to Lavinia, "while I receive these persons. How I wish the Duke was here! To think that I should be alone at such a crisis!"

"Be assured, dear lady," said Lavinia, "that I am ready to do everything that I possibly can to relieve you of some portion of the weight of these responsibilities."

"Yes, yes—I know it, Lavinia! I know your attachment for me!" cried our heroine. "And now go to the Dowager, while I descend to meet the surgeon and the police-officer."

Mr. Brooks and the constable had been shown into a parlour leading out of the entrance-hall; and there they were now joined by the Duchess. She explained to them how the tragedy had been discovered, and she begged that the surgeon would lose no time in ascending to the apartment where the corpse lay.

"Not," said our heroine, "that I entertain the slightest hope that the spark of life still lingers in the body; but if such a thing were possible—and marvels of this kind *have* happened—I would not that there should be any delay in proceeding to the succour of a fellow-creature."

"Perhaps it would be as well, my lady," said the Police Inspector, "if I accompanied Mr. Brooks."

"By all means," answered the Duchess.

"It's only a matter of form, your Grace; because the evidence of your ladyship's servants will be sufficient before the Coroner to enable the Jury to say how it happened—"

"No, no, officer!" interrupted the Duchess; "it must not be considered only as a formality! Do your duty here as you would if it were a peasant's cottage!"

Thus speaking, the patrician lady rang the bell, and ordered the domestic who answered the summons to conduct the surgeon and the officer to the rooms where the tragedy had been enacted.

Half an hour passed, during which the young Duchess partook of a cup of tea, for she had not as yet broken her fast—and even now she could eat nothing. At the expiration of that interval the medical man and the Inspector were ushered back again into her presence. She at once flung a quick anxious look upon Mr. Brooks; but he shook his head, saying, "Your Grace's charitable hope is disappointed! The spark of life is utterly extinct—the corpse is cold! The unfortunate woman must have been dead some hours."

"At least six or seven, you think, doctor?" said the police-officer inquiringly.

"I should say about that time," was the surgeon's response.

"The keys, your Grace," said the Inspector, producing them as she spoke, "I found under the pillow of the deceased, according to the hint that your ladyship gave me that she was always wont to put them there."

"And—and—you think, Mr. Brooks," said the Duchess, "that—that—it is utterly impossible the deceased could have done the deed herself—I mean committed suicide?"

"Utterly impossible," answered the surgeon.

"Begging your Grace's pardon," said the Inspector, "it is scarcely necessary to be a medical

man to tell *that* much. The knife's too well planted—"

"Death must have been instantaneous," added the surgeon,—"*almost* without a groan."

"And your Grace said, I think," resumed the Police Inspector, thus speaking as he followed the train which his own thoughts were taking,—"*your* Grace said, I think, that the outer door of the dressing-room was found unlocked?"

The Duchess replied in the affirmative.

"But the outer-door of the drawing-room was found locked, as usual?" asked the Inspector.

"It was so," rejoined our heroine.

"I have spoken to some of the servants," continued the officer, "and they declare that no doors leading out of the house were found open this morning—no casements or window-shutters showing any suspicious appearance. In fact, I have given an eye to all the back doors and windows in that part of the premises; and I have come to the conclusion that there was no burglarious entry of any kind. If anybody entered the house during the night, it could only have been with the connivance of some person *inside*, to open the door for him and fasten it again on his departure. Does your Grace understand?"

"Perfectly," replied the Duchess, feeling that her cheeks were ghastly pale, and wondering whether there were any hollowness or other peculiar sound in her voice at all calculated to betray the emotions which she was experiencing.

"But now, your Grace," resumed the Police Inspector, "all circumstances considered, I do not think that there was any plant or put-up affair—"

"I beg your pardon," said the Duchess: "I do not exactly understand—"

"What I mean is, my lady, that this is not a business done by collusion, nor by any one from outside. The more's the pity there should be a way—*saving* your Grace's presence—of accounting for it so simply and easily as to avoid the trouble of much thought on the subject. You see, my lady, the door leading from the dressing-room is found unfastened at seven o'clock in the morning. Now, it couldn't be poor Mrs. Quinlan herself that got up to unlock the door at her usual time, for she must have been dead six or seven hours according to Dr. Brooks' showing. Well, but the door *was* unlocked, and the keys were in their usual place under the deceased's bolster. Who put them there? Why, the same hand that must have originally taken them in the first instance to open the door for the purpose of gliding stealthily down-stairs to fetch the murderous knife."

"Or else the other theory," suggested the surgeon.

"I'm coming to it, doctor," replied the Inspector. "Suppose, my lady, that by some accident Mrs. Quinlan should have left the dressing-room door unlocked,—*then*, as a matter of course the keys need not have been taken from underneath her pillow at all; and your Grace will pardon me for reminding you that lunatics are uncommon sharp—they notice when any of the ordinary precautions taken to insure their safety, are neglected—a door, for instance, left unfastened—"

"Yes, yes," said the young Duchess, who listened with much evident agitation and distress to

the Police Inspector's cool, deliberate, and business-like strain of reasoning. "And therefore the conclusion to which you come—"

"Is beyond all doubt, your Grace," answered the inspector.

"Yes, beyond all doubt," added the surgeon.

"What?" inquired our heroine in a faint tone.

"The truth must be told, my lady," rejoined the Inspector. "It's a sad business, but one that's easily accounted for; and that's a blessing in this respect—that it leaves no room to cast unpleasant aspersion upon any other party. In plain terms, my lady, it must have been the act of one who can't be held responsible—I mean her Grace the Dowager."

The young Duchess made no answer, but averted her countenance, which she almost immediately concealed by raising her kerchief to it.

"And now I have something still more painful to say, my lady," resumed the police official; "and that is—"

"What is it?" asked our heroine quickly.

"It is, your Grace, that I must keep an eye upon her ladyship—I don't wish to do the thing rudely at all—heaven forbid!—but law is law, and I am only a humble agent of it after all. I left word at Beaconsfield, when I learnt what had happened up here, for a couple of my men to come presently—"

"You mean two police-constables?" said the young Duchess in a hollow voice.

"The truth is, my lady," said Mr. Brooks, who thought it time to interpose, inasmuch as the Inspector through very excess of delicacy was torturing the young Duchess with a prolonged suspense,—“you must make up your mind for all the usual unpleasant consequences of such a dreadful occurrence. Her Grace the Dowager will be put under arrest—In this respect she must share the fate of the lowest and the humblest individual—And what is more, she will have to appear before the proper tribunal—"

"What! be tried?" exclaimed the young Duchess, her accents mingled with a shriek. "But yes! I see it all! I understand what must happen!—and she sank down upon the chair from which she had started up.

"Your Grace must arm yourself with all your courage," observed Mr. Brooks.

"I know it! I feel it!"

"There will be a Coroner's Inquest—"

"Yes—for that ceremony I was indeed prepared: I have sent a messenger to communicate the dread intelligence to the Coroner:—then, after a silence of upwards of a minute, the young Duchess turned towards the Police Inspector, saying in a voice that was scarcely audible, "I hope you will do nothing till the Duke comes?"

"Nothing, my lady—nothing," was the response. "As the circumstances are so suspicious against the Dowager, I am bound to keep an eye upon her—but I need not actually arrest her until the Coroner's warrant is issued. So my fellows, when they come, shall just sit down in the hall, or the kitchen, or wherever your Grace thinks fit; and I trust to your ladyship to see that the Dowager does not escape."

"I will promise you that my mother-in-law shall not set foot beyond the threshold of the house," replied the young Duchess.

She then intimated that if the surgeon or the

Inspector required anything they might ring the bell; and she quitted the apartment.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE TRUTH DISCLOSED.

SOME hours elapsed—it was now between two and three o'clock in the afternoon—and nothing of any consequence had in the interval occurred at Thornbury. Mr. Condamine and Mrs. Boyle had respectively informed their pupils of the terrible tragedy which had taken place, and which was so awfully associated with the name of their unfortunate mother. The young lords and ladies begged to see their parent; but the tutor and governess besought them to remain in their own apartments until the arrival of their brother the Duke from London. The young Duchess joined them for about half-an-hour, and seconded the representations of Mr. Condamine and Mrs. Boyle. As for the unfortunate Dowager-Duchess herself, she seemed to have lost all recollection of anything dreadful that might have occurred; and falling asleep upon the sofa in the Green Drawing-room, she slumbered for some hours.

Shortly after two o'clock a carriage drove up to the mansion; and when the hall-porter went forth to see who the visitor might be, Connt Mandeville—for he it was—gave him his card, saying, "I was on my way to pay my respects to her Grace when I learnt at Beaconsfield of the terrible event which has occurred during the past night. My first thought was therefore to avoid intruding upon a scene of grief. But then it struck me that I might possibly be of some use, and that the offices of a friend might be acceptable under such circumstances. Will you have the goodness to go and repeat all this to her Grace; and I will wait in my carriage until you return with her ladyship's answer."

The hall-porter bowed and withdrew; and at the expiration of about five minutes he returned, saying, "Will you please to alight, sir?"

Mandeville was shown up into a drawing-room, where he found the young Duchess waiting to receive him. The instant the door was closed by the domestic who had escorted him thither, he seemed to be so struck by our heroine's appearance that he atopped suddenly short as he was advancing towards her.

"Unhappy man!" she said, clasping her hands with every appearance of the direst anguish, and bending upon him a look in which terror and compassion seemed to commingle; "how could you have recourse to such desperate means? But, Oh! think not that you will hear reproaches nor upbraidings from my lips! No, no! I appreciate—yes, my God, I appreciate all the love and tenderness on your part which has led you—"

"Mary, you confound me!" interrupted Mandeville. "This is absurd!—yes, a thousand times ridiculous! It is so utterly needless! Do you think that I should betray you?"

"What!" cried the young Duchess, starting back with all the appearance of a strong recoil: "you pretend—you affect—"

"Mary, 'tis *you* who pretend and affect!"

"Good God, that he should say this! that he should think it!"—and the young Duchess again clasped her hands as if in utter despair.

Mandeville folded his arms across his chest, and said in a cold tone, "Will you tell me, Mary, how long this farce is to last? It is scarcely well on your part to let Comedy succeed so soon upon Tragedy. Come, come! let there be an end to this ludicrous acting! Think you not that I can make all allowances, goaded as you were almost to desperation? Yes—by heaven! from the very bottom of my heart I pity you!"

"Oh, Hippolyte!" cried the Duchess, wringing her hands as she spoke, "it was because you *did* pity me that you had recourse to such a desperate measure in order to save me altogether! But, Oh! believe me, I have not proved ungrateful! I have curbed my feelings, and by a stupendous effort kept down all my emotions when I heard accusing tongues throw their imputation against my poor mother-in-law! Yes—although it has cut me to the very quick to echo the dreadful charges, yet have I done so; and I have even permitted her very children to be informed that all circumstantial evidence pointed to their poor mother as the authoress of the deed! *Now* you will give me credit for some degree of gratitude on account of all you have done for me? But the ordeal through which I am passing, is not yet half ended. Presently I shall be constrained to look my husband in the face and tell him that his mother is—is—my God! how can I breathe the hideous word?—a murderess! And then I shall have to place a seal upon my lips, and stifle my feelings even to the very verge of suffocation, when the Coroner's Jury pronounces the decision to which the evidence, as it now stands, must lead them. And then—Oh! *then*"—and the young Duchess shuddered visibly as she pursued the terrible theme—"there will be the most hideous phase of this ordeal! I mean that I shall be compelled to look on and still to keep the seal of silence upon my lips, while my poor mother-in-law is being borne away to gaol!"

Mandeville listened to this speech with a countenance that would have been inscrutable were it not that once or twice there was a slight play of a mocking smile upon his lips; and he retained his arms crossed the whole time over his chest. He was about to speak as the young Duchess left off; but she made a quick impatient gesture to silence him, and she resumed as follows:—

"There is something that I dread, Hippolyte—something from which my soul recoils in horror! It is lest you should be discovered!"

"On my soul, Mary!" ejaculated Mandeville, with a sudden start: "this is too strong!"

"Ah! listen to me! for heaven's sake, listen!" interjected the young Duchess; "and be not too overweeningly confident! Oh! it is for your good that I speak!—it is that no possible precaution should be neglected—but that in case of emergency you should be prepared for flight——"

"Flight?" exclaimed Mandeville indignantly. "By heaven——"

"Yes—flight for you!" said the young Duchess; "but shame—degradation—perhaps suicide for me! Do not interrupt me!—I will tell you where the danger lies. My mother-in-law must evidently have seen the deed committed—or else she has got a certain impression so strong upon

her mind, that if in a lucid interval she should be enabled to make certain statements——"

"Well, well!"—and Mandeville stamped his foot impatiently. "Let me hear first all that *you* have to say——"

"My mother-in-law ejaculates '*The ghost, the ghost did it!*'" pursued the young Duchess.

"Oh, if she should recognise you!"

"One word will suffice, Mary!" interrupted the Count. "Your mother-in-law saw too little of me last night in your bed-chamber to be enabled to recognise me again."

"But in her own chamber!" ejaculated our heroine "when—when—you must have stolen in thither——"

"A truce to this acting!" cried Mandeville. "I was never there at all—and you know it! Listen to me! I insist upon being heard! I have given you a patient hearing—you shall give me one. I drove my phaeton down to Beaconsfield last evening: I brought no servant with me—for I would not afford any clue to my intended movements. I engaged rooms at the hotel at Beaconsfield. I said that I was going out to supper at a farm-house in the neighbourhood, and that I might not return until very late. The porter promised to sit up for me. Ah, by the bye, I spoke of the starlit beauty of the night as a motive for walking to my destination and back, instead of taking the phaeton. But instead of being late after all, I was at the hotel again precisely as the clock was striking midnight. It was about a quarter-past eleven when I parted from you—and you will admit that it required a walk of at least three-quarters of an hour to take me to Beaconsfield. This morning I left the hotel at eight o'clock and returned to London."

Mandeville paused for a few moments, during which the young Duchess surveyed him with a singular expression of countenance, half incredulous, half compassionate.

"Now, Mary," resumed Mandeville, "the moment is come when all ridiculous acting and by-play must cease between us."

"Oh, yes!" cried the Duchess, "let it be so! let it be so!"

"It shall be so—and therefore, Mary, you may admit to me that, as I ere now said, goaded to desperation—dreading everything at the hands of Mrs. Quinlan—you had recourse to those fatal means——"

"Enough, enough, Hippolyte!" interrupted the Duchess, with a species of frantic impatience: "you will drive me mad! Remember that when I spoke to you of the manner in which the villain Abel Kingston had been disposed of, and when I shuddered lest his blood should have been spilt, you declared that you could even have done *that* for my sake!"

"And it was so, Mary," replied Mandeville. "And if I had done *this* deed, I should not hesitate to avow it."

The young Duchess pressed her hand to her brow as if to steady her reeling brain; and then she abruptly said, "If you did not strike the blow, who did?"

"Mary, between us there need be no secrets!"

"As I have a soul to be saved," rejoined the young Duchess solemnly, as she looked the Count with steady frankness in the face,—"as I believe in God, and tremble at his power to punish me if

I appeal in perjury or false-swearing to his holy name, I am innocent of this deed!"

"And I, Mary—though unaccustomed to take such oaths—can repeat the same words. But I can do better, as I have told you," added Mandeville; "for I am able to prove, if necessary, by the hour I returned to Beaconsfield, that I could not have possibly lingered within these walls long enough to commit the crime!"

The Count and the Duchess now began to look upon each other in a different light, though neither one was as yet fully and completely convinced of the innocence of the other. They were staggered:—each thought it quite possible that the other might be innocent; and yet there was a lurking misgiving which remained in their minds.

It was at this juncture that voices from the landing outside reached their ears; and the young Duchess ejaculated, "My mother-in-law! Do not let her see you! Oh, if she should recognise you!"

"Nonsense! she cannot! Will you not believe me? I tell you again that I was never in her chamber!"

"But I mean when you were in *mine*! For heaven's sake hide yourself! Oh, I know best—I know best how you ought to act!"

It suddenly occurred to Mandeville that our heroine was right enough in this respect; and he accordingly stepped without another moment's delay behind the window draperies,—the young Duchess quickly adding, "I will get rid of her almost immediately."

The door opened, and the Dowager-Duchess entered the room, followed by Lavinia and two other lady's-maids who had been specially left in charge of her.

"My dear Mary," she said, with a strange vacant expression of countenance, "how is it that these girls try to prevent me from coming near you? What does it mean?"

"Oh, my dear mother, you shall come to me," cried our heroine, bounding forward. "Leave us alone together," she added, turning towards the handmaidens: then, as they retired, she took the Dowager's hand, and leading her to a seat where her back was turned towards the draperies behind which Mandeville was concealed, she said in the kindest and most soothing tone, "My dear mother, have you anything upon your mind? If you have, pray tell me! Yes, tell me, I conjure you! You may have had bad dreams—"

"It was the ghost that did it!" exclaimed the Dowager abruptly: "the ghost, I say!—the evil spirit—the dark fiend!—he did it!"

"Did what?" asked the young Duchess, shudderingly.

"Took the knife and stabbed the old woman," responded the Dowager. "I suppose some one will come to ask questions about it—I think that is the custom; and if anything is said to me—"

"Well, mother—what?" asked the young Duchess, again quivering with the painful feelings which she experienced.

"I shall tell them that they need not give themselves the trouble to search any further into the matter—because the ghost did it. I saw the dark fiend!—Ah! and now I recollect, Mary, it was in your room."

"In my room, dear mother?" exclaimed our

heroine, with a frightened expression of countenance.

"Yes—your room to be sure!"—and the Dowager raised her hand to her brow. "Yes—I recollect! To be sure! how could I have forgotten? The dark shape—your chamber, Mary—and—and—the more I think of it, the more convinced I am that it had a human form. So you see what a tale I can tell when they come to ask me questions presently. Ah! and how lucky for you, Mary, that the evil spirit did not remain in your room, but that it went away and killed Mrs. Quinlan instead of yourself! We will tell Mr. Condamine of this—and he will pray with us and assure us that it was a special mercy of heaven vouchsafed to you, Mary."

The young Duchess was now under the influence of an awful consternation and dismay; for exposure of some kind or another seemed to be almost inevitable.

"So let us go to Mr. Condamine's room at once," said the Dowager, rising from the seat to which her daughter-in-law had conducted her.

At that very moment the door opened; and a tall, thin, elderly gentleman, with an intelligent expression of countenance, and a somewhat obsequious manner, looked in, bowing, and saying, "May I enter? shall I be intruding?"

"I know him!" exclaimed the Dowager abruptly: "I know him! He is Mr. Hornby, the lawyer! No—Mr. Watson, the Coroner! Yes, yes—Watson to be sure!"—and the Dowager's features lighted up with a species of childish satisfaction as she advanced to proffer the gentleman her hand.

She was right: he was the Coroner. He closed the door behind him, and taking the Dowager's hand, he made some few commonplace observations,—at the same time turning towards our heroine, and shaking his head with an ominous significance, as much as to say, "How dreadful! how shocking!"

"Do you wish to speak alone with me, Mr. Watson?" asked the young Duchess, with a hurried and nervous manner, and in a low and even hoarse tone of voice; "because if so, we will escort her Grace to some other apartment—"

"I thought it my duty to call upon your ladyship," interrupted the Coroner, "before the inquest takes place, to ascertain if your Grace has any particular wish to express under the present painful circumstances: because, as you are aware, the Jury—who, by the bye, are to meet at the Thornbury Arms at five o'clock—will come to view the corpse—it is a mere form—but it is indispensable; and if the hour should not suit your Grace—or if you would rather that the ceremony should be postponed until the arrival of the Duke from London—"

"Yes, to be sure!" the Dowager-Duchess now broke in: "you are Mr. Watson, the Coroner! I couldn't for the life of me think just now who it was that made inquiries into such cases as this: now I recollect it is your duty."

"My dear mother," said our heroine, "will you come with me?—and Mr. Watson shall go with us:—we will take you to the Green Drawing-room, where there are all the pretty china ornaments, you know—"

"No, I mean to stay here," replied the Dowager;

and she resumed her seat with a resolute air. "Sit down, Mr. Watson. I wish to speak to you:"—and now the look and manner of the Dowager-Duchess were so completely those of a rational person that if a stranger had entered the room at the moment he could not possibly have surmised that her brain was affected.

The Coroner bent a glance upon our heroine, as much as to imply that he would humour her mother-in-law; and he accordingly took a seat near her. The young Duchess was a prey the while to the most poignant terror and suspense; but she knew not how to interfere in the present proceeding without the risk of appearing strange in her conduct.

"You know, sir," resumed the Dowager, putting on a very grave and solemn air, and which still appeared to be completely rational,—“a very dreadful deed has been committed in this house——”

“Alas! your Grace, I have heard of it,” said the Coroner: and then, as a thought struck him, he started somewhat abruptly, from his seat, turned towards the young Duchess, and hastily whispered, “I must not listen to your mother-in-law any farther! I am as it were the judge who is presently to investigate the matter; and I fear lest I may have to perform the very painful duty of—of——”

“I understand you, Mr. Watson,” interrupted our heroine, eagerly catching at what appeared to be a means of putting an end to the present scene. “Your conduct is alike delicate and generous——”

“Sir,” the Dowager-Duchess here broke in, “I beg you to resume your seat. You need not whisper aside to my daughter-in-law:—it is for me to tell you who did the horrid deed. Stop, sir! I saw him——”

“Pardon me, my dear madam,” said the Coroner, in a soothing tone; “but I am in a great hurry—I must leave your Grace——”

“And I command you to stop!” cried the Dowager, with an authoritative air; “for you must hear what I have to say. I tell you that I saw him glide across the room—yes, almost as plain as I see you at this moment—for there were tapers upon the toilet-table——”

“Bless me!” said the Coroner, flinging a glance of inquiry upon the young Duchess; “is there anything in this? It really looks serious!”

“Nothing!—absolutely nothing!” our heroine hastily interjected.

“What is that you say, Mary?” demanded the Dowager, turning sharply round upon her daughter-in-law: “what did you say?”

“Nothing of any consequence, my dear madam,” answered the Coroner, with a soothing blandness of tone. “Her Grace was simply expressing the hope that you would not worry nor perplex yourself——”

“The matter must be cleared up!” exclaimed the Dowager, now getting excited; and there was the gleam of a sinister light flashing in her eyes. “You must not pursue the inquiry without me, Mr. Watson. I can explain it all! I saw the dark shape!—it was that of a man—though no doubt a fiend in the disguise of that form——”

“Mother, dear mother!” cried our heroine entreatingly; “do compose yourself!”

“But the truth must be told, Mary!”

“No doubt, dear mother!—and it shall be told! You shall have an opportunity.”

“I think, my dear madam,” interrupted the Coroner, with a mild deprecating air, “you had better not talk or think any more of these dreadful subjects.”

“Dreadful indeed!” cried the Dowager; “because the fiend in human shape might have murdered me—or he might have laid in wait to kill my dear Mary here—and then what would Herbert have said? Why, Mr. Watson, I saw the shape as plain as possible!”

“No doubt, my dear madam,” interjected the Coroner: “but do let me entreat your Grace to talk on some other subject——”

“You are afraid of it?” said the Dowager quickly. “Well, and no wonder! But you would have been still more afraid if you had seen the shape, as I did. It was gliding across the room, and it disappeared behind one of the window-curtains.”

“Indeed, there must be something in this,” whispered the Coroner aside to the young Duchess.

“Something in it?” exclaimed the Dowager, whose ears, being excessively sharp, had caught the words that were just spoken. “Something in it? Do you think I am telling stories? Sir, the Duchess of Ardleigh”—and here she drew herself up with as haughty a dignity, as ever in her lucid days she had put on—“the Duchess of Ardleigh never utters an untruth! But I will show you how it was. There!” and she flew towards one corner of the apartment. “Suppose this to be the room—it was here, in this corner, that the shape seemed to emerge from the darkness—then it glided along by the wall in this manner——”

“Oh, she is quite mad!” whispered the young Duchess aside to the Coroner, terror and anguish being mingled in her looks. “Mother, pray be calm!”—and she hounded forward to seize the arm of the Dowager whose movements filled her with the direst apprehension.

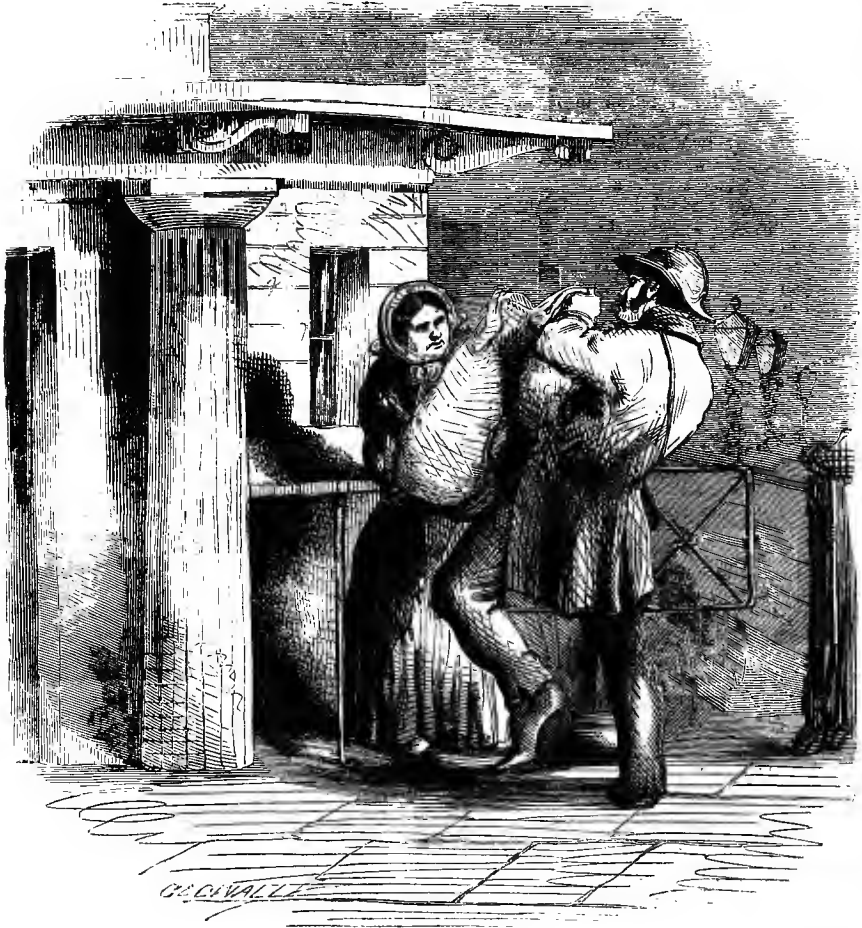
“Let me show Mr. Watson!” cried the Dowager, getting more and more excited. “This was just how it was. The shape stole forth from the corner—glided along in this way—and then suddenly disappeared behind the window-draperies, just as if it was *here!*”

The Dowager had reached a window as she thus spoke: she glanced behind the draperies—and then as a loud shriek pealed from her lips, she stepped hastily back, stumbled over a footstool, and fell with violence, her head coming in contact with some piece of furniture.

“Good heaven! what has she seen?” exclaimed the Coroner, who was now rushing towards the window.

“Help! help! for God’s sake help!” cried the young Duchess, literally flinging herself in Watson’s way to bar his progress towards the case-ment. “Look! she is dying! she may be dead!”

Our heroine’s affliction and terror seemed naturally enough to be concentrated upon the state of her mother-in-law; for the blood was flowing from a wound received on the temple, and the unfortunate lady lay motionless on the carpet. Watson hastened to lift her: and the young Duchess, rendering her assistance, made for the door, exclaiming, “Alas, my poor mother-in-law! it was all imagination on her part!”



"Yes—it must have been so," said Watson; "for after all, she could have seen nothing behind those curtains."

"This way, Mr. Watson! this way!—along the passage! Here—here, to the nearest chamber! There! softly upon the bed! And now to summon assistance!"

With these words the young Duchess rang the bell violently; and during the few moments that elapsed ere the summons was answered, she kept the Coroner employed, so that he might not quit the chamber to which the Dowager was transported.

"That bottle of scent, Mr. Watson! Thanks! thanks! That other one! There;—and now the little cut phial yonder! The sponge, to wash the wound! Ah, it bleeds still! But, thank heaven, life is not extinct!"

The handmaidens, to whose care the Dowager had been previously confided, now made their ap-
No. 38.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS

pearance, and their ministrations were promptly afforded. Some few hurried words of explanation were given; and then our heroine tottered as if she felt very faint, and said, "Give me your arm, Mr. Watson—lead me from the room—I need fresh air."

The Coroner accordingly conducted the young Duchess forth from the chamber; and she made him lead her to the dining-room, where he poured her out a glass of wine from one of the decanters which stood upon the sideboard.

"Does your Grace feel better now?" asked the attentive Coroner. "But really all this is sufficient to try your ladyship's nerves exceedingly."

"Ah, Mr. Watson," murmured our heroine, "you do not know what strange fancies my poor mother-in-law sometimes takes into her head, and how her imagination plays the wildest freaks!"

"It is only too evident that such is the fact," observed the Coroner. "I must confess that for a

moment I really did fancy her Grace beheld something behind the draperies in the other room."

"Nothing but imagination!" rejoined our heroine. "And now, Mr. Watson, permit me to thank you for the kind assistance you rendered; and excuse me for quitting you abruptly, but I feel better now, and will return to my mother-in-law."

The Coroner took his leave; and the young Duchess literally wrung her hands in despair the instant she found herself alone. But the next moment she gathered all the scattered remnants of her courage, and hastened to the drawing-room where the recent scenes had taken place. The windows were large and deeply set: the draperies were half closed over them—and instead of being looped up, they flowed with their heavy golden fringes upon the carpet. A person could therefore easily remain concealed behind one of those curtains, without being perceived by others who might enter the room.

The moment our heroine crossed the threshold of that drawing-room, Mandeville came forth from behind the draperies of the particular window which the Dowager-Duchess had approached and whence she had recoiled with the sudden paroxysm of wild terror that had produced the accident.

"Hippolyte," said the Duchess, in a low mournful voice, and with a singular blending of horror, aversion, and compassion in her looks, "there is no longer a doubt! Nay, do not interrupt me! It is impossible for you to deceive me for another instant! There was a moment when I was staggered—when I wavered—when I thought it possible that after all it might not be as circumstances seemed to indicate—but now—my God! ~~now~~ it is as impossible for me to doubt any longer!"

"Mary!"—and Mandeville stamped his foot with apparent rage.

"Nay, do not interrupt me!" she vehemently ejaculated.

"But I will and must interrupt you!" he fiercely rejoined. "I am losing all patience! You are either playing a part of the most execrable hypocrisy—or else you are suffering yourself to be swayed by the nonsensical ravings of your insane mother-in-law!"

"Stop, sir—stop!" exclaimed the young Duchess angrily: "you shall not insult her thus in my hearing! Weak—foolish—almost criminal as I have been in some instances—yet, believe me, I have certain good feelings left! God knows I am now under the impression of the terrible warnings which in various ways have been conveyed unto me; and if my reason survives all the tremendous shocks which it is now sustaining, rest assured that I shall be the gainer by all these bitter experiences. For heaven's sake, Hippolyte, let the same be said of *you*! Go, go! remain not here any longer; for danger hangs over your head! If my mother-in-law regains her consciousness and reverts to the same themes as those which have already so startled us—"

"Look you, Mary," interrupted Mandeville; "we must come to an understanding together—though perhaps this is not the precise time—"

"An understanding?" she echoed. "Oh! you would not now venture to assert those claims which—which"—and she hesitated and blushed;

but almost instantaneously gathering courage, she added, "You know what I mean, Hippolyte;—and you must comprehend how completely everything is now finished between you and me!"

A strange expression, which had something of sardonic mockery in it, appeared upon Mandeville's countenance; but quickly reassuming a grave look, he said, "I see that this is not the time to discuss whatsoever matters may concern you and me. As for argument or recrimination on a certain point, it is simply ridiculous. You know as well as I do—in fact who better than you *can* know that your mother-in-law has in the confusion of her ideas mixed up the circumstance of seeing me in your chamber with the murder of her keeper? She took me for a ghost—and with an hallucination quite intelligible on the part of one whose intellects are weak, she fancies that this same ghost took Mrs. Quinlan's life. I know full well that it would prove somewhat perilous for me, if she, on regaining her consciousness, were to persist in her story. Now, Mary, mark me! Knowing as I do that you did the deed—"

It was almost a scream which burst from the lips of the young Duchess; and she wrung her hands either with angry impatience or else in utter despair, it was difficult to say which.

"Yes," continued Mandeville,—“for I see the necessity of speaking out,—knowing as I do that *you* did the deed, where is your gratitude when you hear me promise that on no account will I say aught that may implicate you, no matter what peril may suddenly overtake myself?"

"Good God!" exclaimed the young Duchess, "what motive can you have in imputing this to me? Have I threatened that I would betray you? Are you afraid of me? No, no! you cannot be! You know that I am grateful—deeply grateful on account of all that you have done for me! Heavens! how could I be otherwise? That you should have imbrued your hands with blood—stained your soul with such a crime for my sake—"

"Really," said Mandeville, with a peculiar smile upon his lip, "I am almost inclined to let you have your own way. It must be a mere woman's fantasy on your part! Or is it a proof of love which you demand of me, that I should take upon myself the responsibility of this deed, in order that you may so far delude yourself as to prevent you from blushing or feeling strange when you look me in the face? Well, if this be your motive, I am perfectly agreeable. Let it be so, then."

"At least I am glad that you have confessed it at last, Hippolyte," said our heroine; "though I could wish you had not adopted such terms of flippant levity. And now go! for heaven's sake go! Already have we been too long together! I know not what may be thought. At least this absence from my mother-in-law must seem most strange—"

Here the speech of the young Duchess was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of Lavinia, who burst hastily into the room, evidently in a state of violent excitement, exclaiming, "Come, my lady, come! Her Grace asks for you!"

"What!" ejaculated the young Duchess, flinging a look of affright upon Mandeville; "has the Dowager regained her consciousness?"

"Her Grace is completely sensible," answered Lavinia. "She likewise appears quite sane!"

"Ah! same!"—and once more were the affrighted looks of our heroine flung upon Mandeville, as much as to imply that the dreaded peril was at last overtaking him.

There was a certain air of indecision about him: it was pretty clear that he knew not how to act, though he by no means lost his self-possession.

"Her Grace," Lavinia quickly resumed, "is quite prepared to die."

"To die, Lavinia?" exclaimed our heroine.

"Alas, yes, my lady!—and Dr. Brooks, who is there, says that in a short time it will be all over. Oh! I am really glad that your ladyship was not there, when her Grace seeming to recollect everything all in a moment, made the accusation in such rending accents—"

"The accusation?"—and the young Duchess felt that her limbs were failing under her.

"Yes, my lady—the accusation. And Oh! how we all shuddered; for there was something fearful—"

"My God, speak, Lavinia! The accusation?—against whom?"

"Against whom?" repeated the abigail, as if evidently surprised at the question: "Ah, I see that even until the last moment your Grace finds it difficult to believe—"

"But speak, Lavinia! speak! The accusation—against whom?"

"Against herself!"

"My God!" murmured the young Duchess, with a sensation which in one respect was fraught with infinite relief, though in another sense it was full of a shuddering horror: and after staggering for a moment against a chair for support, she rushed from the room.

CHAPTER LVII.

THE DOWAGER.

UPON the bed in the chamber to which she had been conveyed, lay the Dowager-Duchess of Ardleigh. Mr. Brooks and two or three lady's-maids were present when the young Duchess entered, followed by Lavinia. The instant our heroine met the looks of her mother-in-law, she was struck by the lucidity and intelligence which reigned in them. A bandage was fastened over her forehead; her countenance was very pale; but her eyes seemed brighter than for a long time past they had been. They neither wandered wildly, nor yet remained fixed inanely; but they vibrated with a steady lustre shed from the lamp which reason had once more lighted up in her soul.

"Mary—dear Mary," she said, "come to me."

The young Duchess threw herself upon the bosom of her mother-in-law, who wound her arms about her neck; and thus for several minutes they remained embraced. Both sobbed—but neither spoke a word, until our heroine, looking around, perceived that she was alone with the Dowager, the surgeon and the handmaidens having left the room.

"Did you tell them that they were to go, dear mother?" asked the young Duchess.

"No: but they have acted through their own discretion—and they have done well: I wish to be alone with you. I am going to leave you, Mary—Oh! I feel that life is ebbing away!"

"Speak not thus, dear mother!" cried our heroine, the tears flowing down her cheeks.

"It is the truth, my love—and you must hear it," rejoined the Dowager. "But where is Herbert? Will he come soon?"

"I expect him every minute—he ought to be here by this time! I sent for him the first thing in the morning—"

"Doubtless he will come shortly," interrupted the Dowager; "and heaven grant that I may see him ere Death, whose cold hand I already feel upon me—"

"No, no, dear mother! you will not die thus!" cried our heroine in an impassioned tone.

"I cannot deceive myself, Mary—nor will I attempt to deceive you. My mind, awaking from a long night of obscurity and gloom, is now endowed with a horrible clearness. You may think it strange to hear me thus speak: but you may judge from what I say whether my reason be still wandering or not. And therefore let me at once avail myself of this lucid interval, for fear lest the cloud should come over my mind again,—let me avail myself of it, I repeat, to impress you with the conviction that it is better I should die now than live to pass through a terrible ordeal—"

"Mother! what do you mean?" asked our heroine, in a low shuddering voice; for though she put the question, she had no difficulty in comprehending what the Dowager *did* mean.

"I tell you, Mary, that I am now completely calm and lucid," resumed the unfortunate lady. "Just now I awoke from a deep torpor to the excruciating sensitiveness of my actual position—I was startled up as it were from the death-like darkness of a profound trance to the blaze of a vivid sunlight which threw out into the boldest relief all the circumstances that environ me. The paroxysm was fearful—and for an instant it seemed as if vultures were tearing at my brain—scorpions plunging their stings into my heart!"

"Oh, mother! mother!" groaned the young Duchess, with clasped hands; "this is frightful!"

"Calm yourself, Mary—for you perceive that I am now calm; and it is no unnatural calmness which possesses me. It is the calmness which inevitably attends upon the prostration of all physical energy—the calmness which is unto the soul that experiences it the unmistakable herald of approaching death!"

"Oh, why is not Herbert here?" cried our heroine. "Shall I send again for him?"

"No," responded the Dowager; "he will perhaps come presently; I am not sorry to be alone with you, Mary. Few are the reminiscences which I have of the incidents that belong to the night-gloom in which my soul has been for some years wrapped: but nevertheless there is one thing which is deeply impressed upon my convictions—and this is that *you*, Mary, have ever treated me with the tenderest love and kindness. Yes! of this I have a perfect consciousness! There are many points upon which I would fain question you—but as perhaps my time may be short—"

"No, dear mother—do not think so! You shall live—yes, live to enjoy happiness yet!"—but

scarcely were the words spoken when our heroine felt that she had proclaimed an impossibility.

"Do not deceive yourself on my account, dear Mary," pursued the Dowager, in a tone that was calm, low, mournful, and affectionate. "I am dying—and it is better that I should thus die. I said so ere now. I have been mad—I know it—and in my madness I have committed a fearful deed. Do not think that because I speak thus calmly of it, I fail to appreciate its stupendous enormity. Oh, that I could recall her to life! But my conscience is so far appeased that I know God will not hold me answerable for an action which was perpetrated when I was not the mistress of myself. No!—that same heaven which in its inscrutable wisdom thought fit to deprive me of my reason, will make every allowance for the deeds that were done while I was groping my way in the clouded gloom of my intellect. I know likewise that the human law may be equally merciful, and that to my case it would not apply the retributive doctrine. But still—but still, Mary, I should have to undergo a trial—I should have to be dragged through the ordeal of a court of justice; and then perhaps I should be confined to a madhouse for the remainder of my days."

The young Duchess shuddered with a cold tremor; for there was a horrible calmness in the manner in which the Dowager spoke these words, and our heroine even began to question whether the light of intellect had after all so completely triumphed over the mind's clouded state as she had at first imagined. Indeed her misgiving on the point increased when she beheld her mother-in-law raise her hand to her brow, press that hand upon the bandage which was fastened there, and have every appearance as if she were endeavouring to collect thoughts that were beginning to wander.

"Of all the circumstances which led to the terrible deed," resumed the Dowager, after a brief pause, "I have now a full comprehension. The deed itself, with all its details, is vivid in my mind. Other ideas hover confusedly about it; but it is vainly that I strive to connect them with the one terrific incident itself. My mind must have been excited and horrified by fearful nightmares. Yes!—I have a dim recollection that you yourself, dear Mary, figured therein—"

"I, dear mother?"—and the young Duchess now listened with a degree of suspense that was excruciatingly poignant.

"Yes," pursued the Dowager: "but then the images of those who are dearest to us are sure to rise uppermost in our dreams, because they are ever present in our waking thoughts. And thus was it, Mary, that I had some dreadful vision in connexion with yourself—a dream of some danger hanging over you—of some fearful shape that was haunting you—Yes, and now I recollect, my fevered imagination carried me even into your very chamber—and there it sported with me in such a hideous but fantastic manner—"

"What was it that you fancied, dear mother?" asked the young Duchess, in a low hoarse voice.

"I scarcely know—I cannot collect my thoughts upon that point;" and again the Dowager pressed her hand to her bandaged brow.

"Perhaps it were better, dear mother," said our heroine, softly yet earnestly, "to abstain from harassing your mind with these unpleasant topics?"

"Yes—it were better," rejoined the Dowager. "At all events, Mary, I have said enough to show you that my mind must have been in a very fevered and morbid state—that it must have been labouring under a great amount of unnatural excitement—and that those horrible nightmares had left a kindred impress upon it. I was more mad than ever! Oh, I must have been fiercely and savagely mad when I could have done such a deed as that! And if I am horrified at the action itself, I am equally astonished at the dissimulation that I displayed—"

"Dissimulation, dear mother?" said our heroine inquiringly: and it was with breathless suspense that she hung upon every word which now issued from the lips of her mother-in-law.

"Yes—dissimulation, Mary," replied the Dowager. "I must not suffer the thread of ideas to escape out of my mind,"—and again she pressed her hand to her brow. "Ah, I will tell you what I mean! I have a recollection of having done something for which Mrs. Quinlan spoke very harshly to me. She scolded me as if I were a child. What was it that I had done? Oh, if my brain should grow confused before I can tell you everything! Ah! there is a gleam of light! Well, I remember I was standing in the middle of my bedroom with Mrs. Quinlan—we had both nothing on but our nightclothes—and she was reproaching me for having stolen out of the room, or else having tried to leave it, I do not exactly know which."

"It matters little, dear mother," said the young Duchess hastily and anxiously. "Do not tax your recollections too much—"

"No, no—I will not, Mary; for I feel that my brain is getting weaker. Give me some water. There! raise the glass to my lips."

"Good God! She is dying!" mentally ejaculated our heroine. "Mother, how do you feel?"

"Better—better now, dear Mary:" but there was evidently an increasing feebleness in the Dowager's voice.

"Shall I call the surgeon—or the handmaidens?" asked the young Duchess, now full of the most feverish anxiety.

"No, no—Mary!—they can do me no good! Besides, I feel better now. I shall last till the Coroner comes."

"The Coroner?" echoed our heroine.

"Yes: I have ordered him to be sent for," responded the Dowager. "I know not exactly why he should be uppermost in my thoughts—but so it was at the moment when I begged that he might be summoned."

"For what purpose?" asked the young Duchess, in a faint voice.

"That I may tell him how I did the deed—so that by no possibility there may be any injurious suspicion fall upon others. You see, Mary, that I am anxious to do all I can."

"Yes, yes, dear mother—I see that you are But what were you telling me?"

"Where was I, Mary?"—and the Dowager's thoughts seemed to be growing slightly confused; or at all events they were not quite so clear and collected as they were a few minutes back.

"You were telling me, dear mother, that you were standing in the middle of your own bedroom, and Mrs. Quinlan was scolding you for

something which you do not recollect, and which indeed is of no consequence."

"I was very angry with Mrs. Quinlan," resumed the Dowager; "and I have the most perfect recollection of the idea which was uppermost in my mind. Oh! you cannot conjecture, Mary, how strange, how wild, and how terrible are the hallucinations which may take possession of the fevered fancy! Methought that the woman was a fiend—a ghost—a spectre—a dark spirit of evil—"

"Yes, yes. What then, dear mother?" asked our heroine, with nervous quickness; for she dreaded the channel into which the Dowager's thoughts now seemed to be once more flowing.

"I was inspired with mingled rage and terror on account of that woman. Alas, poor creature! she became the victim of my hallucination. I could not control my own thoughts—I was not the mistress of my own mind—and therefore I was equally unable to exercise a control over my actions. Instead of a good, well-meaning, conscientious, though somewhat arbitrary woman as she really was, I beheld before me naught but a fiend in human shape—a horrible spectre that was haunting me—a demon that had taken a female form for the purpose of working me a mischief! Ah, everything now becomes vividly clear once more!"

"What? what?" asked our heroine, still with nervous quickness.

"All the thoughts which took possession of my brain," pursued the Dowager. "I fancied that the fiend in female shape was laying in wait to kill me, and that if I gave her an opportunity she would take my life. And thus, Mary—and thus," added the Dowager, with a hollow voice and haggard look, "I resolved upon taking *her* life in order to save my own!"

There was a pause, during which the elder Duchess seemed to reflect painfully, and the other one nervously and anxiously. At length the former resumed:—

"I got into my bed, and shut my eyes, pretending to be asleep, though in reality I had not the faintest inclination to slumber. I recollect all this now! I heard Mrs. Quinlan ask if I wanted anything. I did not answer her—but I pretended to breathe as if I were sleeping. Oh, the dissimulation of which I was guilty!"

"You could not help it, dear mother: you were not responsible for it!—Why do you look at me in that strange manner? Speak, speak! Why do you not answer me?"

"I was thinking, Mary," answered the Dowager, in a slow deliberate manner, "whether it were possible that I could have been altogether mad?—whether if my reason had been completely overturned, I could have practised so much dissimulation?—for now that I look back on all the details of the fearful deed, I recoil shudderingly from the dread thought that there was a certain amount of calculation displayed therein—a method—a cunning—I scarcely know what term to use—"

"Tranquillize yourself, dear mother, on this head," interjected our heroine: "for, alas! all these charges which you are now bringing against yourself, are often the symptoms of various conditions of mental infirmity—they are psychological phenomena well known to exist—"

"If that be so, Mary, my conscience is relieved from a sudden weight which had fallen upon it."

"And now therefore you may proceed to explain how—how—"

"I will make the story short. I had no idea it would prove so long when I first entered upon it! I lay awake, as I was saying—and after a while I felt convinced that Mrs. Quinlan slept. I was resolved to kill her. But how? I need not tell you that the utmost care was taken to leave nothing of a dangerous nature within my reach. The devil that was prompting me, suggested that I should descend into the servants' offices and procure a knife. I knew the outer doors were always locked: I knew also that Mrs. Quinlan kept the keys under her pillow—though I have now no recollection how I could have discovered a fact which she would have doubtless taken every precaution to guard from my knowledge. But perhaps, with that cunning which, as you have explained, belongs to certain conditions of mental infirmity, I may have kept watch at times when pretending to be asleep—as was the case last night. But of this I have no positive recollection. However, suffice it to say that I knew the keys were there,—yes, *there*, beneath the pillow of the sleeping woman!—and I resolved to obtain possession of them. Let me reflect!"—and again was the hand raised to the bandaged brow. "Ah, I remember! I was nearly half an hour in gently drawing forth those keys from beneath the pillow. I did not suffer them to give forth the slightest sound—I held them as noiseless as was the tread of my own naked feet upon the carpet. Yes—and I recollect, too, that I was inspired by a fierce savage joy: there was a ferocious chuckling within me as I went about my horrible work. Oh! how all the cunning to which we ere now alluded, and which characterises mad people, was shown in the stealthy caution of my movements!—for is it not astonishing, Mary, that they could have been conducted so carefully as to fail to arouse a woman who from the very nature of her avocation must have learnt the habit of light-sleeping?"

"Yes—it is a wonder that you did not disturb her," answered the young Duchess, as she recollected how the late keeper was wont to boast that she slept so lightly the slightest thing would awaken her.

"And thus I succeeded in getting the keys from under the pillow while she still slept," resumed the Dowager; "and I glided into the dressing-room—I unlocked the door opening on the servants' landing—and I remember that I looked round, more than half convinced that I should see Mrs. Quinlan standing behind me ready to thrust forth her arm, clutch me with her strong hand, and drag me back. Again therefore I chuckled with a savage joy when I succeeded in reaching the bottom of the staircase and found myself on the threshold of the servants' offices. I chose a knife, Mary," added the Dowager, in a hoarse voice.—"Are you not tired of listening to this horrible narrative?"

"I listen to it," replied the young Duchess, "as one listens to a confession which relieves the soul of the person making it. I listen therefore, dear mother, in order that I may be enabled to sympathise with you all the more deeply!"

"Oh! that I am sure you will do, Mary!" exclaimed her mother-in-law, with a joyous ex-

ultation in her accents: but her voice almost immediately grew feeble again, as she went on to say, "I must make an end of this confession of mine. Picture therefore to yourself an unfortunate woman at the dead of night, inspired by maniac thoughts—guided by a fiend—possessing herself of a murderous weapon—clutching it as if she were at length possessed of the means of ridding herself of some terrible enemy and performing an act of righteous justice! Then continue in your imagination to follow in the footsteps of that wretched being whose only justification is that she was a maniac—follow her, I say—ascend those stairs with her as she trips so lightly that not a step shall creak beneath her feet—pass with her through the dressing-room—enter into the bed-chamber—proceed with her to the side of the couch wherein her victim reposes! And then—and then—something flashes before the eyes in the gleaming of the night-lamp!—it is the murderous steel!—and deep it goes down into the bosom of the unfortunate creature, whose earthly sleep is thus suddenly changed, without a moan, and almost without a convulsion, into the eternal slumber of death!"

The Dowager had gradually raised her voice with the excitement of the horrible description; and there was for a few instants a maniac glitter in her eyes; so that a dread effect was produced upon her listening daughter-in-law, who again found the suspicion stealing into her mind that the Dowager's reason was not completely re-established upon its throne.

"And then how I exulted! how I rejoiced!" she proceeded. "It was as if a veritable fiend were committing his hideous holiday in my soul, rendering it a pandemonium of everything evil and abhorrent! Oh, Mary, you must loathe and detest me as you listen to these shocking details!"

"No, no, dear mother! think not that I shall regard you thus! You were not in your right senses at the time!—you are not responsible for the thoughts that accompanied the deed, any more than you are for the deed itself!"

"Are you sure of this? Oh, if I could only think so!"—and now the look and manner of the unfortunate lady were completely sane and rational once more.

"Believe me—believe me, dear mother," responded the young Duchess urgently, "you have committed no crime for which human laws would condemn you or heavenly ones hold you answerable!—And now continue. But quick! and make an end of a narrative the details of which excite you so much!"

The Dowager reflected for a few moments; and then she said, "I recollect that when I first plunged the weapon into the poor creature's bosom—God forgive me!—very little blood indeed came forth; but when I was going to draw out the knife, it spirted out all over my hand and the sleeve of my night-dress."

"The sleeve of your night-dress?" ejaculated the young Duchess. "Why, there was not a mark—"

"No, dear Mary— I changed it," replied the Dowager. "The blood-stained garment will be found at the bottom of the large wardrobe, which I took good care to lock. I washed my hand in the dressing-room, and I made no further attempt to draw forth the knife. I replaced the keys

under the pillow of the murdered woman; and I left the outer door of the dressing-room unlocked. Do you know why? It was because I was seized with a sudden notion that it would be better not to let it be known that I perpetrated the dread deed. It was not remorse that smote me: on the contrary, I continued to chuckle with a savage joy—for I felt assured that I had slain a fiend in human shape! But some instinctive cunning prompted me to conceal the authorship of the crime: so I thought that by leaving the door unlocked and restoring the keys to their proper place, it would seem as if Mrs. Quinlan had gone to bed without locking that particular door at all, and that some unknown assassin had thus been enabled to penetrate thither. Down to that point, Mary, do I recollect the ideas and motives which swayed my conduct; and then there follows a complete blank, until I awoke to find myself lying here, my brow bandaged on account of a fall, and the lamp of reason rapidly flaming up in my brain!"

"What, dear mother!" asked the young Duchess eagerly: "you recollect nothing which occurred in the interval?"

"Nothing," was the response. "Yes!—I do remember that I went to bed—to be sure! I remember it now! And then—and then—"

"Never mind reflecting!" interrupted our heroine: "do not distress yourself, dear mother! I do not bewilder your brain by uselessly exercising it!"

"No— I will not," answered the Dowager, whose voice was now so faint as to be scarcely audible.

There was a long pause, during which the young Duchess, while meditating intently upon all she had heard, naturally came to the satisfactory conclusion that her mother-in-law's mind was a complete blank in respect to everything which had occurred that might in any way compromise her. It was even evident that when the Dowager had awakened in the morning, she had recollecting nothing of the awful occurrences of the preceding night; she had not even retained the consciousness of her own awful deed. *She had forgotten that she was a murderer!* And thus in the confused and jumbled state of her ideas and reminiscences, she had associated the image of Mandeville with the death of the unfortunate woman; and when she had caught a glimpse of his form concealed behind the curtains, she was smitten with an overwhelming terror at the idea that she there beheld the fiend who had done the deed. All these facts were now sufficiently evident to the comprehension of the young Duchess, who was solemnly and awfully impressed with the whole series of incidents that had occurred at Thornbury within the last four-and-twenty hours.

Her reflections lasted for some minutes,—at the expiration of which she looked towards her mother-in-law, whose eyes were now closed, and who appeared to be dozing. There was presently a gentle knock at the door: our heroine hastened to answer it; and Mr. Brooks, the surgeon, proved to be the individual who sought admittance.

"How is her Grace?" he asked, in a cautious whisper, as he entered the apartment. "I thought that I had better come to inquire, for upwards of

an hour has elapsed since I left your Grace alone with her."

"She seems to be sinking off into slumber," said our heroine, glancing towards her mother-in-law, whose eyes still remained closed. "Is there really any danger, Mr. Brooks?"

"It is my duty to inform your Grace that there is every danger. The system has received a shock which under such peculiar circumstances can scarcely fail to prove fatal. All tremendous revulsions in the human system are to be dreaded. It was by a fall, a few years ago, that her Grace lost her intellects: it is now by a fall that she to a certain extent regains them—but regains them only as a dying lamp flames up for a moment ere it flickers into extinction!"

"And thus—you think—there is no hope, Mr. Brooks?" asked our heroine tremulously.

"I did not say *that*, your Grace: but I would have you prepare for the very worst. Everything that I can do for her ladyship shall be done. I have been home to Beaconsfield for certain medicines; and I will now administer a draught."

This was done accordingly; and the Dowager-Duchess, reviving somewhat from the torpor which appeared to have been gaining upon her, took her daughter-in-law's hand, saying, "You must prepare to lose me, dear Mary. I feel that I cannot survive the shock which I have sustained!"

The door now again opened; and Lavinia made her appearance to announce that the Coroner and "another gentleman" sought admittance. The young Duchess hastily asked who the other gentleman was?—and Lavinia, drawing her young mistress aside, whispered in her ear a few words of explanation.

"What is it?" asked the Dowager. "If you have any unpleasant intelligence to communicate, hesitate not to impart it,—no matter what it may be! Anything is preferable to suspense."

Our heroine glided towards the couch; and bending down to her mother-in-law's ear, she said, "The Coroner judged from the message which you sent to him, that you wished to unburden your mind—and—and—inasmuch as he is somewhat peculiarly situated, he thought it expedient to ask a justice of the peace to accompany him."

This explanation was given hesitatingly and delicately: but the Dowager-Duchess seemed to be perfectly firm and collected; and she said, "Let the Coroner and the Magistrate enter."

Those functionaries were accordingly introduced: our heroine remained in the apartment, as did likewise the surgeon; and the latter whispered urgently in the Coroner's ear to the effect that it would be expedient for the proceeding to be rendered as brief as possible. We need not linger upon it. Suffice it to say that in a calm and lucid manner, but with every evidence of the deepest regret for the tragedy, the Dowager-Duchess avowed herself to be the author of it. The Coroner and the Magistrate withdrew: but ere they left the house, a corroboration of the confession they had just heard was sought for and found in the bloodstained garment which had been put away in the wardrobe. The Coroner's Jury returned a verdict in accordance with the evidence that was placed before them; and a warrant was made out, according to the law's requirement, for the arrest of the Dowager-Duchess of Arleigh. But this was a mere formal pro-

ceeding; for the unfortunate lady relapsed into a torpor, soon after the departure of the Coroner and the Magistrate—she sank rapidly—and by the evening of the following day she had ceased to exist.

Mandeville had taken his departure from Thornbury immediately after that scene which we have described: but he remained in the neighbourhood until he had ascertained the result of the inquest; and then he returned to London. He longed to see the young Duchess ere he thus left the neighbourhood; but he dared not call again at the mansion: he saw that such a proceeding would not only be most indelicate under existing circumstances, but would also tend to compromise our heroine's character most seriously in reference to himself.

The Duke reached Thornbury in the evening, soon after the verdict of the Jury had been delivered: he had been absent a few miles from London at the time when the summons was sent to the town-mansion. It would be impossible to describe the mingled horror and anguish which he had experienced on receiving the startling news: nor is it a topic that we need dwell upon. When he reached Thornbury, his unfortunate mother was plunged deep into that stupor from which there was no awakening, but which was destined to lead on rapidly, though almost imperceptibly, until it merged into the trance of death!

CHAPTER LVIII.

HESTER AGAIN.

WE must remind our readers that it was on the night of the 2nd of June that the corpse of Ivan Zadonski was conveyed to the house of Mr. and Mrs. Grills, and that the girl Hester, stealing down stairs, from her own chamber, peeped into the scullery and beheld the appalling spectacle which has already been described. We must now suppose that a couple of days have elapsed; and it is the evening of the 4th of June of which we are going to write.

It was between nine and ten o'clock that Henri Ponchard made his way to the house to which we have alluded, and where he was instantaneously admitted. In a few moments he was closeted with Mr. and Mrs. Grills in the parlour; and having tossed off a dram of brandy which was presented to him, he inquired, "Any news? has anything occurred? is everything all right?"

He did not put these queries anxiously or nervously: indeed he did not seem in any hurry to set his mind at rest upon those points; for though passionate and excitable when engaged in argument, especially on political subjects, he was cool-headed and self-possessed on all occasions when there was need for resolute action and calm intrepidity.

"Everything as right as a trivet," said Mr. Grills, thus giving a general answer to the several questions that had been put.

"So much the better," observed Ponchard, but with a certain coolness, or even a callousness, just as if he would have been by no means surprised to receive intelligence somewhat less

favourable. "Nothing suspicious in *that* quarter—you know what I mean?"

"What! Hester?" said Mrs. Grills. "No—nothing to fear there. The gal has no more idea of what's been going on in the house for the two last nights than the man in the moon—and p'rhaps not half so much," added the woman, with a coarse laugh.

"That is to say," observed Ponchard inquiringly, "she is just the same as usual?"

"Except that she complained a good deal of headache to day," responded the woman, "and wouldn't take no brandy."

"But did she go out?" asked Ponchard.

"Yes she went and took a walk; but I did as you told me—I followed her at a distance. I took very good care she shouldn't see me——"

"And there was nothing peculiar in her proceedings?" asked the Frenchman. "Did she look about her as if she thought she might be watched?"

"Not a bit of it," replied Mrs. Grills.

"Did she go into any place where she might meet any one unknown to you?"

"She never entered any house at all, not even so much as a shop; and I'll take my oath," added Mrs. Grills, helping herself to some brandy, "that she did not speak to a policeman."

"Has she mentioned my name since the night before last?" inquired Ponchard.

"Well, I don't think she was the first to mention it," resumed Mrs. Grills; "but this morning, at breakfast-time, I said something, as if quite promiscuous—and I watched the gal, but her face never changed."

"She dropped her roll, though, at the moment, now I recollect," said Grills.

"Stuff and nonsense! it was an accident," exclaimed the woman. "Trust me for knowing how to tell what's passing in people's minds by their looks—pertikler young gals such as Hester. I said you was likely to be here this evening, sir; and I'm sure she never suspected for a moment that you was here the best part of all last night."

Henri Ponchard was reflecting deeply; and he gave no immediate answer to the information he had just received. Though daring and intrepid, yet was he of all men the very first to adopt as many precautions as possible; and it was that very self-possession on his part which constituted the cautiousness of his disposition, even when he might appear to be callous, flippant, or indifferent in certain circumstances.

"What is it you're thinking on?" asked Mr. Grills, at length breaking the silence which for some minutes prevailed.

"Hester dropped her roll when my name was mentioned?" said Ponchard thoughtfully: "Hester had a headache, and would not drink brandy? Hester went out for a walk, and went wandering about in a sort of vague uncertain manner?"

"I didn't say so," interjected Mrs. Grills, with a slight expression of alarm upon her bloated countenance.

"Perhaps not," observed Ponchard; "and perhaps I may be wrong. But I do not like the spect of the thing. In a word, I suspect the girl."

"By jingo!" said Grills, in a low, savage, concentrated tone, as he clutched a knife that lay upon the table: "if I thought——"

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Mrs. Grills: "I don't for a moment believe there's anything wrong about the gal. If I did, I shouldn't be fool enough to blind my eyes to it, because it might just be the werry same thing as wilfully thrusting one's neck into a halter. But of course when people are engaged in things that might get them into trouble, they're always suspicious, and they make mole-hills into mountains. It's like poor timid creatures which sees ghostesses when if they went straight up to 'em and touched 'em they'd prove to be postesses. For my part I'm no more afeard of Hester than I am of that strange cat which came a-sniffin' in at the scullery door last night when you was cutting up the rest of the stiff'un."

"And I don't say I'm afeard," interjected Mr. Grills; "but what I meant is that if so be there's any risk to run on the part of that gal, why the sooner she's put out of the way the better."

The Frenchman gave a sudden start, and the word "miscreant!" in his own language wavered for a moment upon his lips: but quickly composing himself, he said, "No, no! not for the world! At all events such a crime should not be perpetrated unless it were to be found absolutely necessary. In politics one cares not how the blood of tyrants or traitors may be spilt; but apart from *that*——However, no matter!" and he suddenly checked himself; for contrary to his habitual caution, he was giving audible vent to his musings. "But at all events," he said, turning towards Mrs. Grills, "you ought to know Hester better than I; and if you are satisfied that she is all safe, it is not for me to give way to misgivings."

"I'm so satisfied," answered the woman, "that I don't flinch a bit from what I've got to do presently."

"Well and bravely spoken!" cried Ponchard. "At all events when once the business is finished according to our plan, there will be nothing to fear. It's the English law that the remains of the dead must be discovered and produced—aye, and identified too, by some means or another—before a charge of murder or complicity therein can be sustained. Well," added the Frenchman, with a grim smile, "I think we have destroyed the identity of Ivan Zadouiski——"

"You have at least!" interjected Mrs. Grills, with a chuckle. "Ah! what a thing it is to be a surgeon!"

"It ain't a bad name which we sometimes gives the gentlemen of your profession," remarked Mr. Grills. "We calls 'em sawbones."

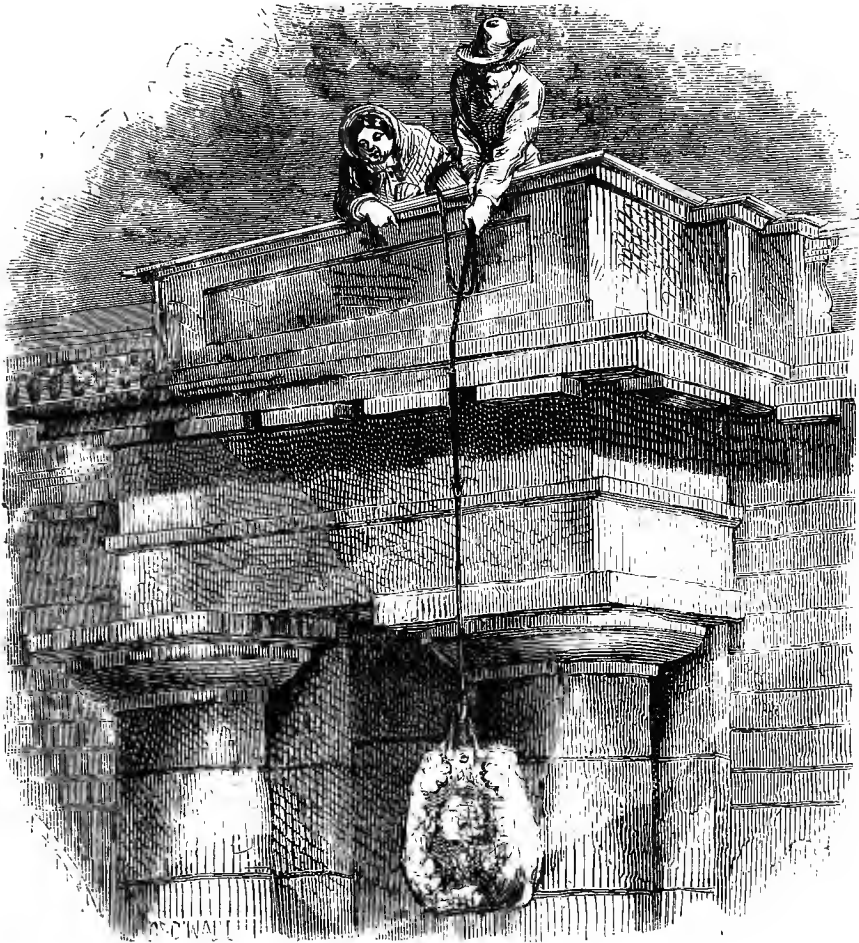
"But as I was saying," pursued Ponchard, "we have destroyed the identity of the deceased; and by midnight at latest let us hope that all the remains will have been consigned whence they are never likely to be fished up."

"And after all," said Mr. Grills, "me and my old 'ooman here had nothink to do with the killin' of the Polish gentleman."

"Ah, my good fellow," exclaimed Ponchard, "don't begin talking in that strain, or else I shall think your courage is falling and you want to sneak out of the business."

"Not I, by jingo!"—and Mr. Grills gave vent to two or three other imprecations of a nature not to be expressed in print.

"So much the better," resumed Ponchard



quietly; "because it is now too late to think of climbing towards any such loophole as that to which you seem to allude. I had no more hand in murdering the traitorous Pole than you: but now we have all rendered ourselves as criminal as the actual dealer of the death-blow—I mean in the eye of the law—by the fact of disposing secretly of the corpse. But this is not language that I need hold to either of you; for you are both staunch, faithful, and bold. Besides, I hinted that the reward originally promised might be somewhat increased—and I mean to keep my word."

"As for me," said Mrs. Grills, fortifying herself with another glass of brandy, "I mean to go on with it to the end."

"In course I mean you should," growled her husband; "and whatsoever I said oughtn't to have been taken as if so be I wanted to back out."

No. 29.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

"No more on that subject," said Ponchard. "Here is a salve for the wound which I have inflicted:"—and he placed a bank-note in the man's hand, at the same time muttering to himself, "It is lucky Petronoff happens to be in funds at the moment to meet these expenses liberally."

"Have you seen your friend, sir?" asked Mrs. Grills. "I mean him as——"

"You mean Karl Petronoff, who was with me the night before last when we thrust the corpse into the cab, and who, as I have before told you, was the one who struck the blow. Yes—I have seen him. My part of the business is well-nigh finished; and he, Mrs. Grills, will meet you presently according to the understanding."

"All right," said the woman. "I shan't draw back. At what o'clock?"

"Between eleven and twelve."

"That, I suppose, means half-past eleven punctual?"

"At half-past eleven precisely. It is now ten o'clock," continued Ponchard, referring to his watch. "There is a good hour to spare. I tell you what—I think I had better see Hester. We will drink a bottle of wine together; and in any case it can do no harm. The girl was somewhat suspicious the night before last—or if not suspicious, she was jealous at being excluded from all confidence in the secrets which I had with you; and so it will be as well to appease and cajole her."

"All right," said Mrs. Grills. "I will call her down, and send you in the wine. Come, Grills: we've business to attend to."

The husband and wife quitted the parlour; and in a few minutes Hester Sergeant made her appearance, bearing a little tray on which were the bottle of wine and glasses.

"Well, Hester my dear," said Ponchard, with his usual air of offhand affability mingled with a patronising kindness towards the girl, "how are you now? I was sorry to hear you were not well—you had a headache—"

"Oh, that was through staying in-doors so much," replied Hester, in whose manner there was naught to excite—or rather, we should say, to strengthen any suspicion which the Frenchman's mind might have formed concerning her. "I go out so seldom; and when I do, it is only into the close streets, and not into the open country. Oh, how I long to get into the green fields!—how I should like to plunge into the depths of a wood and inhale the purity of its atmosphere! What freshness, too, for the eyes to enjoy in gazing upon its verdure, as a change from this wilderness of brick and mortar!"

"Why, on my soul, Hester, you are becoming quite poetical!" exclaimed Ponchard, laughing; while in reality he surveyed the girl with the most scrutinizing attention.

"Oh, these humours come over one at times," she said, suddenly adopting an air of abandoned and reckless indifference. "I know you think I am a fool to give way to such silly dreams. And so I am. Come, let us drink!"

"By the bye, do you like wine?" added Ponchard, as he filled the glasses. "What was it that Mrs. Grills told me? Ah, I recollect! She said that she was afraid you were out of sorts, as you refused the drop of brandy she offered you."

It struck Ponchard, as he stole a scrutinizing glance at the girl's countenance while affecting to be busy in pouring out the wine, that her dark eyes were riveted on him at the time with a peculiar expression: but if it were so, their look changed so rapidly that the next moment he could not be certain that it was as he had fancied.

"And so you would like to go into the country Hester?" he said.

"How do you mean? For a holiday—or for ever?"—and then the girl raised the wine to her lips.

"Nay, I ought rather to ask which *you* mean?" said Ponchard, smiling. "Would you like to leave for ever this wilderness of brick and mortar, as you call it?"

"Yes—my God! for ever!—for ever!" answered the girl, with a strange emphasis: then suddenly bursting out into a hollow laugh, she cried with flippant levity, "But it is ridiculous in me to talk thus! I have no chance of leaving

this earthly pandemonium—this seething cauldron of vile passions, jarring interests, and myriad varieties of selfishness!"

"You are bitter, Hester."

"Ah! and you would be bitter if you knew this horrible London as well as I!"

It was with the most serious attention that Ponchard now again contemplated the young girl, as he asked himself, "Is her present disposition precisely the same as that which impelled her to narrate her history to me the evening before last? or has some change taken place within her? If so, what has caused it?"

"Come, give me more wine!" she said, again bursting out into a light laugh.

"Let us talk of the country once more, Hester," said Ponchard, refilling her glass, though he had as yet scarcely touched his own. "Shall we talk again of the country?"

"What is the use of it?" exclaimed the girl, almost petulantly. "I shall never be able to leave London—unless it be at the end of my career, some few years hence, when I may perhaps be glad to drag myself away from these busy haunts and seek some shady lane or verdant copse, where I may lay me down to die! Or else"—and here her eyes flamed suddenly and strangely, and her lips writhed with a bitterness that seemed to communicate itself to her words,—"I may more probably be perishing on some dunghill—and *that* heaven knows, must be in the open country!"

"Foolish girl! why do you talk thus?" asked Ponchard, caressing her cheek with his hand, with that soothing and compassionating kindness of feeling which he was frequently wont to display towards the unfortunate creature.

"Well, I am silly—and I know it," she said, now again laughing. "I do not know how it is," she continued, with a careless manner of speech, and yet with an abstracted expression of countenance, "but ever since I told you my history the night before last, I have felt as if I had a sort of right to trouble you with my whims and fancies."

"And you shall do so if you think fit, Hester," interrupted Ponchard. "But listen to me, my dear girl. I am going to speak of the country again—I will propose to you a holiday if you will accept it—"

"A holiday?"—and she fixed her eyes inquiringly upon him.

"Yes—a day's excursion—a pleasure-trip to some pretty place, where you shall walk through the fields, pick the wild flowers, or rove in the woods. What say you, Hester?—will you come with me?"

It struck Ponchard that she gazed upon him with a peculiar expression: he did not like it: for the moment it struck him that there was mistrust in that look; and he mentally ejaculated, "By heaven, she *does* suspect or know something, and she will not trust herself in my company!"

But scarcely had this thought swept through his mind, when Hester's look was totally changed; and as she laid her hand upon his, as if with the familiarity of completest confidence, she said, "Of course I should like such a holiday. I am only afraid that it would render me averse to return to the stifling atmosphere of the metropolis. However, there is scarcely any pleasure which is totally unmingled with pain; and so it will be in this instance."

"Well then, Hester, it is agreed! To-morrow or next day—according as my engagements stand when I shall presently reflect on them—I will take you for an excursion into the country. To which place shall we go? It is for you to decide."

"Since you are kind enough to leave it to me," answered the girl, with every appearance of smiling gratitude, "I think I should prefer— But no, no! I must not!" she ejaculated, thus suddenly checking herself: "I could not revisit that spot!"

"Where do you mean, Hester?" asked Ponchard.

"I mean near Lewisham," she responded,— "the place where my earliest years were passed with those maiden sisters—the poor Miss Morphew, who afterwards—"

"What!" exclaimed Ponchard, with a sudden start. "What name was that which you mentioned?"

"Morphew. But why do you ask? You surprise me!" said the girl.

"And the name of the two maiden sisters—with whom you lived, I think you said, until you were seven years old—"

"Yes—so I told you. How well you recollect my history! But why do you ask? Do you know that name of Morphew?"

"I know it! But tell me, Hester—have you any recollection of those ladies? What think you would be their ages now if they were alive?"

The girl reflected for a few moments; and then she said, "As nearly as I can surmise from such recollections as the casual observation of childhood leaves behind it, I should think they would be some few years past sixty."

"Do you happen to know the Christian name of the younger?" demanded Ponchard, as some recollection seemed to strike him.

"Oh, I remember perfectly well, it was Caroline! We used to call the elder Miss Morphew, and the other Miss Caroline."

"They are the same!" said Ponchard. "What a singular coincidence! And you told me that their school was broken up—and that they were ruined—and that they went away no one knew whither?"

"Yes—I told you all this," cried Hester, becoming much excited. "And, Oh! if you know anything of these people, tell me I beseech you!—for if there be any lips on the face of this earth which can make a revelation in respect to my parentage, their's must be those lips!"

"Hester," said the Frenchman, "I do know where these women are to be found. They are sadly fallen in the world—you will perhaps be alike shocked and surprised—"

"How can I be shocked at anything?" ejaculated the girl. "Perhaps they would be shocked, if you present me to them, to learn what I have become! But no matter! I must see them—Oh! I must see them!—for if they could tell me anything in reference to my parents, it might clear up a mystery which if you had asked me about it only ten minutes or a quarter of an hour ago, I should have said could never by any possibility be elucidated!"

"You shall see these women, Hester," answered Ponchard,

"You promise it?"—and the girl's hand was laid for a moment in familiar trustfulness upon the Frenchman's shoulder:—but all in a moment her countenance underwent a change—she flung one quick searching look upon Ponchard—and then said in a somewhat cold tone, "After all, I daresay it was a mistake, and the women you allude to are not the Miss Morphews of Hillside House near Lewisham."

Ponchard bit his lip for a moment, as he thought within himself, "There can be no doubt this girl suspects or else knows something of what has happened! She is afraid of me! She thinks I shall lead her into a snare!"—but stifling the various feelings which this idea excited within him, he said, with his accustomed air of affable kindness, "You seem to think, Hester, that because I am interested in you I am too sanguine in attaching importance to matters which may turn out to be mere coincidences, and will therefore be fraught with disappointment. But I look upon the circumstance as more serious—"

"Let us talk of something else," interjected the girl. "Come, give me more wine!"

"To be sure!"—and he refilled her glass. "But do answer me one question. Should you know the handwriting of Caroline Morphew? It may be changed with the addition of years since you were at Lewisham—"

"I am sure I should know it!" ejaculated Hester: "it would be impossible to mistake it! Through some malformation of the forefinger she held her pen in such a way that her writing, instead of sloping forward as usual, was completely upright."

"Then look!" said Ponchard; and drawing forth a paper, which seemed to be a receipt for rent, he displayed it before the eyes of Hester Sergeant.

"It is her's! it is her's!" she at once exclaimed.

Then, into her brain there was such a gush of the memories of other days—days of childhood's innocence and happiness, all alike gone never to be recalled!—that she was overwhelmed by this flood of emotions; and sinking down upon the seat whence she had sprung up, she burst into tears. Ponchard suffered her to give way to her feelings for some minutes before he spoke another word; and then at length he said, in a gentle voice, "Now, Hester, do you believe me?"

"Yes, yes—I can no longer doubt it! But is it possible," she asked, suddenly dashing away her tears, "that those poor ladies have come down in the world to such a degree—that—that—"

"Yes, it is so. You shall see them to-morrow. I will come and fetch you, if you will: or if you would rather visit them alone in the first instance—"

"Oh, all things considered," cried Hester, "I do not think that I shall visit them at all"—and once more did there come over the girl one of those sudden changes which appeared to characterize her as completely as alternations of shower and sunshine belong to the fickle April.

"What do you mean, Hester?" asked Ponchard, gazing at her with the most unfeigned astonishment.

"I will tell you," she answered. "If I go to them it will be to make inquiries concerning my

parentage—will it not? Well, they will either have it in their power to give me the information—or they will not. If it be the latter, a painful interview will have taken place for nothing.”

“But if the former?” asked the Frenchman.

“Oh, then of what avail for me to discover who my parents are? Is it not most probable that I was the child of shame?—or else whersfore the mystery with which my parentage was enveloped? And this being so, shall I put myself in the track of discovering a mother who will have to blush in a two-fold sense?—yes, blush for her own shame in the presence of her daughter—and blush to acknowledge a daughter who is herself steeped to the very lips in shame!”

“Extraordinary girl!” ejaculated Ponchard, gazing upon Hester with mingled astonishment and admiration.

“And therefore,” she continued, not heeding the interruption on his part, complimentary to herself though it were—“and thus,” she said, “it would be a source of sorrow instead of happiness for me to discover the secret of my birth;—and at all events I will not run the risk of plunging a dagger into the heart of a mother!”

“But on the other hand, Hester,” said Ponchard, “is it not possible that a mother may be yearning for a daughter?—and even if you be the child of shame, you may yet be dear to the parent who would behold in you the pledge of her unrequited love for another! Or is it even impossible that you may be the offspring of a secret marriage, over which circumstances no longer render it compulsory or expedient that the veil of mystery should be thrown? and may not fond parents be pining in bitterness for the lost child whom they would now so gladly welcome to their arms? In any case,” pursued the Frenchman, who saw that the girl was becoming more and more deeply touched by the language he was addressing unto her,—“in any case, it would be as well for you to ascertain whatsoever particulars these old women may be enabled to furnish relative to your birth—supposing them to possess any knowledge upon the point at all;—and it will then be for you to judge whether you choose to prosecute the inquiry any farther, or whether you shall stop short at some particular point.”

“True!” said Hester, in a low murmuring tone: “true! The advice is good!—And you who give it to me,” she ejaculated abruptly; darting a quick look upon the Frenchman’s countenance, “must be my friend and well-wisher! You cannot be otherwise!”—and now she fixed her gaze upon him, as if by the reading of his features she sought to find corroboration for the opinion she had just uttered, or else that she might be enabled to undeceive herself altogether.

“I am your friend, Hester—I swear that I am!” he emphatically responded. “And now retire to your own room—think over all that has been said—and prepare for an interview to-morrow with those women,—an interview which may probably produce results of no mean importance to yourself?”

The young woman said not a word in reply; but she bent upon Ponchard a look of unmistakable gratitude—she seized one of his hands, and pressed it with fervid violence—and the next instant she glided from the room.

CHAPTER LXIX.

THE BRIDGE.

HENRI PONCHARD looked at his watch: it was now a quarter to eleven o’clock; and he said to himself, “It is time.”

He descended gently into the scullery, where he found Mr. and Mrs. Grills; and a glance at their proceedings showed him that they were making all requisite preparations for the next step towards the complete concealment of the corpse.

“Well,” said the woman, as Ponchard made his appearance, “what do you make of Hester now?”

“That she has a suspicion of some sort or another, I feel convinced,” replied the Frenchman; “but whether it amounts to any actual knowledge or not, I cannot say.”

“Then, what’s to be done?” demanded Grills savagely. “It would be a deuce of a thing if we was to get into any trouble after all the pains we’ve took——”

“Fear nothing,” interrupted Ponchard. “Circumstances have given me some insight not only into Hester’s strange character, but also into her past history; and I have obtained a sort of hold upon her—no matter how nor what it is——”

“Well, Grills,” said his wife, “if so be the gentleman is satisfied, what’s the use of bothering ourselves any more upon the pint?”

“Not a bit,” answered the man in his gruff voice. “So there’s a end of it.”

We must now direct the reader’s attention to the proceedings in which the horrible man and woman were occupied at the moment when Ponchard thus joined them. A revolting spectacle was before them: but they recoiled not from it! Hideous objects lay upon a table: but they were not appalled! The fragments of a human form!—these were scattered there! But heavens! what appearances did they wear! The table of the anatomist never could have displayed ghastlier horrors!—the work which the scalpel does on behalf of science, would be deemed pleasant and agreeable to the eye, in comparison with the results of dark expediency and criminal precaution that might be seen there! The bones sawed or chopped in pieces—the flesh hacked and hewed off, and disposed of by some means or another—the disjointed, severed parts flung pell mell about,—this was the spectacle that presented itself! But the head of the deceased was not there; nor any portion of it. It had been boiled in the copper until all the flesh came from the bones; and then the bones themselves had been burnt:—and this was the precaution, so deliberate and so horrible, that had been taken to prevent the identity of that corpse from ever being established! And in that same copper the flesh, which had been hacked and hewed away from the bones, had likewise been boiled down and thrown away along with the usual household refuse. The chemical knowledge of Ponchard had furnished the means of destroying every disagreeable odour during the appalling process.

But we will not linger at unnecessary length upon this revolting scene: we will hasten to inform our readers that the corpse, or rather the

fragments thereof, having been reduced to portable dimensions, were now being packed away in a carpet-bag, along with the garments which the unfortunate Ivan Zadoski had worn at the time when he met his death.

"By the bye," asked Ponchard, after a brief interval of silence, during which he watched Grills and his wife in the performance of their horrible work, "have you told your friend Nat Bulmer to be ready with his cab?"

"Not such a fool!" replied Grills. "Me and the old 'ooman discussed that part of the business this mornin' arter breakfast; and we agreed that it wouldn't do to let Nat have the aightest means of suspecting that we had any pertickler business on hand at this hour. Cos why, if so be as the carpet-bag should be fished up—though it isn't likely, yet it may be, you know—"

"But I thought you meant to borrow the cab," said Ponchard, "as you have often done before, and drive it yourself, so as to put your wife down at the nearest convenient point."

"That part of our plan is altered," interrupted Grills. "It's better to have nothink to do with one's neighbours in a business of this sort. The less reason Nat Bulmer had to know we're busy or a-stirring this night, the better. So the old 'ooman will go and shift for herself; and I'm blowed if she'll leave a clue behind her."

Ponchard glanced at the bloated countenance of Mrs. Grills; and he could indeed full well judge by its expression that she was not likely to flinch from the task she had undertaken. All the fragments of the corpse—all those mutilated remnants of the unfortunate Pole—were now consigned to the carpet-bag, which was then locked and strapped, so that it looked just for all the world as if it contained the wearing apparel and toilet necessaries of some person who was going on a journey.

"Well, it's rayther heavy," said Mrs. Grills, with a coarse chuckle as she tried its weight: "but not too heavy—and there's nothing in its appearance to excite suspicion."

"Nothing," observed Ponchard.

"Here's the cord," said Mr. Grills, handing a closely-packed coil of clothes-line to his wife, who at once secured it in her capacious pocket.

"Now," said she, "for my bonnet and shawl—and I'm off."

She ascended to her bed-chamber, dressed herself for going out, and on coming down stairs again, found Ponchard in the passage waiting for her.

"It's all right," he whispered: and then he opened the front-door for the woman to issue forth.

Closing it again immediately behind her, he remained in the house—while she, having assured herself that the coast was clear, turned into an adjacent street, where she met her husband, who, in the meanwhile had stolen out of the premises by means of the back gate, with the carpet-bag in his hand. This he now consigned to his wife: not a word was spoken between them; and they at once separated,—the woman continuing her way, and the man retracing his steps to his abode. So soon as Grills returned to report that the business had progressed thus far in perfect security, Ponchard at once fulfilled the remainder of his own portion of the hideous compact by

placing a sum of money in the fellow's hands. He then took his leave, intimating that he should call on the morrow.

We must now follow in the footsteps of Mrs. Grills, who was making the best of her way towards the Westminster Road, which was close by, and which therefore in a very few minutes she gained.

"Cab, ma'am?" was the salutation which at once met her ears from the lips of the driver of a vehicle loitering along the kerb-stone for the purpose of picking up a fare.

"Yes," answered Mrs. Grills: and as the man opened the door, she at once flung in her hideous burden, so as to dispense with his officious services. "Charing Cross!—and drive quick, or I shall miss the last omnibus down to Chelsea."

Up jumped the driver, and away went the cab. Mrs. Grills took care to have the money in readiness for the fare; so that the instant the vehicle stopped at Charing Cross, she stepped out with her carpet-bag in her hand, gave the man the coin, and bustled towards a couple of omnibuses that were stopping close by to take up passengers. One was for Chelsea—the other was for Paddington: but Mrs. Grills pretended that neither suited her—for the cab which brought her was already driving away, and the cabman was not busying himself to ascertain whether she entered the Chelsea omnibus or not. She hailed another cab, and bade him drive along the Strand, "as she wanted to overtake a Waterloo omnibus, to go to the Elephant and Castle." She was now again in motion:—again too she had her fare in readiness, so that as she alighted at the corner of Wellington Street, she carried her carpet-bag in one hand, paid the man with the other, and at once made rapidly for the bridge.

The woman was fortified with a horrible coolness—a brazen hardihood that was partly natural and partly the result of the brandy which she had been drinking. She had no fear of detection: she considered that she was playing a game which was perfectly safe. As for any sensation of loathing in respect to the contents of the carpet-bag, she had none; and so far as compunction was concerned, it was not likely that she would be troubled on this score, inasmuch as she was enabled to make matters perfectly right with her own conscience by means of the reflection that she had naught to do with the perpetration of the murder itself. It was therefore no wonder if she went about the work in a self-possessed business-like way worthy of a better cause.

She held in her hand the halfpenny to pay the toll; and on reaching the toll-gate, she flung the coin upon the iron-table at which the toll-taker stood. She was then pushing onward with her burden, when behold! the gate was too narrow:—the carpet-bag, as she held it, would not pass through!

"Now then, ma'am," exclaimed the toll-keeper, "what are you up to? Dash me if you haven't made the gate take two turns instead of one!"

Mrs. Grills comprehended in a moment what the toll-keeper meant. The mechanism of the gate, communicating with an indicator inside, showed the number of passengers that passed through during the twenty-four hours; and thus there must be a certain corresponding number of halfpence.

By forcing the gate it had marked *two* for her *one* halfpenny. Without losing her presence of mind, she felt in her pocket for another halfpenny; and at the same moment the toll-keeper, stooping down, lifted the carpet-bag, and placed it on the iron plate, or table. This was the work of an instant. Mrs. Grills had not foreseen it, and could not prevent it. She was struck with a sensation of horrible dread: her hardihood and self-possession seemed to abandon her in the twinkling of an eye.

"There, ma'am," said the toll-keeper in a civil good-natured way; "now it's all right. The bag's heavy for you to carry, though."

Mrs. Grills felt as if she must sink down upon the earth; for the toll-keeper still kept his hand upon the bag, and her consternation was too great to show her that it was merely in a listless, meaningless, unsuspecting way that his hand did still rest there.

"But if so be, ma'am, you're going to catch the quarter-to-twelve down-train, you must look sharp."

All the woman's courage revived in a moment. She saw that the man suspected nothing. The mention of the train furnished her with an excuse to be expeditious: she flung down the second half-penny, seized the carpet-bag, and passed through the toll-gate. She now once again breathed freely: but scarcely had she advanced thirty paces when she was destined to receive a shock more terrible than that which she had just experienced. For all in a moment her ear caught the name, whispered somewhere close by, of Ivan Zadouski!

She stopped short, as if suddenly smitten with a spell and transfixed to the spot. She dropped the carpet-bag; and the strong woman was paralysed with the direst terror. Neither natural disposition nor the effect of brandy helped to sustain her at that moment!

"Ivan Zadouski!"—Yes, as plain and as unmistakable as words could be, though only whispered in the lowest accents, *that name* had reached her ear! But whence did it come? She was alone in that part of the bridge—or at least her eyes could not discern any one through the gloom of the night. Was it a delusion? was her imagination playing off its freaks upon her? or was Murder raising its mysterious voice upon the breath of the night-air? and were the horrible remnants of mortality enclosed within the carpet-bag becoming temporarily endowed with some strange and preternatural vitality, that they might proclaim the name which in their compact collected state of life they had borne?

But all was now still save the sighing of the night-wind over the river; and the woman, rapidly taking courage, said to herself, "It must have been fancy on my part."

She picked up the carpet-bag, and hurriedly continued her way, glancing back to see whether any one was following, and then plunging her eyes forward to discern whether the light of the lamps would reveal any approaching form from the other extremity of the bridge. Yes—a tall man was advancing; and perhaps this might be he whom she was to meet. She had never seen Karl Petronoff; but Ponchard had described him to her—and moreover he was to give her a password so that there might be no mistake.

The form drew nearer; and though it was in the middle of summer, and the night was by no means cold despite the breeze which blew along the river, the individual was enveloped in a cloak. He was walking slowly, every now and then looking about him, and therefore seeming as if he were waiting for somebody. As he drew nearer still, Mrs. Grills heard that he was talking to himself, and as she now discerned that he wore a great deal of hair upon his face, she was almost completely convinced that this must be Karl Petronoff. On he came; and just as they were within two or three yards of each other, the tall individual breathed a name—"Ivan Zadouski!"

The woman stopped short—looked very hard at the tall personage—and then was instantaneously seized with uncertainty and bewilderment; for she saw that he had light hair, auburn whiskers, and moustaches that were lighter still—whereas Petronoff had been described to her as grey-haired and having his beard streaked with white. Besides, at the same instant it struck her that the personage now in her presence must be several inches taller than the individual whom she was expecting to meet.

"Ivan Zadouski!"—yes, as plain and unmistakable as words could be, had that name come from the lips of the tall cloaked personage whom she thus met upon the bridge! She stopped short, we say—she looked hard at that individual. He stopped also, though at first evidently about to pass; and seeing how singularly she regarded him, he fixed an inquiring look upon her, but said nothing.

"I beg your pardon, sir," Mrs. Grills now hastened to exclaim; "you must have thought it very strange that I should have stopped—but it struck me you mentioned the name—"

"Ah, indeed?" interjected the tall cloaked personage, who spoke with a foreign accent. "It may be so! I was deep in thought. But the name—why should it have struck you? Do you know it?"

It instantaneously occurred to Mrs. Grills that since there was now scarcely a doubt that *the name was* mentioned from this stranger's lips, he might be somebody whom Petronoff had sent in his stead; and the idea was all the more natural from the fact that the personage was himself a foreigner. So under this impression she said without further hesitation, "Yes, I know the name."

"Ah, you know it?" ejaculated the stranger: "you know the name of Ivan Zadouski?"

"I know the name," responded Mrs. Grills; "but I did not expect to hear it mentioned."

"What do you mean? I do not understand you!" exclaimed the stranger.

"You have got something else to say to me," replied Mrs. Grills, bending a significant look upon him.

"Something else?"

"Yes—to be sure. Come, think now! I dare say it is all right—but still one must be cautious—"

"In the name of heaven, woman—"

"Come, come, sir," she interrupted him, "what is the use of being petulant? I tell you I've no doubt it's all right; but still you can just give me the pass-word?"

The stranger stamped his foot with impatient

rage: but evidently making an effort to master his angry feelings, he said, "There surely must be some mistake! Tell me what you mean?"

"Before I speak another word of explanation," said Mrs. Grills, again getting bewildered, and to some degree frightened, "you must tell me what you mean?"

"What I mean?"—and the tall form was drawn up with the loftiest hauteur.

"Yes—what you mean," persisted Mrs. Grills.

"I'll put a question if you like. You mentioned a certain name just as you came close up to me—"

"Yes: and since I have said it once, I will repeat it. It was the name of Ivan Zadouski."

"And why did you mention that name?" asked Mrs. Grills.

"You know the name, it appears?" said the stranger.

"I have already admitted it. But answer me—why did you mention it?"

It was now the stranger's turn to form some conjecture; and this was very similar to the one which the woman herself had conceived a few minutes back. The fact is, he supposed she had been sent thither to meet him, and she had therefore come instead of the person whom he was expecting at that hour to fall in with upon that bridge.

"I see, my good woman," he said, "that though you are pretty sure in your own mind that you have encountered the right person, yet you are properly cautious, and you seek to convince yourself beyond doubt of the fact. Well then, I will tell you I am here to meet Ivan Zadouski."

"Here—to meet *him*?" said Mrs. Grills, faintly.

"Yes—I am here to meet *him*," repeated the stranger, and he looked searchingly at the woman.

"To meet *him*?" she repeated; for it struck her that there was something horribly ludicrous in the fact that if he had come in the hope of meeting the living man, he was now unconsciously encountering all that remained of Ivan Zadouski inside that very carpet-bag which she carried in her hand!

"And you perhaps," said the stranger, not understanding her hesitation and singular manner,— "and you have come to tell me that Ivan Zadouski cannot meet me to-night?"

"That's just it," answered Mrs. Grills, catching at this means of putting an end to an interview which was not only detaining, but also beginning to alarm her.

"Ah, this is provoking!" ejaculated the tall personage. "When will he come?"

"To-morrow night instead," rejoined Mrs. Grills.

"Good! But are you sure? can I rely upon him? May not the same cause, whatever it be, which prevents him from coming to-night, also prevent him keeping the appointment to-morrow?"

Mrs. Grills shuddered despite all her brazen hardihood: but perceiving at the moment another person approaching, from the Surrey extremity of the bridge, she plucked up all her presence of mind, and said, as if in a decisive manner, "You may be sure of meeting him here to-morrow night."

"Tell him to fail not!"—and the tall personage then sped along towards the Strand extremity of the bridge.

Mrs. Grills was also continuing her own way, wondering at the incident that had just occurred when she again heard the name of *Ivan Zadouski* breathed close by—it seemed to be in a subdued whisper—then all was still and she perceived no one near! She glanced back:—could it be the tall stranger again talking to himself? No: he was too far off for the sound of his voice to be heard. What could it mean? She looked about in bewilderment and terror: but, Ah! what a mortal dread seized upon her when between the granite balusters or pillars of the parapet she beheld a human face looking straight at her.

The bag dropped from her hand—she closed her eyes—she staggered back—and she would have fallen if the arm of some one who appeared at the instant upon the spot, had not sustained her.

"What is the matter?" asked the individual, with a foreign accent. "Hah! it must be!"—and then fixing his eyes significantly upon the woman, who now opened her own, he said with marked impressiveness, "*Henri Ponchard!*"

"To be sure! that's the pass-word! and you are Karl Petronoff?"—for Mrs. Grills not merely knew him by the fact of that watchword, but likewise by the personal description which had been given of him.

"What is the matter with you?" he quickly demanded. "Ponchard told me you were brave—"

"Look over the parapet," ejaculated Mrs. Grills, with a feverish terror. "Quick, quick!"

"There is no one here," responded Petronoff, as he obeyed her mandate.

"Look well along the ledge!—make sure! Do you see no one?"

"No one, I repeat."

"No one crouching down anywhere? Look well!"

"I see no one. But why do you ask? What are you frightened at?" inquired Petronoff, who though of desperate intrepidity and hairbrained dauntlessness, nevertheless began to catch the infection of the woman's own terrors, especially when he glanced again and again at the carpet-bag which lay at her feet.

"Perhaps it's nothing," said Mrs. Grills. "Come along, and let's be quick. There! carry the bag. I can't any longer!"

"Yes—it *is* heavy," said Petronoff, as he lifted it.

"Well," continued the woman, "I don't know that it's altogether because it's heavy that I can't carry it any further; but the truth is I've already had enough of it, and shall be only too glad to get well quit of it."

"This woman is a coward after all!" muttered Petronoff to himself: "how the devil could Ponchard have been so deceived in her?—Come, come," he said, speaking audibly, "cheer up."

"Here, let us stop at this seat," interrupted Mrs. Grills: "it's a convenient place. I've got a cord—and you can stand upon the parapet and lower—"

"Hush!" said Karl, nudging his companion with some degree of violence: "people are coming! Let's place the bag on the seat and sit so as to conceal it."

Mrs. Grills obeyed him mechanically; and almost immediately afterwards two young females, whose loud light talk and flaunting apparel denoted what they were, passed by.

Meanwhile Mrs. Grills was endeavouring to gather up her almost prostrated courage: but she found it difficult; for the face haunted her—and whichever way she glanced, she thought she still beheld it gazing steadfastly upon her.

"Now let's finish the business," she suddenly ejaculated; for she thought that she should feel more tranquil if the horrible bag were disposed of.

"Do not be in a hurry," interposed Karl Petronoff. "Look! those girls have stopped yonder. They seem to be surveying the scene—perhaps they are contemplating the silent flowing river, with a presentiment that it may some day be their own doom."

"How horrible you talk!" said Mrs. Grills, with a shudder.

"Ah! you are really frightened? Come, tell me," continued Petronoff, as he gazed searchingly upon the repulsive bloated countenance of his companion, "why did you bid me look just now over the parapet?"

"Because twice since I first set foot on this bridge ten minutes back, I heard some voice whisper the name of Ivan Zadouski—but I saw no one; and if it was a human voice at all, it must have been that of some one who was concealed nigh at hand."

"Pure imagination!" ejaculated Petronoff.

"Well, perhaps, it was—and so we'll grant it to have been, if you like. And I'll tell you what, sir," continued Mrs. Grills, in a low voice; "my imagination never before played me such a trick as it just now did—if imagination it really was—when it showed me a face staring right at me between the stone railings,—a bearded face too!—and if it wasn't the face of you know who I mean—*him* who is in this bag—then my name isn't Betty Grills, and I'm not a living woman, and this isn't a bridge!"

"All nonsense! fancy! imagination!" ejaculated Petronoff, starting up. "Come, the girls are gone—the coast is clear—let us proceed to business!"

"Here's the rope," said Mrs. Grills. "There! fasten it, and be quick!"

But Petronoff did not require any such injunction: he was expeditious in his proceedings; he mounted upon the seat, and quickly lowered the carpet-bag over the parapet.

"Here comes some one!" Mrs. Grills suddenly ejaculated: and as the woman's nerves had been painfully acted upon, it is no wonder if she threw an accent of terror into her speech.

"There!" cried Petronoff: "you have made me drop the rope, you startled me so!"

"Well, never mind! How can that possibly matter?" demanded Mrs. Grills. "The bag's gone, and that's sufficient. You weren't foolish enough to think you could draw the rope up again without having the bag at the end of it?"

"No—but I meant to make sure by the *feel*, that the bag went fairly down into the river. I should have known when it touched the water—"

"And where, in the name of common sense, could it have gone except into the river?"

"I should like to have made sure that it cleared all the masonry," rejoined Petronoff.

"There's no fear on that score," said Mrs. Grills, impatiently. "Depend upon it, it's all right enough. You go that way—and I'll go this. Good night."

"Good night," answered Petronoff: and he and the woman separated; for a glance flung along the bridge, showed him that people were approaching from both directions.

He pursued his way towards the Strand; while Mrs. Grills passed through the toll-gate on the Surrey side; and she was soon plunging into the maze of narrow streets which led towards her own habitation. But as she pursued her way, she could not banish from her memory the face which had looked at her between the stonework of the parapet of the bridge.

Before we conclude this chapter, we must direct the reader's attention for a few minutes to Grosvenor Square. There, in the palatial mansion of the Russian Embassy, Count Olonetz was seated in his private cabinet, looking over some official documents, but every now and then glancing towards the timepiece and the door as if he were expecting some one. At length that door opened; and a middle-aged man, with a bearded countenance, made his appearance. He looked like a superior sort of domestic; and indeed we may as well observe that he was one of the Count's valets—a man of trustworthiness, a willing tool in whom his master could place the fullest confidence. We need hardly add that he was a Russian; but it may perhaps be as well to observe that he spoke the English language with the utmost facility, and was therefore particularly useful in assisting to carry out any of the Ambassador's dark mysterious plans on the British soil.

"Ah, Nicholas—come at last!" said the Count, waiting till the man had carefully closed the door. "What tidings? Is it done?—No! before you answer me I can tell by your countenance that there has been a failure of some kind or another?"

"A failure for to-night, my lord," was the response, accompanied by a low bow; "but there is every reason to hope that the arrangements will stand good for to-morrow night."

"Then I suppose the appointment was not kept?" said the Ambassador inquiringly.

"It was not, my lord. I had my six men in readiness, all ambushed as nicely as possible—three with me, crouching on the ledge of the parapet on one side—three concealed in a similar manner on the other—"

"I have no doubt, Nicholas, your dispositions were most admirably made. And the Grand Duke—"

"His Imperial Highness was upon the bridge at about twenty minutes past eleven."

"A good ten minutes before the appointed time!" interjected Count Olonetz.

"It was so, my lord:—and his Imperial Highness walked to and fro with a visible anxiety."

"How came he to learn that the appointment would not be kept?" asked the Ambassador: and then in an undertone he muttered to himself, "I hope that fellow Mandeville has not been playing any fast and loose game!"

"It was from an elderly female, my lord, with



HENRI PONCHARD.

forbidding looks enough, that his Imperial Highness received the information. But something took place which it is quite proper I should mention."

"And what is that?" demanded the Count.

"I will tell your Excellency," returned Nicholas. "I was crouching down outside the parapet, and Michael had just crawled along the ledge from a little farther down the bridge, to tell me that his Imperial Highness seemed much excited, for that he was talking audibly as he paced to and fro. I asked Michael what he was saying."

"I could scarcely make out the sense of what his

Highness was saying," replied Michael; "but there are two names which seem principally to be upon his tongue."—"And what names are those?" I asked.—"Mildred is one," returned Michael.—"And the other?" inquired I.—"Ivan Zadouski," rejoined he.—At that very moment a stout elderly woman who had just come upon the bridge, stopped short, dropped a bundle or bag of some kind that she was carrying, and looked as if she was seized with sudden illness or else with a mortal terror. Of course Michael and I kept closely concealed; but on peeping through the stone-work, I saw

how the woman was affected through some cause or another. However, it soon passed—she snatched up her bundle and went on.”

“And what is there strange or peculiar in this incident?” asked the Ambassador. “Oh, but I see you have not finished? Continue.”

“It was this same woman, my lord, who met his Imperial Highness, and told him that the appointment was to stand over until to-morrow night at the same hour.”

“You heard therefore all that passed?”

“To be sure, my lord. Were not those your Excellency’s instructions? No sooner had I found that the Grand Duke and the woman were talking together, than I stole along the ledge of the parapet, and was speedily crouched down close by where they were carrying on their discourse. There was a good deal of beating about the bush between them: the woman seemed to have been enjoined to adopt a special caution—she wanted a pass-word—his Imperial Highness was evidently agitated, and perhaps had forgotten it. However, the woman delivered her message at last—and they separated.”

“Have you anything more to tell?” inquired the Ambassador.

“One other little incident, my lord. Your Excellency must understand that Michael and the two others on that same side of the bridge, had crept along the ledge close behind me, so that we might be all in readiness to act according to circumstances: because if Ivan Zadouski had made his appearance, we should have obeyed your Excellency’s orders by waiting until he had separated from his Imperial Highness, when we should have waylaid and seized upon him. However, he came not; and after the Grand Duke had left the woman, Michael again whispered something to me about Zadouski. I had no doubt on that occasion that as he incautiously spoke too loud the name met the woman’s ear; and she was evidently stricken with dismay and astonishment. I was resolved to have a good look at her, in order that I might know her again on some future occasion; and I accordingly raised myself up from the ledge, and gazed at her for a moment between the granite balusters or pillars of the parapet. I think,” continued Nicholas with a passing smile, “that I was as unguarded in that action as Michael had previously been in his whisperings; for there can be no doubt that the woman caught a glimpse of my face, and frightened enough she was.”

“Well enough she might be!” interjected the Ambassador.

“Another moment, my lord,” resumed Nicholas, “and I was gliding along the ledge, with Michael and the others; for some one had come up to the spot at the instant—”

“You mean where the woman was standing?”

“Yes, my lord: and I thought that in case she should explain the nature of her fears and bid him look over the parapet, it would be better for us to get out of the way in order that her alarm should be set down to mere fancy—which no doubt was the case.”

“You were indeed incautious in showing yourself, Nicholas,” said the Ambassador, somewhat sternly; “as Michael was equally unguarded in speaking so loud.”

“I thought it better your Excellency should be

made acquainted with every detail of what really did happen:”—and Nicholas spoke penitentially.

“I am not chiding you, my good fellow—nor do I mean to upbraid you,” resumed the Count, “for you invariably tell me the truth, and if you commit an error you confess it—though seldom indeed is it that either you yourself or Michael are at fault. But though I purpose not to blame you, yet I cannot help deploring this want of caution. If that woman were frightened, and if she fancied herself watched, she might go and tell Ivan Zadouski some tale to prevent him from keeping the appointment to-morrow night.”

“I hope, my lord,” answered Nicholas, hanging down his head, “that nothing so vexatious will result from the indiscretion displayed by Michael and myself.”

“Let us hope so,” added the Ambassador: and with a sign he then dismissed the man from his presence.

CHAPTER LX.

EDWARD WALPOLE.

It was ten o’clock in the morning which followed the night whereof we have been writing; and a plain carriage—drawn however by a pair of excellent horses—stopped at the door of a house in Hanover Square. From that carriage a short, thin, bustling individual alighted; and as the front door was opened by a genteel-looking page resplendent in a new livery, the gentleman exclaimed, “I need not ask whether your master is at home at this hour?”

“Yes, sir—master’s at breakfast,” was the young menial’s response. “Shall I announce you, Mr Seymour?”

“Not necessary! I can announce myself:”—and the bustling visitor at once sprang up the staircase three steps at a time, as if he were overwhelmed with business and was therefore compelled to live in an incessant state of activity and excitement.

He burst into a handsomely furnished room, where a young man in a flowered silk dressing-gown was seated at a well-spread breakfast table. His age might have been about twenty—a year more or less, it was not very easy to determine; for his countenance, somewhat pale, at first struck the beholder as being very juvenile, until a closer inspection discerned a degree of intelligence which seemed to belong to maturer experiences. He was good-looking, with dark brown hair curling naturally, large blue eyes, and a well-formed mouth. He was tall, slender, and well made; his appearance was sufficiently genteel—but there was nothing actually distinguished nor fashionable about it—much less any of that West End dandyism which is so largely affected by “young men about town.” Books were lying scattered about on the sofa and the side tables; and if their title-pages had been referred to, it would be seen they belonged to the graver rather than the lighter class of literature. He flung from his hand the morning newspaper as Mr. Seymour entered the room; and springing from his chair, the young man rushed forward to give his visitor a welcome which had something more

than mere cordial friendliness in it: it seemed to be grateful and even affectionate.

"Always in a hurry, my dear sir?" he said, with a smile, when the usual morning compliments were exchanged.

"Hurry, my dear boy!" cried the great contractor: "to be sure I am! But really, when I come to you, it is more through habit than I have this appearance of violent haste than because I am in reality anxious to cut short my visit. There!" he continued, placing his hat on the sideboard, and then settling himself in a chair; "now I will endeavour to put off this hustling air of mine for half-an-hour or so. Tell me, Edward—are you happy?"

"Oh, how could I be otherwise, my benefactor?" exclaimed the young man, with a look and tone of fervid enthusiasm, as he caught Mr. Seymour's hand and pressed it in both his own.

"Do not call me your benefactor," said this gentleman, his lip quivering with emotions.

"Not my benefactor?" cried the young man, in astonishment. "As well hid me declare that the sun is not bright, or the roses have no fragrance, or that providence itself is not good!"

"And what, Edward," said Mr. Seymour, fixing his looks with a strange significance upon him,—“what if I were to tell you that all for which you thank me is in reality no boon, but a simple act of justice?”

"I should say, my dear sir, that I cannot understand you," was the young man's answer.

"But what," pursued Seymour, "if I were to assure you that this conduct on my part is far from being a disinterested benevolence—it is even more than a simple act of justice—aye, and more even than a duty! It is—it is—But I must not be too quick!"—and the great railway contractor, who usually seemed to have no mind nor soul for aught save business and worldly affairs, was now visibly agitated with some deep inward emotions.

"My dear sir," said the young man, again taking Seymour's hand, and speaking in a tone of the most affectionate earnestness and grateful fervour, "that I must be sensible of a deep mystery in all that has occurred to me within the last fortnight, you cannot be otherwise than aware. Yes!—for when I awake in the morning, my first idea is that it is all a dream, and several minutes elapse ere I can persuade myself that it is the truth. Then, naturally enough, I ask myself certain questions—why all this should have happened to me? why heaven should have sent me such a friend? and what I can have done or who I can be that all the fabulous wonders of the Arabian Tales are realized for my benefit? Oh, Mr. Seymour! your own good sense will tell you that it is natural I should experience this amount of curiosity! But hear me, sir—hear me, I beseech you, while I proceed to declare that if there be any reason why it would pain you to clear up that mystery and to tell me the entire truth, I would rather remain in uncertainty and darkness till the end of my days! Oh, believe me, I have power over my own feelings—I can stifle those sentiments of curiosity—and I can crush all illegitimate yearnings to plunge into the forbidden realms of mystery! You have already made me acquainted with so much happiness, that I would not for the world display such black ingratitude

as to ask a question inopportune or prematurely!"

"Excellent young man!" cried Seymour, the tears starting into his eyes. "And to think that I should——" But he stopped short, and hastily wiping away those tears, he said, "Yes, Edward, you *must* think it was strange! it ought to be absolutely bewildering to you!"

"I accept my happiness with gratitude," he meekly replied: "I kiss the hand which bestows it; and if it be better that I should never learn why it is thus showered upon me, heaven knows that I can resign myself to a lifetime of ignorance upon the point!"

"And yet, Edward," said Mr. Seymour, "it is absolutely necessary that certain matters should be cleared up to your comprehension. I have no right to leave you to such conjectures as you may perhaps be inclined to form. With all your patience, and with all your self-denying readiness to stifle the yearnings of curiosity, you cannot prevent your imagination from soaring in the realms of surmise. It is natural! In the absence of certainty, the human mind is involuntarily compelled to take refuge in conjecture. Now it is possible—indeed I fear it is most probable—that you are very likely under existing circumstances to form a conjecture that must be painful and humiliating to yourself, as well as dishonouring to her who gave you birth. In plain terms, Edward, you may have perhaps surmised—that—that—I am your father—and that you are illegitimately born?"

A blush rose to the cheeks of the young man: he bent down his eyes for a moment: and then, suddenly raising those looks with an expression of unmistakable frankness, he said, "It is true! that thought has floated in my mind! But I have banished it!—for it would kill me with despair and grief to think that I have wronged you by a suspicion, or shed a taint upon the memory of that mother who you have told me is no more."

"Your mother, Edward," answered Mr. Seymour, solemnly, "does indeed deserve this justice at your hands!" He paused—stifed a sob—and added, "She was the best and purest of women!"

The tears stole down the cheeks of the young man; and slowly wiping them away, he gazed upon Mr. Seymour with the suspensful look and the half hushed breath of one who felt that he was standing upon the threshold of further revelations, but who dared not put a question nor give utterance to a syllable that should betray an undue curiosity for the veil to be completely lifted.

"Fear not," resumed Mr. Seymour, "that any stigma rests upon your birth. No, no! it is not thus! And therefore, when I tell you this—as you know I am married and have children older than yourself—you may see that I am not your father. But—but, Edward—I am—your uncle!"

"My uncle?"—and it was in a tone of gushing emotion that the young man spoke. "My uncle? Thank God that I am of your kindred!"—and sinking on his knees at Mr. Seymour's feet, he pressed that gentleman's hand to his lips.

Seymour folded the youth to his heart—embraced him—and sobbed over him for some minutes. The man of the world whose whole cares had wont to be centred in business, and

whose entire thoughts were accustomed to be riveted on money-matters, now found all his feelings and sympathies flowing into other channels—and he gave free vent to these emotions.

At length, when some little degree of calmness was restored between the uncle and nephew, and the latter had resumed his seat, he said, "You have taught me to call myself Edward Walpole. I suppose therefore that my mother was your sister?"

"Yes," replied Seymour. "She married a worthy gentleman named Walpole. You were their only child——"

"And both died when I was very young?"

Seymour held down his head for upwards of a minute ere he answered the question; and then he said, "Your father died before you were born. His death was fearfully sudden—it was accidental. He was a great practical chemist; and in making some experiment—alas! the story is a sad one, Edward!—he inhaled a subtle poison and was discovered a corpse in his *studio*. As you may suppose, terrible was the effect produced upon your mother. She was thrown upon a sick bed—you were born somewhat prematurely—and—and—a few days afterwards my poor sister was no more!"

There was another long pause,—another interval during which there was a gush of emotion on the part of the young man who received this intelligence from his uncle's lips. What could be more affecting than to hear of one's parentage after years of utter ignorance concerning it, and then at last to learn that so many sorrowful circumstances were attached to the interesting topic!

"But do not ask me to tell you any more at present," resumed Mr. Seymour, at length breaking silence. "I know that a thousand anxious and suspenseful ideas must be agitating in your mind, and that you would fain put to me a thousand queries! You may even think that I ought not to delay an explanation which on my own account I owe you—I as your nearest surviving relative so long abandoning you——"

"Say not another syllable upon the subject, dear uncle!" exclaimed Edward Walpole fervently. "Explain yourself when you choose—or never, unless you think fit! I shall be contented. And believe me, I will never never put to you a question that shall seem to be fraught with curiosity!"

"Well, well, my boy," interrupted the railway contractor, pressing his nephew's hand, and speaking in a voice that was tremulous with emotion, "we have said enough upon the subject for the present occasion—at least upon that particular point. Nevertheless, in process of time, Edward, you shall receive every requisite explanation. I will keep nothing back from you.—And now, to turn to another topic. Do you like living in these lodgings? Are the apartments handsome and cheerful enough?"

"Handsome and cheerful enough? What! for me who——"

"Nay—refer not to the past! think only of the present, Edward! I will supply you with sufficient means to enable you to indulge in all rational enjoyments——"

"You have already given me an earnest of your kindness, dear uncle! In one fortnight a com-

plete edifice of luxury and splendour has been built up—horææ, servants, plate, jewels——"

"It is nothing, Edward," interrupted the rich capitalist, with a smile. "I do not want you to become extravagant nor profuse in your expenditure; and I have seen enough of your good sense to be aware that there is no danger of this. Indeed, I wish to accustom you to the enjoyment of wealth; and I think I need not any longer hesitate to tell you that you may look upon your income as being about five thousand a year."

"Five thousand a-year!" repeated the young man almost confounded with amazement. "It is a dream! But, Oh! how much good may I be enabled to accomplish with such a sum!"

"Be rational in your charities, as in everything else," observed Mr. Seymour. "And now, Edward, that you know the extent of the resources upon which you may rely, you can at your leisure form plans for your future mode of life. If you do not feel comfortable in these apartments, take a house in London or a villa in the suburbs——"

"A house! a villa!"—and the young man seemed lost in the dazzling and bewildering light which a discourse of this sort shed around him.

"Well, well," said Mr. Seymour, "there is plenty of time for you to think over these matters. By the bye; be careful in forming friendships amongst the young men of the West End——"

"I have formed none yet," responded Walpole.

"But you will, in process of time—yes, with young men of rank and station——"

"No!—Oh, no!" murmured Edward, in a half-stifled voice: and then he looked as if he were choking, while the blood having mantled on his cheeks for a moment, left them deadly pale.

"My dear boy," Seymour hastened to exclaim, "give not way to those ideas. And now let me touch upon one more topic—and this I must confess that I am about to approach with some degree of difficulty——"

"Oh, why, dear uncle?" cried the young man: "why should this be the case? There is not a command you could utter that I would not obey!—there is not a syllable of counsel that you might give which I should refuse to follow!"

"Edward, you now know that I am your uncle," continued the capitalist, "and you will naturally expect to be introduced to my wife and children—that is to say, to your aunt and cousins."

"It would give me infinite pleasure," answered the young man, with mingled meekness and joy: "but still—if there be any inconvenience—or if you hesitate——"

"I do not, Edward! You shall see them to-morrow."

"To-morrow?"—and the animation of happiness appeared upon the young man's countenance. "An aunt! cousins! Oh, to be recognised by one's kindred—and to call them such!"—and he clasped his hands with a sense of ineffable thankfulness.

"Yes—to-morrow you shall see them," pursued Seymour. "But—but—there are reasons—you cannot altogether understand them now—you will know them better at a future time, when I give you those full and unreserved explanations which I have already promised——"

"You need not tell me your reasons for any line of conduct that you may suggest, uncle. You

have but to indicate the course itself and it shall be followed."

"What! even if it involve hypocrisy and deception?"

The young man reflected for a moment; and then hastened to say, "Whatever you command or advise, I will do blindly!"

"Then all I ask," continued the capitalist, "is that when I present you to-morrow to your aunt and your cousins, you will throw a complete veil over the past;—or rather you will so completely change it in all its aspects and phases, that it shall assume an appearance as different from what it actually was as light differs from darkness. You will throw over it the gloss which I shall suggest:—you will commit to memory and repeat the story that I shall tell you. Now, will you do all this, Edward?"

"Is it indeed necessary," asked the young man, "to have recourse to so much deception? But, Ah! pardon me—pardon me!" he suddenly cried. "I was going to be both disobedient and ungrateful!"

"No, no, Edward," said Seymour, in a low tremulous tone; "it was your virtue—your natural rectitude of principle—which interfered at the moment to make you hesitate! But one word, my dear boy—"

"I know what you would say, uncle. The feelings of others must be consulted!"

"Yes, my boy!—and mine—*mine* chiefly, if not wholly in this instance!" answered Seymour, rising from his seat, and heaving a strange look of mingled entreaty and distress upon the young man. "Good bye for the present, Edward. To-morrow at midday I shall come to fetch you to present you to your aunt and cousins. Good bye, my dear nephew."

The capitalist wrung Edward's hand fervently; and hastening from the room, was in a few moments seated in his carriage, which at once drove off into the City. Just as Mr Seymour alighted at the door of the Bank of England, where he had some business to transact, he encountered Mr. Warren the stockbroker.

Mr. Warren had plenty of assurance, and he therefore hesitated not to proffer his hand with his wonted familiarity; while Mr. Seymour, also dissembling his own feelings, assumed a corresponding air of friendliness. For be it remembered that he fancied the stockbroker to have become possessed of some secret which deeply regarded his honour and his personal safety; and he was not therefore incautious enough to show any angry feelings towards a man in whose power he apposed himself so completely to be.

"How are you, my dear fellow?" exclaimed Warren. "Full of business as usual—eh?"

"As full as ever," responded Seymour.

"And the horses—and the yacht—"

"You know that I have little or no enjoyment on account of all the appurtenances of luxury which I maintain. But I have a wife, sons, and daughters—"

"To be sure! and you like them to be amused," said Warren. "You are rich—and you spend your money liberally upon your family. Well, it's all right enough. You've worked devilish hard to get it."

"Ah!"—and the contractor looked at the stockbroker with a singular earnestness for a moment.

"Warren, my dear fellow," he went on to observe in an altered tone, "I wish to speak to you."

Seymour led his companion into the Royal Exchange, which was almost completely unfrequented at that hour in the forenoon; and as they paced to and fro in the midst of the now deserted quadrangle, the following discourse took place.

"I thought perhaps, Warren," began Seymour, "that I should never again be compelled to allude to that very painful topic which you yourself broached in your own office between three weeks and a month ago. But inasmuch as by some means that are to me utterly unaccountable, you became possessed of that secret, I think it right to inform you that I have made the completest amends. When I say the *completest*, I mean the fullest and most perfect atonement which *can* be made by a man who is unable to recall the past."

Be it recollected that Warren was in reality altogether unacquainted with any secret at all in connexion with Seymour. Acting according to the instigation of Count Maedeville, he had merely spoken at random on that day when in his own office he had availed himself of the singular expedient to defraud and plunder the rich capitalist of no less a sum than fifteen thousand pounds. Therefore, in utter ignorance of the mystery which lay at the bottom of the topic to which Seymour was alluding—but finding himself on the other hand compelled to maintain his pretended knowledge thereof—he said in a tone of becoming gravity, "I am glad to receive this assurance from your lips."

"After that interview which took place between us, Warren," continued Seymour, "I instituted immediate inquiries. Ah! I had long been stricken with remorse; but I had nevertheless wanted the moral courage to take the proper steps for the performance of an act of justice. It only required some such impulse as that which your words gave, to set me boldly moving on the right path. I have therefore to thank you—"

"Perhaps," said Warren, "we had better not speak any more of the business:—for he had just been thinking to himself, "If by any possibility he should discover that I know nothing of this secret, he may turn round upon me—and all the more fearlessly too, inasmuch as he now seems to have set himself right in the matter, whatever it may be."

"Rest assured, Warren," pursued Seymour, "I shall not dwell a moment longer than is necessary on a topic which, as you may full well understand, is fraught with so much painfulness and humiliation unto myself. But I have two motives in recalling it to your recollection. In the first place I was anxious you should learn that I have lost no time in making amends; and as my inquiry was most providentially crowned with a speedy success, I have been enabled to do this act of justice, and ease my conscience from the load that had weighed upon it. But I had another motive!—and this was to beseech and conjure that you will tell me how this sad secret came to your knowledge?"

"I must not," answered Warren, with an emphasis which he hoped would put an end to the subject.

"I do not understand you," observed Seymour,

in mingled surprise and distress. "Who could have told this secret that would have enjoined the maintenance of so much mystery?—who could be sufficiently interested in it—"

"I beg you not to question me further," rejoined Warren.

The railway-contractor looked perplexed; and after a brief silence he said, "You told me at the time that you had never until that occasion breathed to a living soul a syllable in allusion to it?"

"And this was true," replied the stockbroker, hastily; "and I likewise promised that I would continue to keep the secret inviolably. I have done so, and I will ever do so. But do not question me further."

"With these answers I must be contented," said Seymour, in a voice which was nevertheless expressive of disappointment. "By the bye," he said, with a suddenly altering tone, as if casting away the former topic from his memory, "how are you now getting on in your own affairs? Do not think that I mean to allude to any sore topic—"

"Well then," answered Warren, somewhat curtly, "thanks to the assistance, or rather the forbearance which I received at your hands and at those of two or three others, I think I shall be enabled to set myself right altogether. The beauty of it is, there is scarcely a soul who suspects that I have been at all queer."

"If I were you, Warren," remarked Seymour, "I would diminish my expenses until fairly set firm upon the legs again."

"What, my dear fellow!" exclaimed the stockbroker; "are you mad? would you advise me to court the very catastrophe which I have been taking so much pains to ward off? Why, if I were to put down a single horse or drink a bottle of champagne the less, it would be instantaneous destruction! To economise at such a crisis, is to proclaim the nakedness of the land! It is just the very conjuncture when a person ought to increase his expenditure rather than diminish it. Many a fellow has saved himself from perdition by setting up an extra carriage at the very moment when he could not afford to keep so much as a donkey-cart. There's that fool Norton, the country banker—whom I'm going presently to oppose in the Bankruptcy Court,—if he hadn't begun to cut down his expenses he never would have made his customers suspect the true nature of his affairs and so caused the ruin which broke his bank. He used to pass for a millionaire—and he might have lived on the reputation in luxury and security till the end; whereas it now transpires that his whole assets will not pay more than eightpence in the pound."

"And why should you go and oppose this unfortunate man?" asked Seymour.

"Oppose him? Why, to be sure!" ejaculated Warren, as if astonished that there should be any doubt upon the point.

"But why, I ask? His chief fault seems to have been that he was too honest—he wished to economise when he saw his difficulties—"

"And so he must be punished for his folly," exclaimed Warren. "All the bankers and merchants in the City look upon him as a most egregious fool."

"Ah, I comprehend!" cried the sharp-witted

contractor. "You think it will be a popular act to go and oppose this unfortunate man, and perhaps prevent him getting his certificates?"

"To be sure!—And moreover," continued Warren, "it will be a little useful notoriety for myself—a creditor for fifteen hundred—it looks *moneyish*—and that's just the way in which I do want to look, my dear fellow, at this present moment. But Ah! noon, by Jove!" ejaculated this moral specimen of the City moneyocracy; for at that instant the clock of the Royal Exchange began to proclaim the hour of twelve. "I must be off. This is the time for the fool Norton to appear before the Commissioner."

The stockbroker and the contractor parted. We likewise shall now take leave of them for the present, and return to Edward Walpole, whom we left in his handsomely-furnished lodgings in Hanover Square.

The young man remained absorbed in deep reflection after the departure of his uncle. His thoughts were of a mixed character; for if on the one hand he had heard much to sadden him in respect to his parents, yet on the other hand he had much reason for rejoicing at the prospect of being presented on the ensuing day to his aunt and his cousins. He felt that the arms of an entire family were about to be opened to receive him; and this reflection was naturally a source of bliss to one whose life had hitherto been cheerless and dreary indeed. Thus, altogether, Edward Walpole's thoughts were rather of a pleasurable than a melancholy cast; and assuredly, if he looked at his future prospects, everything might be deemed of a roseate hue and he had naught to render him desponding.

In the afternoon he rode out through the Parks, attended by a groom in a plain but neat livery; and though he was far from an ungraceful figure on horseback, yet it was evident that he could as yet boast of being but little practised in the equestrian art. However, he knew that "all this would soon come," as Mr. Seymour was wont to tell him; and though he had as little vanity in his disposition as any living being, yet it would be endowing him with a fabulous meekness if we were to say that there was no sentiment of gratification, even if we do not call it pride, at finding himself handsomely mounted, well attended, and daily becoming an object of more and more attention on the part of the habitual loungers in those fashionable resorts. In the evening he dined at his own lodgings: he then went to some theatre; and thus he appeared to be passing his time rationally enough, until about half-past ten o'clock—when his conduct, his habits, and pursuits seemed suddenly to undergo a change which will perhaps astonish the reader.

Having ascertained that his purse was well furnished with gold and silver—for if not, he had only to return to his lodgings to procure a supply—he crossed one of the bridges; and plunging into some of those vile neighbourhoods which constitute whole quarters or districts on the Surrey side of the river, he appeared all in a moment to have thrown off the mask of a consummate dissimulation and to have become a dissipated libertine. He stopped and jested with the loose females who accosted him:—some he took into public-houses and treated to wine or other liquors; and it was with a lavish profusion that he seat-

tered about the money which his uncle so bountifully supplied. He was constantly proclaiming his resolve "to see London life." This phrase, which forms so frequent and yet so wretched an apology for the novice who is plunging headlong into dissipation, was constantly on the lips of Edward Walpole when in the midst of these low vile associates whose company he was thus eagerly seeking. And then too, with a readiness that might well have served to make his new associates suspect that he had a natural inclination for vicious debauchery, did he penetrate into houses of the most infamous description—gathering around him all the female occupants of each successive den that he thus visited, and regaling them with the most expensive wines that the taverns or public-houses in those districts could furnish. But all remarked that there was a certain restlessness about him, as if he were no sooner in one place than he was weary of it and wanted to get to another,—just as if he could not see too much debauchery in one night, or as if he felt that he could not diversify these loathsome amusements too rapidly in order to sustain a requisite degree of excitement.

But we will not dwell at unnecessary length upon this portion of our narrative. Suffice it to say that having passed some hours in flitting from one den of infamy to another, the young man returned to his lodgings when the day was dawning; and therefore it was no wonder if after a short feverish sleep he rose to breakfast between nine and ten with a countenance that was paler even than on the preceding day.

At about noon Mr. Seymour arrived in his carriage; and Edward Walpole was dressed in readiness to accompany him.

"Good heavens, my dear boy! how pale and ill you look!" cried the contractor.

"Do I, uncle?" said the young man, with a start; and he glanced at his countenance in the opposite mirror—but the cheeks were now red with blushes.

"Were you up late last night?" inquired Mr. Seymour.

"Late? Oh, no, uncle!—that is to say, not very. I went to the theatre—"

"Well, well, my dear boy, I am sure I do not wish to pry into your pursuits."

"Oh, but you have a right!" ejaculated Walpole: and then he suddenly checked the next words that were about to issue from his lips, and he stooped to pick up the kerchief which he had just dropped.

"You certainly do not look well, Edward," resumed Mr. Seymour, contemplating his nephew with some little uneasiness. "I must send our family doctor to you."

"Oh, I can assure you, dear uncle, I am quite well!"

"Ah!" ejaculated Seymour, as he caught sight of all the hooks that lay scattered about on the sofa and side-tables; "perhaps you read too much? Come—confess, Edward—you pursue your studies late at night?"

"Well, sir," answered the young man, with an air of the supremest meekness and diffidence, "perhaps I do continue my pursuits until too late an hour. But—"

"Enough, Edward! I now see the entire clue to the mystery. You are naturally studious; but

pray, my dear boy, take care of your health. And now come!—the carriage is waiting—and I am giving myself a holiday that we may all pass a pleasant day together at Highgate."

In a few moments the uncle and nephew were seated together in a carriage, which rolled rapidly away towards the northern suburb of the metropolis.

"By the bye, Edward," said Mr. Seymour, "what a shocking discovery that seems to be! I only just had time to glance over the account in the newspaper, while I was despatching my breakfast."

"You mean the discovery at Waterloo Bridge yesterday morning?" said the young man.

"Yes—the carpet-bag that was found on the abutment at the base of the pier of one of the arches. Was it not so?"

"It was," replied Edward; "and there can be no doubt that a horrible murder, followed by a hideous mutilation, has been perpetrated."

"Is there any clue to the assassin?" asked Mr. Seymour.

"Scarcely, I should think, from what I read," rejoined Walpole. "The surgeon who was called in to the Bow Street Station, to which the carpet-bag was conveyed, put the remnants together, as it were; and he made out the perfect form of a man, with the exception of the head."

"Good heavens, how horrible!—the head missing!" cried Mr. Seymour.

"The head was missing. Ah, my dear uncle! you may well say it was a horrible affair—and as mysterious as it is horrible!"

"You say there is no clue?" asked his uncle.

"Nothing more than this,—that one of the toll-keepers perfectly recollects a stout elderly woman having passed through the gate on the Strand side, with a large carpet-bag, between eleven and twelve o'clock on the night preceding the hideous discovery. Yet it appears that so many different persons pass the bridge with bags in their hands at almost all hours—especially when the trains of the South-Western are about to start—"

"No doubt of it," interjected Seymour. "Is there no other clue?"

"It seems not—at least so far as one may judge from the newspaper-account."

"It is horrible!" said the railway contractor, with a shudder. "Perhaps some unfortunate man who was inveigled into one of the myriad dens of infamy which abound in the metropolis—some stranger perhaps—"

"It is suspected that the victim was a foreigner, from his clothes," remarked Edward.

"Poor devil!" said the contractor: "little thought he to what a dangerous place he was coming, and what a doom awaited him! But it is enough to make one shudder to reflect how many houses of an infamous description there are in this modern Babylon, and how recklessly the profligate and dissipated trust themselves in those dens! As well plunge into a morass swarming with reptiles! Ah, if the debauched and the libertine—young men especially—would only pause to reflect what fearful risks they run when venturing into such places, where hocussing, robbery, and murder are no doubt crimes far more common than the world is generally inclined to suspect,—if men, I repeat, would only think of

the awful perils to be thus incurred, it would make them wiser. But some there are—indeed many—who go with well-filled purses, and their forms bedizened with jewellery,—they go, I say, into those resorts of vice and profligacy, without reflecting that by flashing their coin and by displaying their gold chains they are actually courting a violent death."

Mr. Seymour felt his nephew shudder as he was seated next to him; and if he had happened to glance at the young man at the instant, he would have seen that his face was deadly pale with an expression of direst horror upon it.

"You shudder, Edward," said the contractor; "and it is enough to make you! But do not think, my dear boy, that I was saying those things on your account. Heaven forbid! I know how unnecessary it is to give you such warnings. But let us turn the discourse."

"Oh, yes, uncle—*do!*" said the young man eagerly. "I think you had some instructions to give me—some suggestions to offer in respect to the answers which I must return if questioned by these relations to whom I am about to be presented."

"Yes," said the contractor, his tone and look becoming gloomy and mournful. "I am afraid that I am going to give you a lesson in an art with which you are as yet little acquainted, and which heaven forbid that you should ever practise!"

"And that art, uncle?"

"Dissimulation and duplicity. But as an expedient to serve a purpose for once—indeed to spare my feelings, and to make me stand well in the eyes of those with whom I would not for worlds appear in a sinister light—"

"Do not say all this, uncle!" interrupted Edward quickly. "You remember the assurances I gave you yesterday. Tell me what I am to do—and it shall be done. Oh, believe me, I would make any sacrifice of my own feelings!—yes, every sacrifice to save yours from being pained!"

"Excellent boy!" cried Seymour. "You know not what a weight you lift from my mind by these assurances; but you are equally ignorant how much it afflicts me on the other hand to be compelled to ask you to deviate for a single moment from the pathway of truth on my account!"

A long pause ensued ere the discourse was resumed; and we must reserve additional details for a new chapter.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE FAMILY AT HIGHBURY.

EDWARD WALPOLE prepared to listen with the deepest attention to whatsoever instructions were about to issue from his uncle's lips; and the latter, taking his hand, said, "You must not think too badly of me, my dear boy, for the course I am now adopting."

"Uncle!—dear uncle! you distress me infinitely by this repeated justification of yourself, after I have promised a placid obedience!"

"I will proceed without further preface," said Mr. Seymour. "You now know that you were left an orphan at your birth. Why did not I

take care of you? why did I abandon you? These are questions which some day must be answered—though I am not going to enter upon the explanations now. No, no—not now! But then my wife—my children—all have been anxious to learn what had become of you for twenty long years!—the twenty years that have elapsed since your eyes first saw the light of this world! I have told them a certain tale—and it is now for you, my boy, to corroborate it! Otherwise you would render me detestable in the eyes of my wife, and suspicious in those of my sons and daughters!"

"I will assuredly corroborate the tale, uncle," exclaimed Edward, "whatever it be!"

Seymour pressed his nephew's hand, and went on to say, "Fortunately I had never denied your existence to any of my relations or friends—I never said that you had died—On the contrary, I always spoke of you as one who might some day turn up—In a word, Edward, I represented that you were stolen in your infancy! Yes—I said that gipsies had stolen you—I pretended at the time to make inquiries—All this my wife knew well!—Ah! Edward, I was very wicked towards you, poor boy!—very wicked!"

The contractor was now sobbing violently: Edward Walpole flung his arms about his neck, and implored him to be pacified.

"I must now tell you the whole truth, my dear boy," continued Seymour, after a pause. "Yes—it is useless any longer to delay it—Perhaps you have already conjectured from the partial avowals I have made—"

"I have conjectured nothing!" exclaimed the young man vehemently: "I will conjecture nothing! Go on, uncle—and tell me *only* what I am to say if questioned by my aunt and cousins."

"You were stolen in your infancy by gipsies—"

"Yes. What next, uncle?"

"Your earliest recollections were associated with the wandering life of that race, until at the age of eight or nine some country clergyman, noticing you in his village, was struck by your complexion so different from the usual swarthiness of the gipsy—and he was led to make inquiries. Well, the issue was that the gipsies, under the influence of terror, confessed that you were stolen, but that they had obtained you from some other tribe, and thus they could furnish no farther particulars. Do you follow me, Edward?"

"Completely, uncle. I will say all this. Go on—and tell me the rest."

"The good clergyman—But we must give him a name; for this I have not yet done in the narration of the fictitious tale to my wife—We will call him Bloomfield, if you will—I once knew an excellent minister of that name—"

"It shall be Bloomfield, uncle," said the young man. "Proceed."

"This Mr. Bloomfield—Ah! and now we must fix a place; for, as you perceive, I have not been circumstantial in my story."

"What place shall we say?" inquired Edward. "Remember, dear uncle, that I know little enough of England. I have never travelled anywhere—except—except—"

"We will fix upon some place that I happen to know, but which is not by any means known to



LADY AMESBURY.

my family; and thus you will stand no chance of any perplexing questioning on the point. We will say the little village of Southmolton in Devonshire."

"Be it so, uncle. And I suppose a hilly district—well wooded—beautiful in its verdure in the summer—wild and dreary-looking in the winter?"

"Exactly so. And all these points being settled, we may continue the tale by supposing—as indeed I have already represented it—that this worthy clergyman took you from the gipsies, and placed you with an elderly couple—good people but very poor;—and thus you were brought up—while to Mr. Bloomfield himself you were indebted for the education you have acquired. Let

No. 41.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

the worthy couple he named Taylor. And now, Edward, before I proceed any farther, do you really think you can bring yourself to give utterance to all these falsehoods?—or rather, to corroborate them if questioned? But Ah!" suddenly ejaculated Seymour, "thank heaven! there is one thing that is favourable!"

"And what is that, uncle?" inquired the young man.

"Your aunt and cousins will have too much delicacy to press their questions upon you—they will be afraid of wounding your feelings—and thus, perhaps, much less may be said on all these points than my fears have hitherto led me to anticipate."

"No matter what may be said, uncle—whether much or little," replied Walpole; "for you may rest assured that I will play my part precisely as you wish. Oh, I would do anything for you!"

"Good God, if you knew all!"—and Mr. Seymour dashed his hand against his forehead in a sudden paroxysm of feelings that were utterly beyond control.

"Uncle, uncle! calm yourself!" cried the young man entreatingly.

"I have been a villain towards you, Edward," said Seymour, with indescribable bitterness of accent. "Stop!—do not interrupt me! How can you ever forgive me when you think of all the neglect, sorrow, and misery to which all the best years of your life have been doomed through me? How can you pardon me, I ask? how can you do otherwise than turn round upon me in some moment of rage—"

"Never, never, uncle!—it is impossible!" cried Edward vehemently. "I am no hypocrite—no dissembler: what I say I mean—what I promise I will fulfil. Therefore believe me—Oh! believe me, when I tell you again and again that the sense of all your present kindnesses and attentions alone occupies my mind!"

Mr. Seymour took his nephew's hands and wrung them with force—even with violence, while in a voice which was broken by sobs, he said, "I must make a clean breast of it, Edward—I must tell you everything! Yes—I would rather acquaint you at once with the whole extent of my iniquity, so that when you perceive how much you have to forgive, you may again reflect whether you have not promised rashly in declaring that you can pardon me under such circumstances! But Ah! by this time you must have suspected it! Well, then, you can judge how remorse is tearing at my heart! Yes—for I proved a treacherous guardian—I thought only of my own necessities—I forgot the vow I made to your mother, my poor sister, on her death-bed—my own affairs were at that time desperate—and—and—the temptation was great—the fortune which your father had left for your use was in my hands—"

"Enough, uncle! enough!" interrupted the young man. "In the name of heaven do not continue any longer in this strain!"—and the tears were pouring down his cheeks.

"I must make my tale complete since I have got thus far," resumed Seymour; "and perhaps it is good for me that I should endure the present punishment for my great misdeeds—I mean that punishment which consists in the humiliation, the pain, the grief, that I now feel!"

"But what more can you have to tell me? You have already told me too much! I shall banish it all from my recollection!"

"Excellent youth! But hear me for a moment. I was telling you that I robbed you of your fortune—I sacrificed you to save myself! The crime was doubly infamous—and I will tell you why. I might have possessed myself of your fortune and yet have reared you in the bosom of my own family: I might at least have made this atonement at the time for the wrong that I was doing you. But then I knew that you would grow up in the knowledge that your parents had left wealth behind—and moreover that the day

would come when you would ask me for an account of your fortune; and I knew not whether I might be in a position to give that account. I could not foresee whether I should be enabled to replace the funds which I was so dishonestly appropriating to my own purposes. And thus I resolved to make away with you altogether. Not by murder! Oh, no! no!"—and Seymour shuddered visibly. "No! no!" he repeated; "I was not so criminal as all that! Base, mean, and treacherous I was—aye, to the very fullest extent, to which baseness, meanness, and treachery can reach!"

"Uncle, I can endure this no longer!" cried Edward Walpole vehemently. "I tell you that I forgive you! I bless you for the present: I cannot curse you on account of the past! I beseech that you will say no more upon a topic which wrings my heart! Let us go back to that point whence the conversation so suddenly diverged. You recollect—do you not? I am to say that I was brought up by an elderly couple named Taylor, and that to a worthy clergyman I am indebted for whatsoever education I possess. Is there aught more to add? Must I be prepared to explain how it was that you found me out?"

"Yes," said the contractor, composing his looks as well as he was able after the violent paroxysms of excitement which had shaken him as it were throughout his entire being; "you must be prepared on that point. I have told my wife and children that from some information which I indirectly received a little while ago, I caused inquiries to be instituted—that I followed them up closely and rapidly, so that the result was that you came up from Southmolton in Devonshire about a fortnight back; but that I would not introduce you at Highbury House until every point of doubt was fully cleared up and your identity as my nephew was established. And now, Edward, you are acquainted with all the details of the narrative which I have fabricated to account for the past. In five minutes more you will be in the presence of your aunt and cousins."

"Again and again I declare, dear uncle," cried Walpole, "that nothing shall fall from my lips which can tend to falsify or throw suspicion upon the explanations which you have given."

Once more did Seymour press his nephew's hand with grateful enthusiasm: and then he said, "Having confessed to you, Edward, all that has been bad on my part, I may now in justice to myself reveal a certain fact which tells a little in my favour—though I am very far from parading it in pride as a set-off against the humiliation which I have experienced; nor do I look upon it as a complete atonement for the past. Listen, Edward! The fortune of which I robbed you would have produced you about a thousand a-year. I have reckoned that capital in its relative proportion to my own ventures and gains; and I have placed in your name in the Bank of England a sum that will produce you five thousand a-year! All the requisite documents shall be handed over to you to-morrow. Nay, not another word, Edward! not another word!" exclaimed the contractor, as he placed his hands upon his nephew's lips: "for here we are!"

Highbury was reached; and the equipage dashed along a shady avenue up to the front entrance of a handsome dwelling, situated in the midst of

grounds that were well laid out. This was High-bury House—for so the mansion was called. It was with feelings which we cannot describe that the young man alighted at the place where he was about to be welcomed by those relations whom he had never seen before. In a few moments he was in their midst. Mrs. Seymour was a handsome woman, of about five-and-forty—affable and good-natured—without undue pride or pretension—hospitable, sincere, and warm-hearted. She at once embraced the nephew who was now presented to her; and the very first words that she spoke were calculated to place him at his ease, to relieve him of any feeling of embarrassment, and to convey the assurance that he was welcome there. He was then presented to his cousins. These consisted of two young men, a little older than himself—and three girls, who were younger. They were all good-looking and good-tempered; and they received their cousin with a cordiality which showed how deeply interested they were in him. By the time he had been an hour in their company, he felt as if he had known them for at least a whole year.

The young men took him to the stables to show him their horses: the young ladies conducted him through the flower-garden and led him to inspect the conservatories; and after luncheon Mr. and Mrs. Seymour took him over the house, which was sumptuously furnished and contained many excellent pictures. Neither Mrs. Seymour nor his cousins put any direct questions to him in reference to the past circumstances of his life; nor did they make any allusion thereto—and when Edward Walpole found that this was the case, he felt all the more completely at his ease. Never had he enjoyed such perfect happiness: it seemed almost too great to be real: his heart was overflowing—and he longed to be alone for a little while that he might give vent to the feelings which he could scarcely restrain. At length, between four and five o'clock, when his uncle, his aunt, and his cousins dispersed to their respective chambers to dress for dinner, Edward descended from the one to which he had been shown; and escaping into the garden, he rushed through the grounds, as if obedient to an impulse which he could not possibly resist. A gate which stood open led him into a paddock, which sloped down towards a low fence separating it from an orchard attached to another house which stood near. On reaching this boundary, the young man threw himself upon the grass, and covering his face with his hands, burst into tears. It was thus that his feelings found a natural vent: but not tears of sadness were they which were thus shed. No!—they were the overflow of a joy—a bliss—a degree of happiness which could find expression in no other way. And then, as Edward Walpole thought of many past incidents of his life, and contrasted his present position with what it had lately been, he tried to articulate some words of thankfulness to heaven; but his voice was broken in sobs, and then he wept again.

"Good heavens, sir, what ails you?" he heard a soft musical voice suddenly inquiring.

He started up and beheld on the other side of the fence a young lady of the most extraordinary beauty, and whose clear blue eyes were fixed upon him with an expression of compassionate interest. She was elegantly dressed: she had on a

bonnet and mantle; she was tall, and of elegant shape.

Edward Walpole, we say, had sprung up to his feet; and as he dashed away his tears, his countenance glowed with shame at the thought of having been discovered in such a state by the lovely stranger. He could give no reply to the question which she had so kindly put to him; but he stood gazing at her over the fence, which stood in a sort of hollow between the paddock which sloped upward on one side and the orchard which rose with a similar swell on the other side.

"I fear you must think me very rude in putting such a question," said the young lady, "and intruding upon your grief—"

"No! no!" ejaculated Edward: "it was not grief—it was happiness!"

"Happiness?" echoed the young lady, with an air of surprise. "And yet——" but she stopped short, as if afraid to give utterance to the words which had come to the very tip of her tongue.

"I thank you," said the young man, "for the kind interest which you have displayed on my behalf. Pray speak on. You were about to make some observation?"

"May I speak frankly?" asked the young lady.

"Assuredly—I wish you to do so," and Edward Walpole was now contemplating her with a degree of admiration that was only subdued by the respect which her appearance inspired; for there was an unmistakable air of superiority about her—an air of good-breeding and of refined gentility which could not have failed to strike even the most superficial observer.

"I was going to observe," she resumed, "that you startled me when you declared that your emotions arose from a sense of happiness; for you were assuredly weeping and sobbing as if overwhelmed by the direst calamity."

"Doubtless this was the impression which my conduct must have made upon your mind," said Walpole, again colouring with shame as he thought of what had happened. "But those tears which one sheds through excess of joy, are perfectly similar to those which are shed through grief."

"True!" said the young lady, with an air of reflection: "all tears are alike, though flowing from such different sources. But frankly speaking, I never before knew happiness display itself with such a phase; and you will permit me to congratulate you that so much emotion did not arise from very opposite circumstances."

"I accept your congratulations with gratitude," answered Walpole; and then, as he saw that the young lady, having inclined her head in graceful and modest salutation, was about to turn away from the spot, he hastened to exclaim, "I consider myself your debtor—I owe you an explanation in return for the generous sympathy you have displayed on my behalf!"

His object was to detain her a little longer in discourse; for he was enchanted by her beauty, and his soul was ravished by the tones of her voice.

"It is a Christian duty," she said, "to show sympathy towards one's fellow-creatures if they seem to be in distress. I know that many young ladies would have at once turned away on behold-

ing a gentleman seated weeping and sobbing upon the grass; but I could not do so. You may think my conduct bold——”

“What! bold when it was so generous?” exclaimed Walpole.

“Why, in this strange world,” responded the young lady, “where the trammels of etiquette are so peculiar and the conventionalisms of society so preposterous and absurd, it sometimes needs no ordinary amount of courage to perform a generous action, and to prove that the natural feelings of the heart have not been entirely warped by the artificialities and restraints to which I have alluded.”

“True—most true!” cried Walpole, who was delighted, charmed, and amazed at the language which thus flowed from the lips of that beautiful creature. “And now I feel that I more than ever owe you the explanations which I promised. Yes—it was indeed an excess of happiness that I experienced! To-day for the first time I have been introduced to the bosom of an amiable family,”—and he glanced over his shoulder towards Highbury House—“I have been greeted with unaffected fervour and cordial warmth: I have been welcomed by relations whom I never saw before! And thus my heart grew too full——”

Here he stopped: for again did his emotions swell up into his throat, and the tears started from his eyes.

“Weep on,” said the young lady, with a certain tremulousness in her tone: “never attempt to check prematurely or rudely the natural flow of the best feelings of our human nature! Heaven knows we have none of us too many sources of such feeling; and there is consequently oftentimes a luxury in tears.”

“I thank you for these words so truthfully and so kindly spoken,” answered Walpole. “Just now I was ashamed of myself for having been surprised by a stranger in the midst of those tears and sobs: but now I do not blush on that account, for I see that you do not despise me.”

“Far from it,” replied the young lady. “Your’s was no unmanly grief! I think that of all characters, that of a coward is the most contemptible: but I feel convinced that the truly brave and courageous individual can weep at times. Hard hearts have no magnanimity, and therefore no true courage. But perhaps—but perhaps—you will now again begin to fancy that my conduct is bold and unlady-like to a degree in thus giving expression to my feelings?”

“Heaven forbid!” exclaimed Walpole. “Excuse me for saying that though I have not yet had the pleasure of being quite ten minutes in your company, I have seen more of a mind that I can admire——”

“Oh, but because I have stood here to converse with you for a few minutes, it was not to court flattery:—and as the young lady smiled, her parting lips revealed two rows of brilliant teeth.

“Flattery?—no!” exclaimed Walpole, with enthusiasm. “Purblind indeed should I be if I did not perceive that your’s is a mind which would consider mere flattery to be an insult and idle compliments the greatest offence that could be offered you.”

“I am glad that you comprehend me thus far,” replied the young lady. “I have no undue

curiosity—but I presume that from the information you have given me, you have never been in this part of the world before? Perhaps you come from abroad, and thus have only for the first time seen the relations who have received you so kindly?”

“I have long dwelt at a great distance,” answered the young man; “and this is the first time that I was ever in this neighbourhood. Perhaps you are acquainted with my relations?”

“I have not that pleasure,” was the response. “But I must now wish you good afternoon; for here is some one coming to seek me.”

The young lady bowed with that modest affability which had characterized her entire bearing towards Walpole; and then turning away, she was almost immediately joined by another lady, who was advancing through the orchard. This latter lady seemed to be about five-and-thirty years of age; her features were beautifully regular—but her face was pale, and its expression was pensive and melancholy. Her hair was of a dark brown: her eyes were hazel: her complexion was very pure and clear. She was dressed plainly, but with the elegant neatness which characterized the gentlewoman. She was of the medium stature; and the symmetry of her shape was slender and good. She had on neither bonnet nor shawl, but looked as if she had just stepped out of the adjacent house to take an airing in the grounds, or else to search after the young lady who had been talking to Walpole.

When the two ladies met, as just described, the young man distinctly heard the elder of the two say to the younger, “Who is that you have been speaking to?”

He could not catch the reply that was given; but he saw the elder lady glance back at him for a moment—and as he caught her look it startled him, he knew not why. There was nothing angry nor unpleasant in it: on the contrary, it seemed to be a glance of mere passing curiosity and interest which she thus flung upon him; but there was something in that face which assuredly touched a particular chord in his memory or his heart and made it vibrate. He stood gazing after the two ladies until they were lost to his view amidst the trees of the orchard; and then he slowly retraced his steps towards the house, thinking of the singular conversation he had held with the younger lady, and of the expression of the elder one’s countenance.

Nothing of any consequence occurred during dinner—nor indeed for the remainder of the evening, which was passed pleasantly enough by Edward Walpole; and we may describe it as the happiest in his life. He had more than once felt an inclination to inquire who occupied the pretty little villa-residence to which the orchard belonged; but with a bashfulness which was natural on his part, he did not like to put a question which might seem to indicate curiosity, or which might bring up a flush to his cheeks as he thought of the scene with the young lady. He took leave of his relations at about ten o’clock—but not before his aunt had exacted from him a promise that he would spend the ensuing day at Highbury House.

On returning to his lodgings in Hanover Square, did Edward Walpole retire to rest? No:—he sallied forth, and again he plunged amidst all the lowest scenes of debauchery and vice which

belong to the worst neighbourhoods of the metropolis. But we should observe that he now carried a pair of loaded pistols accreted about his person, for the horrible discovery of the mutilated corpse had not failed to produce its impression upon his mind. It was past two o'clock in the morning when he stole into his dwelling—jaded, worn out, and exhausted, and craving the rest of which he seemed to be so strangely and wilfully depriving himself.

It was about two in the afternoon of the following day when Edward Walpole again arrived at Highbury House, and experienced the most cordial welcome on the part of his aunt and cousins; for his uncle was absent on account of business. An excursion into the country was proposed: Mrs. Seymour, with her two younger daughters, went in an elegant open carriage; while the elder daughter and the two sons accompanied their cousin Edward Walpole on horseback. Thus the time was pleasantly whiled away until about five o'clock, when Mr. Seymour arrived from the City; and the family, as usual, dispersed to their respective chambers to dress for dinner. Edward Walpole's toilet was hurriedly completed; for he was impelled by an irresistible feeling of curiosity to repeat his lounge in the direction of the orchard, in the hope of again seeing something of the young lady whose beauty was so extraordinary and whose discourse was more or less tinged with eccentricity. In a few minutes he quitted his dressing-room—he was soon threading the garden—he entered the paddock—and towards the boundary-fence he bent his way. But the young lady was not there. Edward sauntered to and fro, wondering whether she would come—aye, and also wishing that she might!

“But why should she,” he presently asked himself, “even if she should happen to see that I am here? She may not live at the villa at all: she might merely be paying a visit—which, now I think of it, was probable, from the way that she was dressed. Yet supposing her to be there, why should she think any more of me? Because her manner is peculiar and her conversation exhibits a masculine strength of mind, it is no reason why she should forget the modesty of her sex and willingly lay herself out to court an interview with one who is almost a total stranger to her. And must she not think that I am inspired by no ordinary audacity and presumption in seeking this spot with the evident hope—”

But here Edward Walpole suddenly stopped short in his musings, as he caught a glimpse of a female form amidst the trees of the orchard. His heart leapt within him. Was she coming after all? No!—it was not the young lady; it was the elder one. Walpole was uncertain how to act. He knew not whether to remain, or whether to make a prompt retreat. He was about to commence the latter operation, when on glancing towards the lady, he was surprised to observe that she made a sign for him to stop. The next moment he fancied that he must be mistaken!—again therefore did he begin to move away from the place, and once more did he glance towards the orchard. Yes—the sign was repeated: it was an unmistakable gesture for him to remain. The lady looked back two or three times, as if she were afraid of being watched by any

one or observed from the windows of her own residence, which was half embowered in trees at a distance of about two hundred yards from the fence which separated the orchard from the paddock. On she came; she was attired in a dark silk dress, which was fashionably made, and displayed the slender symmetry of her form to the utmost advantage. There was now an expression of haste and excitement upon the countenance which on the previous day had worn only a look of melancholy pensiveness;—and now indeed her entire mien indicated that she had something of more or less importance to say to the young man. But still this countenance produced a peculiar impression upon Edward's mind, touching that chord which vibrated either in his memory or his heart, he knew not where nor why. Had he ever seen this lady before the previous day?—was there in his brain some vague recollection of that pale beautiful face? He could not tell:—but whatsoever mystery might be involved in the doubt, now seemed to be enhanced by the conduct which she was pursuing towards him.

She approached the fence; and fixing her hazel eyes with a strange and peculiar significancy upon the youth's countenance, she said in a hurried anxious tone, and glancing behind her at the same time, “Be here at half-past ten precisely—and fail not!”

“Might I ask, madam—”

“Ask nothing!” she interrupted him; “and keep your own counsel! Be secret! Not a word to those yonder!”—and she pointed in the direction of Highbury House.

“I will follow your injunctions, madam. But may I not know—”

“Enough! enough! You will come!”—and with these words, she turned abruptly away from the fence, leaving young Walpole transfixed with astonishment at the singular and mysterious appointment which was thus given him.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE APPOINTMENT.

As the young man presently retraced his way slowly to the house, he bewildered himself with conjectures and surmises in reference to the singular circumstance which had just occurred. He was about to enter the garden, when he met his eldest cousin, whose Christian name was Patrick.

“Whiling away the time till dinner, Edward?” said Mr. Seymour's eldest horn.

“Yes,” answered Walpole, colouring slightly. “I have been lounging through the paddock. By the bye, that is a splendid orchard!—the cherry trees are laden with fruit—and there is every promise of being an equally fine crop of apples and pears.”

“Ah! but the orchard does not belong to our property, you know,” said Patrick Seymour.

“I observed that there was a fence. I suppose that the orchard is attached to the picturesque villa?”

Patrick replied in the affirmative,—adding, “She seems to be a well-bred lady by the look of her—very quiet and reserved—”

“Whom do you mean?” asked Walpole.

"Why, Lady Amesbury, to be sure!" ejaculated Patrick; "that's the name of the lady who lives at Charlton Villa."

"I did not know it before. Does she live alone there?—for I thought I saw two ladies——"

"Lady Amesbury lives all alone there—that is to say, with her servants: but I have noticed that she is occasionally visited by a beautiful girl—tall and well-formed—I don't know who she is——And indeed it is only on three or four occasions that I have noticed her at all."

"Your family, then, does not visit Lady Amesbury?" said Walpole inquiringly.

"No; because her ladyship does not court society. She came to live at Charlton Villa for the sake of the strictest seclusion——At least so it was given out at the time——"

"She is a widow, I presume?" asked Walpole.

"Yes—the widow of the late General Amesbury. He was created a baronet for his services in India: he died about three years ago—but his widow has only occupied the villa for the last few months. As I have told you she keeps herself very much retired; and if any of us happen to be walking in the paddock when she is in her own grounds, she turns away and beats a prompt retreat. Some say she is in very bad health, for she was many years in India: others declare that her husband's death produced a great effect upon her mind: some few set down her conduct to pride; but so far as I can judge from the occasional glimpses I have caught of her at a distance, I should say that so far from being proud, she is retiring, diffident, and amiable. She also strikes me as possessing the remains of great beauty—even if she may not still be termed beautiful——But, Ah! there's the dinner bell; and a right welcome sound it is!"

The few particulars which Edward Walpole had succeeded in gleaming from his cousin Patrick, only tended to increase the mystery of the appointment which had been given him. The young lady evidently did not live at Charlton Villa, and was only an occasional visitress. Little likely was it, therefore, that the appointment was made in *her* behalf—as Edward had at first flattered himself it might be. For what purpose, then, had it been made at all? Was this lady who lived in such strict seclusion, a demirep? was she courting an amorous intrigue? It was natural enough under the circumstances that this conjecture should strike the young man: but he had too little vanity to give it place for any length of time in his imagination. Besides, there had been nothing in Lady Amesbury's looks, when she spoke to him at the fence, to indicate the wanton. Yet it was assuredly mysterious enough that she who refused all society, and who even avoided coming into the slightest contact with her neighbours, should have given such a rendezvous to *him*, a complete stranger! The whole affair was perplexing and bewildering enough: but Edward Walpole had curiosity sufficient to induce him to resolve on seeing the end of the adventure.

The evening passed away at Highbury House, in the same happy manner as the preceding one; and shortly after ten o'clock Edward Walpole's phaeton and pair drove round to the door. He took leave of his relations—entered the vehicle—and drove away. But in a few moments he

stopped—alighted—and bade his coachman drive the phaeton to a tavern at no great distance, and there wait till his return. Edward then retraced his way on foot towards his uncle's residence; and with the knowledge which he now possessed of the grounds, it was easy for him to find his way unmolested and without creating any alarm, to the place of appointment. It was a beautiful clear night—in the early part of June, he recollected—and all objects were plainly visible. The fence was reached: but Edward found himself alone there. He looked at his watch: it was close upon the half-hour—and he remembered that he was enjoined to be punctual. Would the lady herself be exact? He had scarcely asked himself the question, when he beheld a female form approaching amidst the trees of the orchard; and he quickly recognised Lady Amesbury. Leaping the fence, he stood in her presence.

"I am glad you are here," she said, her countenance becoming animated with satisfaction. "I was afraid something might hinder you from keeping the appointment."

"An appointment given under such circumstances," replied Walpole, "could not fail to command obedience."

"Ah! then, you suspect——"

"I suspect nothing," rejoined the youth. "Perhaps the moment is now come when all mystery may cease?"

A peculiar smile stole over the lady's countenance: it assuredly was not a smile of wantonness nor of immodest encouragement: it was in no sense unamiable—but still it was undefinable.

"Come with me," she said, somewhat abruptly. "This way!"

She led the young man through the orchard; and as he followed her, he naturally wondered more and more at the adventure in which he was engaged. A shrubbery was reached; and this, as it appeared, constituted a boundary between the orchard and the garden.

"Remain here for a few moments," whispered Lady Amesbury: and she lightly laid her hand as she spoke upon Walpole's arm.

She then glided away from him, leaving him within the shade of the shrubbery. He looked after her; but she disappeared amidst the trees of the garden. Some moments of profound silence elapsed—and then all of a sudden the deep stillness was broken by strange sounds: they were those of a tambourine. These lasted for three or four minutes; and when they ceased, a merry peal of musical laughter, but in the sweetest feminine tones, rang out upon the moonlit night and were wafted to Edward Walpole's ear. That silvery outburst of merriment ceased; and then followed the unmistakable sounds of castanets. Walpole listened with amazement—almost with stupefaction: he could scarcely believe his own ears: he thought he must be labouring under some mistake in fancying that all these evidences of gaiety and mirthfulness could emanate from a place which had been chosen as the seclusion of a bereaved widow! But there was indeed no room for doubt: there were the sounds of the castanets;—and suddenly ceasing, they were followed by another beating and clashing of the tambourine.

"Is it possible," asked Walpole of himself, "that I have been brought hither to assist pre-

sently in some orgie or merry-making of a licentious description? Good God! if that beautiful girl be of such a character! And now that I bethink me, that boldness of language on her part—those masculine and philosphic ideas so audaciously enunciated—”

But here his musings were suddenly cut short by the reappearance of Lady Ameshury, who came gliding amidst the trees of the garden towards the spot where she had left the young man in the shrubbery.

“It is all right!” she whispered: “the coast is clear—and I can introduce you without attracting the slightest observation.”

“But one word, madam—”

“Not a word! not a syllable! Come. Hush!” she said, in a low and seemingly frightened tone: “what noise was that?”

“Nothing but the rustling of the leaves,” answered Walpole. “I beseech your ladyship to tell me—”

“Know you not the old adage?” asked his mysterious guide, with one of those peculiar smiles the significancy of which he could not fathom.

“There are many adages, madam,” responded the youth: “but to which particular one you allude—”

“Oh, you will soon see!” she interrupted him. “Come! Not another word!”

She again led the way: Edward Walpole followed in bewilderment of mind—but still with a resolve to see the end of the adventure, whatever it might be. The garden was threaded—the silence was not again interrupted by the tambourine, laughter, or castanets—and in a few moments Lady Ameshury stopped at a glass door opening from the side of the villa upon a lawn ornamented with statues and vases. She led the way into a passage communicating with the principal hall, and lighted by a handsome gas-lamp which threw its rays from the middle of that hall into the corridor.

“It is here that you are to enter,” whispered Lady Ameshury, as she stopped at a door, that was midway up that passage. “And now,” she added, with another of her peculiar smiles, “you will learn to appreciate the truth of the adage that ‘Faint heart never won fair lady.’”

With these words Lady Ameshury gently opened the door and pushed Edward Walpole across the threshold. At the same moment the door closed behind him; and he found himself in a little cabinet, ten or a dozen feet square, and which seemed to contain, as he flung a quick glance around, an infinite variety of curiosities and objects of *virtu*. An inner door stood partly open; and it was through this medium that the beams of light penetrated into the cabinet. Edward Walpole passed on—looked through the half-open door—and beheld a large and handsomely furnished room, the casement of which was open; and in the recess where it stood there were arrays of the choicest and loveliest flowers upon green-painted stands. The apartment was lighted by a chandelier suspended to the ceiling: the atmosphere was warm and perfumed, but by no means sickly nor oppressive, for it softly blended with the fresh air that penetrated through the open casement. And upon an ottoman, or rather luxurious divan, lay a lovely form—a lady in her evening toilet, who

had evidently thrown herself there in that species of abandonment which anticipated no intrusion. She was gently fanning herself; near her lay a tambourine—in one of her hands she held a pair of castanets; and thus Edward Walpole instantaneously became aware that it was she who had been diverting herself, and that it was through that open casement the sounds of music and laughter were wafted to his ears when he was concealed in the shrubbery. He did not instantaneously catch a view of the fair one’s face on account of the fan which she held in an intervening position: but the moment his eyes did obtain a glimpse of those features, his heart leapt as with the joy of a suspense that was relieved or a hope that was fulfilled; for it was indeed none other than the beautiful creature whose acquaintance he had formed on the preceding day!

And at the same moment, too, she caught sight of him; and in the twinkling of an eye she sprang up to her feet. Her countenance crimsoned—her eyes flashed—her very form seemed to dilate with indignation, as she demanded, “What means this intrusion, sir?”

“I take heaven to witness I am innocent of any wilful rudeness!” replied Walpole, who was for an instant startled and completely taken aback by this extraordinary and most unlooked-for reception.

“Explain yourself, sir,” said the young lady, evidently becoming milder, if not altogether appeased.

“Nay, this is scarcely possible,” answered Walpole; “and perhaps I had better refer you to Lady Ameshury.”

“Ah! she has done this? Yes—who else could?”

The young lady ejaculated these words in a subdued tone, and more as if she were musing to herself than addressing Walpole in a direct manner.

“Yes,” she now pursued, as she again fixed her eyes upon him; “I see that it could only have been as you just now intimated. You are therefore acquitted of any intentional rudeness—”

“I should be incapable of wilfully offending one who displayed so much sympathy towards me, and in whom I must candidly confess that I experience an unusual degree of interest—”

“You know,” interrupted the young lady, “that I dislike whatsoever savours of flattery or compliment;”—but though she spoke with an air of rebuke, she was nevertheless entirely good-tempered; all her indignation had vanished, and there was a partial smile upon her beautifully-formed lips.

“By heaven!” exclaimed Walpole, whose natural bashfulness fled before the rapturous and enchanting impressions made upon him by the dazzling loveliness of the fair stranger, whose charms were displayed to the fullest advantage by the evening dress which she wore,—“by heaven! I am incapable of falsehood or hypocrisy in anything that I may say to you! To flatter you would be impossible!—to compliment you beyond your deserts, would also be something that no language could achieve!”

The young lady smiled for a moment—but it was as if in a sort of good-natured mockery of Walpole’s enthusiasm, and likewise as if she considerably tolerated this style of language which

in her heart she despised. But as her features immediately became serious in their expression, she pointed to a chair, saying, "Sit down, and tell me how all this happened."

Instead of resuming her own place on the divan, the young lady took a chair at a little distance from the one which she had just indicated for the use of the intruder; and thus, from the very moment that she had become aware of his presence, her whole conduct seemed to prove, by a variety of little details, that the modesty of her character and the propriety of her sentiments were beyond all suspicion.

"With all possible frankness and candour," said Walpole, "will I give the explanations which you await, and which indeed you have so much right to demand from my lips."

The young lady inclined her head gently, as much as to bid him proceed; and it also struck him that there was a significant hint in that silent movement that he need not render his preface too long. He accordingly proceeded to explain how he *happened* (this was the term he used) to be walking in the paddock that afternoon at about five o'clock—how Lady Amesbury had beckoned him to the fence—how she had given him the appointment—how he had kept it—and how he had been made to tarry a few minutes in the shrubbery until introduced to the apartment where he now found himself.

"And while you were in the shrubbery," said the young lady, who had listened with the deepest attention and with a thoughtful expression of countenance, "you perhaps heard certain sounds—"

"Yes—to be candid, I did."

"The tambourine and the castanets?" said the young lady, with a slight deepening of the sea-shell pink upon her cheeks.

"Yes," rejoined Walpole,—"and likewise a peal of laughter which seemed to gush from the very fountains of a heart that had never known trouble nor care."

The countenance of the young lady still continued imperturbable in the mingled softness and brightness of its sweet intellectual beauty; and after reflecting in silence for nearly a minute, she suddenly raised her eyes, fixed them upon Walpole, and said, "Are you sure that you have told me everything? Did her ladyship give you no intimation of what she meant—no hint of what her purpose was?"

"No. Ah, yes! I forgot!"—and the young man coloured.

"You see that you have not told me everything," said the fair stranger reproachfully. "Yet you promised to deal with me in all frankness and candour!"

"And I will do so!" exclaimed Edward. "Yes, her ladyship *did* say something—It was here, at the door, just before she gently opened it—But I dare not tell you—"

"Understand me, sir," interrupted the young lady. "The indiscretion of my poor friend has thrown us together under circumstances which render it necessary that I should know all that passed. There must be no fastidiousness nor false delicacy between us; for when you have finished your explanation, it will become my turn to give you one, not merely for my own sake, but also for that of Lady Amesbury. Therefore tell

me at once what she said to you ere she opened the door?"

Again did the colour mount to Edward Walpole's cheeks: but suddenly mustering up all his courage, and conquering his bashfulness, he replied, "Lady Amesbury reminded me of an old adage, to the effect that 'faint heart never won fair lady.'"

It was now the beautiful stranger's turn to colour even more deeply than Walpole had done; and for a few moments she bent her eyes down. But suddenly raising them, with the air of one who was all frankness and candour, who meant no wrong and who knew no guile, she said, "Without another instant's delay let me explain the primal cause of an adventure which has naturally proved so embarrassing to both you and me. The key to the reading of the mystery is—unless indeed you have already suspected it?"

"No: on my soul I have not!" ejaculated Walpole.

"Well then, a few words will explain," rejoined the fair stranger. "Poor Lady Amesbury has not always a complete command over her intellects!"

"Good heavens! The unfortunate lady!" cried Edward.

"Unfortunate indeed!" pursued the fair stranger. "She is by no means sufficiently de-ranked to be placed under restraint—nor indeed has she any relations or friends in the whole world who would trouble themselves sufficiently about her—"

"Except yourself, perhaps?" interjected Walpole.

"Yes—I love my poor friend—I sympathize with her—I compassionate her! But she does not court society—it is seldom even that I am truly welcome—and thus my visits are rarely paid. Sometimes she remains for weeks and months together in moods of the deepest despondency, when the visit of a friend would only render her worse. On other occasions she becomes strangely enlivened; and then it is that I do my best to sustain the cheering influence—and I play the part of a great foolish girl."

As she thus spoke, the young lady glanced at the tambourine and the castanets; and again did the soft hue of the sea-shell pink deepen upon her cheeks.

"I myself am a strange creature," she continued; "and if I give the rein to my natural spirits they sometimes carry me away. Hence was it that just now, even when Lady Amesbury had glided out of this room, I seized the tambourine, I clashed it and danced just as if she were still here; and then with a peal of laughter at my own wild folly, I flung myself on that divan.—I consider, sir," added the young lady, in a low and deliberate tone, and again casting down her looks modestly,— "I consider that I am bound to give these explanations for my own sake, because little thought I in the midst of my hoyden mirth that there was a listener outside the casement, or that a stranger step was about to intrude over the threshold of this sanctuary."

"You know—you know," observed Edward, in gentle deprecation of the term which had just been used, "that it was an innocent intrusion on my part!"



No. 42.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

"Yes—assuredly!" cried the young lady; "and I am bound to admit that your conduct has been most courteous and gentlemanly—so that my best thanks are your due."

Edward Walpole fancied that this was an intimation for him to depart; and he rose from his seat.

"One minute longer!" said the fair stranger, with a gesture which made him reseal himself. "I have yet a few words to add to the explanations already given. You may possibly have observed that Lady Amesbury joined me yesterday in the orchard after I had been conversing with you?"

"Yes: and I could not help overhearing her as she asked with whom you had been talking."

"And perhaps, in the reply which I gave," resumed the young lady, "I may have said something which seemed to have a peculiar significance in the warped and clouded estimation of my poor friend. I may have spoken of you as one that had excited my sympathy:—would it not have been natural that I should have done so? for you remember under what circumstances I addressed you at the outset."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Edward: "I was weeping and sobbing as if in profoundest distress!"

"And you may also comprehend," continued the young lady, "that inasmuch as I had intruded upon you at a moment when there was the sanctity of secrecy, so to speak, in the state of your feelings, I did not explain to Lady Amesbury how I had found you weeping, or why I spoke to you at all. Thus, as in one sense I must have appeared reserved towards her, while in another sense admitting that I had felt interested in the young gentleman with whom I had just been speaking, she arrived at certain conclusions—and—and—she acted upon them. Need I say more?"

"I understand you fully!" answered Walpole.

"Lady Amesbury thought she would be performing an act of kindness and friendship in bringing us together:—she meant it also to assume the appearance of a surprise for both!"

"And she was ignorant," added the young lady emphatically, "that she was taking a step which might cruelly compromise me, if I had been brought in contact with one of less gentlemanly feeling and less delicate appreciation than yourself. As a matter of course it will be scarcely necessary for me to express a hope that this adventure—half serious, half ludicrous—shall remain a secret?"

"But may I not on my own side hope," asked Walpole, "that an acquaintance which has certainly commenced so singularly, shall not be put an end to abruptly?"

"Remember," said the young lady, with a smile, "that I do not as yet even know your name."

"My name is Edward Walpole—and I am the nephew of Mr. Seymour, as I think I intimated yesterday. I have just inherited a fortune—"

"And I hope you will enjoy it, Mr. Walpole," interrupted the young lady, with a singular blending of sweetness and abruptness in her manner. "I shall take leave of my friend Lady Amesbury to-morrow morning, and I know not when I may visit her again; so that, to be very candid with

you, it were useless for you to desire the continuation of an acquaintance which would only allow you a chance of bowing to me across a fence between an orchard and a paddock, some two or three times in the course of the year."

Walpole looked embarrassed and discomfited for a moment; he almost felt humiliated—for it seemed that the continuation of their acquaintance was declined in a manner which though perfectly polite, was nevertheless cold and distant. But suddenly plucking up his courage, he said, "Although it were only to have the opportunity of bowing to you at distant intervals, yet would it be alike an honour and a pleasure to feel that I am permitted to claim your acquaintance."

"Oh, Mr. Walpole," ejaculated the young lady, with a generous warmth, "you must not fancy that you gave me any offence by proposing that our acquaintance should continue. A young lady may safely answer in the affirmative when such a proposition is made by a gentleman and a man of honour; and you have proved yourself to be both. Besides, to confess the truth, I really care little for those cold social formalities and conventionalisms which act as trammels and shackles—But enough!" she suddenly interrupted herself. "I must not get preaching and sermonising now. Our acquaintance shall continue, Mr. Walpole. Do you know who I am?"

"I have not that honour," answered Walpole; "but I feel convinced that you are a lady of high birth—"

"Do you know," she interrupted him, with an air half grave, half good-humoured, "if you continue to fling flatteries and compliments at me, even though it be by the merest innuendo or implication, I shall repent the promise which I have given to the effect that our acquaintance may continue. I do not wish to seem singular nor to pretend to eccentricity—for these are affectations of the most nauseating description: but at the same time I do not choose to be confounded with the generality of silly frivolous creatures who are only to be amused by compliments or pleased by adulation."

"I will endeavour not to sin again in that respect," replied Walpole. "But really," he added, with a smile, "one must be very guarded indeed when in discourse with you; for it is scarcely possible to help expressing one's feeling every now and then."

"Again?"—and the young lady blushed slightly; then bursting out into a silvery laugh, she said, "You are incorrigible; so I had better tell you at once who I am in order that you may have no excuse for tarrying here any longer. I am the daughter of Lord and Lady Trentham; and therefore you may address me as Miss Osborne."

"Miss Osborne," said Walpole, with a bow, "I hope that you will not send me away immediately, just at the very moment when I seem to be getting better and better acquainted with you. A short half hour!—I ask no more—it is not yet late—"

"Pray be seated again, Mr. Walpole! If you wish to remain another half-hour here, it is not for me to reply in the negative after everything that has occurred. Perhaps you would like to learn some additional particulars concerning my poor friend Lady Amesbury? I knew her first

of all some years ago, when I was a little girl and she was a beautiful creature of two or three and twenty. That was just before she married General Amesbury; and I may observe that she is about fifteen years older than I am. Young though I was when I first knew her, yet methought even *then* that there was a strange soft melancholy about her: she did not appear to be happy, and more than once did I surprise her in tears. And yet she did not seem to have anything to render her unhappy: she had parents who were good and kind to her—a comfortable home in every respect—and being an only child, she had good prospects. You may suppose how astonished all her friends were when it was understood she had accepted the suit of General Amesbury, who was very nearly thirty years older than herself. However, so it was: they were married, and she accompanied her husband to India. Time passed on—years went by—all the world read of the great exploits of Sir Ralph Amesbury—and as I often thought of my friend, I fancied that despite the difference of ages, there might indeed be great happiness for her in such a marriage, because she had every reason to be proud of the husband whom she had accepted.”

“And Sir Ralph Amesbury died, I believe, about three years ago?” said Walpole inquiringly.

“Yes—he died in India. His widow immediately returned to England, and buried herself in the strictest seclusion: she refused to receive any of her former friends—or at least suffered them to understand that she did not court society of any kind. I hesitated at first whether to call upon her: I did not even know whether she might remember the little girl to whom she used to be so kind and affectionate some years ago, and whom she used to say that she loved most of all on account of her strange romantic name of Azaline.”

“Is that your Christian name, Miss Osborne?” asked Walpole.

“Yes. I had a whimsical godmother, who, it appears, insisted upon my being thus christened.”

“It is a beautiful name!” ejaculated Edward.

“Another compliment!” cried Miss Osborne, with a deprecating look. “But what was I telling you? Oh! I remember—”

“You were hesitating whether to call upon Lady Amesbury on her return to England as a widow, three years ago.”

“Yes: but at length I decided upon making an endeavour to force an entry into the depth of her seclusion,” continued Azaline; “and I succeeded. I was received with open arms, and was infinitely gratified by the preference thus shown me—or indeed I may say by the exception thus made solely on my behalf. But I soon began to perceive that everything was not right with my poor friend: I feared lest some secret sorrow had for years been preying on her heart and had at length touched her intellects. Indeed, I felt convinced it was not only through grief on account of her husband’s death that her mind was thus affected. However, all this was mere conjecture on my part at the time—and it still remains a bare surmise as vague as ever.”

“And thus,” said Walpole, “you are unable to sympathise fully and completely with your friend, because you are ignorant of the veritable source of her secret sorrow?”

“Precisely so,” answered Azaline. “I visit her occasionally—that is to say, as often as I think my presence here may be agreeable; and I strive to amuse her to the utmost of my power.”

A slight blush again appeared upon Azaline’s beautiful countenance as she cast a quick glance towards the tambourine and the castanets; and then she somewhat abruptly exclaimed, “Now, Mr. Walpole, you must leave me—it is growing late—and I shall soon think of retiring to rest. You can depart by the same route by which you were brought hither.”

With her characteristic frankness, so ingenuous and so guileless, Azaline proffered her hand; and as the young man took it, he retained it in his own for a moment, saying in a tremulous voice, “When may I hope to see you again, Miss Osborne?”

“I do not know, Mr. Walpole,” she replied, civilly, but with a certain coldness and reserve, as she abruptly withdrew her hand. “I wish you good night.”

She bowed and turned aside; he could not linger there any longer, but was constrained to take his departure. He encountered no one in the passage: he passed out at the glass door, crossed the lawn, plunged into the shrubbery, and in a few minutes regained the tavern where he had left his carriage. During the drive home to his lodgings in Hanover Square, all his thoughts were occupied by his adventure with the beautiful Azaline,—the peculiarity of whose mind, the independence of whose opinions, and the frank boldness of whose discourse (which was likewise all so guileless) interested him as much as her exceeding personal loveliness had bewildered and enraptured him.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE SISTERS MORPHEW.

It was on the night of the 4th of June, as the reader will recollect, that the corpse of Ivan Zadouski was disposed of in the carpet-bag. Three days had elapsed since then; and it was now the evening of the 7th, about which we are writing.

It was close upon ten o’clock, when Henri Ponchard rang at the door of the Grills’ house, and was at once admitted by the hideous-looking woman herself. She conducted him into the parlour, where he found Mr. Grills smoking a pipe; while the presence of a bottle and glasses on the table showed that the delectable couple had been solacing or enjoying themselves.

“Any fresh news?” asked Grills, as Ponchard sat down at the table, while the woman shut the room-door.

“Nothing fresh,” replied Ponchard. “I have seen the evening paper—”

“And so have I,” interjected Grills. “It says that the police have got hold of some clue—”

“So the accounts have aaid all along,” observed Ponchard, “and I do not believe a sentence of it. On the contrary, I am convinced the whole affair is as safe as ever it was—though of course one cannot help cursing the infernal folly of Petronoff in letting the hag down upon the abutment instead of into the water.”

"And you raly think that everything's safe and square?" asked Mrs. Grills.

"Depend upon it you have nothing to fear," rejoined Ponchard. "There's the toll-keeper who admits that he only has a vague recollection of the face of the stout elderly woman who passed his gate with a carpet-bag; and as a matter of course you will not be fool enough to go that way again in a hurry. Then as for the reports about cabmen coming forward to speak of a similar female riding in their vehicles, it appears to be sheer nonsense—or at all events nothing can be made of it—and I am certain the police are utterly at fault."

"So much the better," said both Grills and his wife, as if speaking in the same breath.

"If it were not so," continued Ponchard, "something would have oozed out—the newspaper-accounts would not be so vague—and, in short, there would be unmistakable signs of the detectives finding themselves upon the right track."

"And what do you now make out of the adventures that happened to me on the bridge?" asked Mrs. Grills.

"I don't believe in any of the superstitious part of the business," responded the Frenchman. "You must have been mistaken about the face looking through the parapet at you, and the name being whispered—"

"Well, suppose I was," interrupted Mrs. Grills,—"and I raly begin to think I must have been,—but what about the tall foreign gentleman that met me and said he expected to meet *him* there?"

"That, I confess, puzzles me somewhat," answered Ponchard; "and I can only account for it by supposing some coincidence. Zadouski had probably made an appointment for that very night and in that very spot. Indeed this is the only reasonable and rational way of accounting for the circumstance; and I am now half mad with myself that I did not watch upon the bridge the next night, to see if any one answering the description you gave of the tall foreign gentleman returned again to the spot."

"It was much better you did not," answered Mrs. Grills. "Who can tell how you might have been suspected? No, no,—leave the matter where it stands; and if we all sail clear through it, I shall say it will be a very fortunate thing."

"And now tell me about Hester," said Ponchard. "How has she been to-day?"

"Just the same as for the last two or three days."

"You mean quiet, subdued, and thoughtful?" said Ponchard.

"Precisely so. Whether the gal does raly know anything or not—whether she thinks that anything suspicious has been going on—I can't for the life of me tell. Sometimes I fancy one thing—sometimes another. But you seem to be able to manage her if any one can?"

"Yes," responded the Frenchman. "I have done all I could to act upon her mind by means of the facts which have come to my knowledge. I have no fear that she will do anything of a hostile character, even though she may know or suspect something."

"You are going to see her, of course?" said Mrs. Grills. "My old man and me will go down

into the kitchen, so that you shall be here all alone with Hester."

"Go and tell her that I am here," said Ponchard.

His order was obeyed; and in a few minutes he found himself alone with Hester Sergeant. He earnestly examined the countenance of the girl as she entered the room; but still he was careful so to compose his looks as to prevent her from perceiving how narrowly he scrutinized her: for he thought to himself that if she really suspected nothing, he must be doubly cautious in engendering mistrust in her mind. On the other hand, he was more inclined to believe that she *did* know or suspect something, but that she was kept under submission by the influence he had obtained over her.

"Come and sit down, Hester," he said. "Here is brandy."

"Ah! give me some," she exclaimed; "for ever since you told me those things I have recoiled as it were from thought itself, but without being able to escape from it. Have you anything more to tell me?"

"Nothing as yet," responded the Frenchman.

"Then you have not seen either of the old women this evening?—or perhaps they have not yet taken the trouble to go and make the inquiry which they promised?"

"I have not been to them this evening, Hester," replied Ponchard. "I have no doubt, from what the elder Miss Morpew said to me yesterday, she would go and call to-day upon the person who used to make the remittances. I will go at once, if you like, and see whether she has been; but I thought perhaps you would at length make up your mind to go and visit the old dames."

"I told you the utter repugnance I had against taking that step," replied Hester. "Even though they themselves be so degraded and fallen, yet the circumstance doesn't give me courage to look them with brazen hardihood in the face. There is only one thing which makes me a coward—and that is the idea of coming in contact with any persons who knew me in the times of my childhood and my innocence. And therefore was it that after mature consideration I begged you to obtain from the Morpews such information as they might be able to afford. And you have done it—yes and you have done it kindly too, Henri!" added the girl with impressiveness; "and I cannot forget it!"

"Shall I go, then, and ascertain whether anything new has transpired?" asked the Frenchman.

"Yes. But, Ah! when I think of it, Henri, do tell me why the old women would not mention the name of the man of business who used to forward the remittances?"

"Their conduct is intelligible enough," answered Ponchard, "in all its base selfishness. Suppose, for instance, they should succeed in obtaining some important revelations concerning your parentage from that man of business,—this would be a secret which they could sell, would it not? Yes—and sell to the highest bidder!"

"I do not exactly understand you, Henri," said Hester.

"I will endeavour to explain myself. Suppose this stockbroker, whoever he may be, should have it in his power to throw any light upon your

parentage,—the Morphews could seek out your mother, for instance, if she be still living—or your father, whoever he may be—”

“I understand,” exclaimed the girl. “Yes, yes! I am in the hands of selfish persons, and the game must be played cautiously and skilfully with these old women! I did not think they were so bad as this!”

“You thought well of them when you were young,” said Ponchard, “because you were too inexperienced and innocent to notice anything that might be at all tortuous or peculiar in their characters or dispositions. But now that you have grown up and got a woman’s knowledge, you would doubtless judge them very differently in a moment if you came in contact with them.”

Hester reflected in deep silence for upwards of a minute; and then she exclaimed with abruptness, “I will go with you and see them!”

“Be it so,” said Ponchard. “Hasten and put on your bonnet, and we will proceed to their abode at once.”

The young woman sprang up-stairs to her chamber; and in a few moments she reappeared, equipped for going out. She and Ponchard issued from the house together; and they made the best of their way towards Granby Street. But little conversation passed during the walk; for Hester was absorbed in her reflections, which Ponchard did not choose to interrupt. Their destination was soon reached; and Ponchard conducted his companion into a small meanly furnished sitting-room, where they found Caroline Morphew, the younger of the two old women; for the elder one was out at the time. She was much changed by misfortune, care, and a sense of moral degradation, since Hester had last seen her about nine or ten years back; and indeed, if they had met in the street by accident, there would have been no recognition on either side.

“Good evening, sir,” said the dame to Ponchard. “Is this—”

“The young person of whom I have spoken,” said the Frenchman: “this is Hester Sergeant.”

The old woman seemed moved for an instant—but it was more through a sudden smiling sense of her own infamous existence, than of sympathy or interest on behalf of the girl who in years past was her pupil;—and quickly recovering herself, she coldly said, “I little thought what had become of you, Hester, till M. Ponchard called and spoke to me about you the day before yesterday.”

“Perhaps, if I were different from what I am, Miss Morphew,” answered Hester, “I should say that I was much shocked and distressed to hear how your position in the world had altered. But considering what I am, as M. Ponchard must have of course told you—”

“Enough upon these points!” interrupted the Frenchman, who wished to hurry his young companion over what degree of painfulness there might be in this meeting with her old schoolmistress. “I have already explained to Miss Morphew why you hesitated to call upon her in the first instance; and she may now understand by your presence here that I have succeeded in persuading you to come and learn direct from her lips those particulars which so much interest you, and which perhaps lose some of their details—and at all events much of their interest—when communicated

through the medium of a third party. I will now leave you together.”

Having thus spoken, Ponchard quitted the room, and as the door closed behind him, Hester hastily demanded of the dame, “Have you learnt any fresh particulars? has the stockbroker been seen?”

“The matter has not been neglected, Hester,” replied Caroline Morphew: “my sister is now away upon that business.”

“What! at this hour?” exclaimed the young woman incredulously. “It is close upon eleven o’clock!”

“You do not think my sister would go to the office of the man of business with the chance of being insulted or turned out by his insolent clerks? We know that we have fallen in the world, Hester—we are not what we were—our appearance indicates our degradation. But you, poor girl—who would ever have thought,” continued the old woman, with a transient sentiment of sympathy,—“who would ever have thought—”

“Pray don’t talk of *that*!” interrupted Hester; “but tell me—do not keep me in suspense!—your sister has gone to see this man of business?”

“Yes—she is gone to his own private house: it is a good way from here—in the northern part of London—and he is seldom to be seen there until after nine o’clock in the evening, when he has enjoyed his dinner and his wine. So it may perhaps be late before my sister comes back.”

“She cannot be much longer now,” said Hester. “I will wait. Meanwhile pray give me in their minutest and most detailed form, all those particulars which you gave M. Ponchard the day before yesterday.”

“The story is not a very long one,” answered Caroline Morphew; “and unless my sister brings some additional details from the place where she is gone for information, it will be meagre enough.”

“Never mind!—tell me at once all you know—repeat everything you said to M. Ponchard—so that I may be certain I made no mistake in listening to him, and he made no omission in communicating the particulars to me.”

“I daresay you are now old enough and experienced enough to understand,” commenced Miss Morphew, “that the establishment which my sister and I kept near Lewisham, was one where no impertinent questions were asked, provided the payments were regularly made. In fact, the pupils we had were either natural children, or else the offspring of parents who cared but little for them and who preferred to leave them with strangers in England rather than incur the expense of taking them abroad. There were also some whose parents were compelled for economy’s sake to leave them with us when they themselves went out to India or other distant colonies. In a word, our establishment was a very useful one to several classes of persons; and this preface will appropriately introduce the particulars I am now about to give. One day a middle-aged lady called upon us; and after feeling her way carefully with some few questions, she proceeded to open her business. Her daughter had been seduced—she was in a way to become a mother—and she had been brought down to Lewisham for her confinement, which was expected to take place hourly. Every precaution had been adopted to envelope the affair in mystery, so that the young lady’s secret might be preserved and her honour saved. The proposi-

tion made to my sister and me was—'Would we take the child from its very birth and bring it up?' We said, 'Yes, if such periodical payments as might be agreed upon were guaranteed by some person of undoubted responsibility.' We were referred to an eminent stockbroker in the City of London; and the answer was completely satisfactory. As a matter of course the young lady and her mother had been living under an assumed name for some few weeks at Lewisham—their real name was not mentioned to us at all—"

"And that assumed name was Sergeant, I presume?" said Hester.

"That name was Sergeant. Well, the bargain was struck—"

"Did the stockbrokers themselves know the real name?"

"That is more than I can say; and as you ought to be able to guess, it is the very point which my sister has now gone to endeavour to find out. I should think it most probable that the stockbroking firm must have known by whom they were employed in the matter. But be that as it may, their pledge and promise were considered safe and secure enough; and as I just now said, the bargain was struck. It devolved upon me to go and fetch the child a few hours after its birth, so that it might not be known at our establishment whence the little stranger came. I went to the lodgings—"

"And you saw my mother?" exclaimed Hester quickly. "Yes!—you told this much to M. Ponchard! But you did not give him a description of the authoress of my being; neither did you repeat what she said to you;—and this was one reason why I suddenly resolved upon seeking the recapitulation of the narrative from your lips, lest Ponchard might have omitted aught of it."

"If I did not give a description of your mother, Hester, it was because I was not permitted to see her face; for she was veiled—yes, closely veiled, and I could not even so much as obtain a glimpse of her features. But I remember this much—that I was struck by the beauty of her arm—it was superbly modelled—and, Ah! now that I bethink me—yes, to be sure—"

"What? what?" demanded the young girl, full of excitement.

"I think I can't be dreaming," continued Miss Morphew, "when to the best of my recollection I fancy that you have three little moles forming a triangle, on the lower part of your right arm?"

"The marks are here! Look!" cried Hester, raising her sleeve.

"Ah, to be sure! I recollect perfectly, I used to say to my sister how singular it was that you should have precisely the same mark as your mother."

"Had she those marks?" cried Hester.

"Yes—precisely as your's are placed—just on the same spot too; and I used to say to my sister that if there should ever be any desire on the part of your mother to claim you, there would be no difficulty in establishing the identity. As for what your mother said to me at the time, it was little enough, poor creature!—for she was weeping and sobbing as if her heart would break, when she knew that the fatal moment had come for her to part with her babe."

"Alas, poor mother!" murmured Hester, the tears trickling down her cheeks. "But even though she spoke little, tell me what was it that she did say."

"Surely you can guess what a mother would say under such circumstances? She told me to be good and kind to you—"

"Ah! then, she loved me," moaned Hester; "and of her own accord she doubtless would not have parted from me, although I was the child of shame! And from that moment you never again saw anything of either my mother or of her mother?"

"Never," replied Caroline Morphew. "You remained with us until you were seven—the remittances always came regularly—and when you attained that age, we received a letter to the effect that arrangements had been made with Miss Thompson to receive you at her seminary at Brompton. You were removed accordingly; and shortly afterwards ruin came upon my sister and myself at Hillside House. These calamities ravaged us like a desolating army; a malignant fever broke out in the school—we had previously got involved in some pecuniary difficulties—so that when once the school was broken up by sickness it became impossible to stave off complete destruction. Our downward descent was rapid; and—and—you now see to what we are reduced!"

There was a pause,—at the expiration of which Hester said, "And now, will you tell me the real truth upon one point? Why have you suppressed the name of the stockbroking firm from whom you received the guarantee on my account?"

The dame flung a sinister glance upon Hester, and then she averted her head without answering the question. The young woman had therefore no difficulty in comprehending that this reserve on the part of the two old women might be attributed to the selfish motive which Ponchard had suggested as the explanation.

"Here is my sister!" said Caroline Morphew, as some one was heard to enter the passage of the house, for the front door stood open.

The elder Miss Morphew entered; and Hester at once sprang towards her, exclaiming, "Tell me without delay—have you learnt anything?"

"Ah!" cried the elder dame; "this, then, must be Hester Sergeant?"

"Yes—the same! the same!" ejaculated the young woman. "Tell me, I beseech you—"

"Ah, my dear," responded the elder Miss Morphew, shaking her head ominously, "there is no good news for you."

"Do not say this!" cried Hester: "do not show such utter selfishness! Remember that there is a sanctity in such a secret, and you must not make it the object of mean vile bargaining! Besides, low as we have fallen, yet let it not be said that all good and generous feelings are extinct!"

"Do not excite yourself, my dear," interrupted the elder Miss Morphew. "I have nothing to tell you—and you may go to the same quarter yourself if you like. You will see that I am not deceiving you."

"The name, then!—the name?" cried Hester.

"The father is dead—but the son carries on the business in the City. The name is Warren."

He has a splendid house at Highbury; and if you wish to see him with the least possible delay, you can call there before nine to-morrow morning—Unless indeed you are bolder than I, my dear, and have the effrontery to visit him at his place of business in the City."

There was a sort of mocking flippant accent in the tones of the old woman, as well as something in her manner which showed the spiteful disposition seeking to revenge itself for some disappointment which its own selfishness had experienced.

"But what did he tell you?" asked Hester, who was in a state of feverish excitement.

"He told me just this,—that fifty pounds used to be regularly remitted every Christmas for your benefit, until about four or five years ago when these remittances suddenly ceased. Sometimes the money was sent in the form of a bank-note in an envelope, unaccompanied by any letter—sometimes the cash was left at the office by a messenger or porter who could give no account of his employer. As a matter of course, when the money ceased to be paid to the stockbroker, the stockbroker ceased to pay it to the school-mistress."

Hester heaved a profound sigh, and her head drooped upon her bosom. There was a silence of nearly a minute, during which the two sisters exchanged significant looks,—the younger asking by means of a glance whether the facts were just as the elder was representing them, or whether for some reason or another she was deceiving the young girl, though giving the name of the stockbroker? But the elder Miss Morpew quickly made Caroline understand that it was just as she had been explaining, and that there was no chance of making a good bargain out of the business.

"There is one thing that strikes me as strange!" ejaculated Hester, suddenly raising her head.

"And what is that, my dear?" asked the elder crone, who, as she contemplated the girl's countenance, gradually began to revolve a certain idea in her mind.

"It occurs to me," pursued Hester, "that it is a very strange thing the stockbroker's firm should guarantee the annual payment of the stipend to you without knowing by whom they were employed. It does not look rational. Either this Mr. Warren *must* know more than he chooses to tell—or else you are deceiving me. I am forced to speak out, and if I wrong you or give you offence—"

"I will forgive you, my dear," answered the elder of the two old women. "You are wronging me. Of what use is it for me to tell you a falsehood to-night when you may make inquiries for yourself to-morrow?"

"True!" said Hester, as hope once more died within her.

"As for the inconsistency which you think you have discovered in the conduct of those stockbrokers," pursued Miss Morpew, "this present Mr. Warren assures me that the transaction was originally settled with his father, and that he himself knows not precisely what took place at the outset. This is no doubt true, for Mr. Warren is under thirty, and the affair itself took place—let me see—you must be past sixteen, Hester—Well, then, it took place upwards of sixteen

years ago. This present Mr. Warren must have been quite a boy at the time."

"But surely in an office of such a description, there must be documents—memoranda—records—"

"Mr. Warren assured me that there is nothing of the sort. He is enabled to speak positively on the subject, for the plain simple reason that when the remittances ceased four or five years ago, Miss Thompson wrote and begged that he would inform her whether he possessed any clue to your parentage? It was then that he searched amongst all the office-documents, and all the private papers left behind by his deceased father—but without success. Now, Hester, do you believe me? But why should I ask, since to-morrow morning you may go and ascertain all these points for yourself?"

"It is useless," murmured the young girl; "I believe you!—and all hope of discovering my parentage is at an end. But perhaps it is so much the better!" she suddenly exclaimed, as her looks assumed that air of bold hardihood which they had of late acquired. "What parents would like to recognise *me*? I was a fool to yield to the delusion; but I never should have done so if it had not been for Ponchard! I yielded to his persuasiveness in suffering him to talk to you about me; and it was also in consequence of what he said that I came here to see you this evening. And a pretty meeting it is!" added the girl, with a loud reckless laugh;—"a happy state for the young pupil to meet her old governesses in!"

The elder crone was well repaid by this bitter taunt for the spiteful mockery which she had ere now thrown into her own speech; and her thin lips were compressed with a rage which she had some difficulty in restraining. But she did not choose to irritate Hester Sergeant, on account of that particular idea which, as we have just now said, she was revolving in her mind.

"Perhaps you would like to take something to drink, my dear?" said the younger of the two crones.

"No—yes, I will! There! fetch brandy!"—and Hester threw down half-a-sovereign upon the table; for Ponchard had been liberal to her within the last three or four days.

Caroline Morpew issued forth to procure the liquor; and when she was gone, the elder hag, taking Hester's hand, said in a coaxing tone and with cajoling manner, "You are very pretty, my dear—a trifle too pale perhaps—but the least touch of rouge upon the cheeks would give a colour almost as good as the natural carmine of health. You have a good figure too—and pretty teeth; and if you were to study how to smile more softly and sweetly, and also to look a little more bashful and downcast, you might succeed wonderfully. And I and my sister will put you in the way of achieving this success. Come and live, therefore, with us, my dear—leave the people you are now dwelling with! Surely *we* have a better claim upon you than they could possibly have?—and as I daresay it is a matter of perfect indifference to M. Ponchard where you live, as long as he can come and see you whenever he likes—But what is the matter, my dear?"

Hester had first of all abandoned her hand to the old woman because she fell into a train of thought which rendered her unconscious of what

she was doing: then she listened abstractedly, until a full sense of the crone's meaning broke upon her—and abruptly withdrawing her hand, she gave vent to a laugh of scornful mockery.

"What do I mean?" she cried, in answer to the dame's question. "Why, I mean that it would be strange indeed if I who had been your pupil in the days of my innocence, should now place myself under you to be trained more thoroughly and completely in the ways of vice than I already am! No, no! you keep to your own sphere, and let me keep to mine! It is enough that we have met once to recall the past most painfully to us both—at least to *me*!"

"Then you will not accept my proposal?" cried the hag, quivering with rage.

"No—I will not," answered the girl boldly.

"Hush! here comes my sister!—and there is some one with her!"

And sure enough footsteps were at the moment heard entering the house; and a voice was exclaiming, 'as if in tipsy mirthfulness,' "What! got a bottle of luscious old dame? Then, by jingo! I'll come and help you drink it—and pay for another too!"

Hester had started when that voice was first heard speaking at the threshold of the front door: then she sprang abruptly up to her feet, and was seized with a strong visible agitation. Caroline Morpew entered, saying, "Walk in, sir—pray walk in. I'm sure you'll be welcome."

She was followed by a young man who was somewhat shabbily dressed, and wore a rough loose overcoat, though it was summer. The young girl remained transfixed: but the instant he caught sight of her, a cry of joy burst from his lips; and exclaiming, "Hester! at last I have found you!" he sprang forward to catch her in his arms.

"No, no! Stand back, Thomas Robinson!" she cried, or rather shrieked forth, as she herself suddenly stepped back and raised her arm as if to beckon him off. "Come not near me! touch me not! You see the vile thing I am! I am pollution's self!"

"Poor girl!"—and young Robinson caught her in his arms, just as she was about to sink down overwhelmed by the power and weight of ineffable emotions.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE LISTENER AT THE CASEMENT.

ON the day following his singular adventure at Charlton Villa, Edward Walpole did not visit his relatives at Highbury House; but in the evening he drove up into that neighbourhood, and left his phaeton at the same tavern where it had stopped for him on the preceding night. He was inspired by a wish to see Azaline again. It was true that she had told him she should leave Charlton Villa in the course of this particular day; but on the other hand he thought it quite probable that she might have prolonged her visit. At all events he had decided upon taking his chance in the matter; for he did not dare call upon the young lady at her parents' residence, as she had given him no invitation to do so, nor indeed any encouragement. He felt that there was a certain degree of coldness

in their parting, or at least on *her* side; and he was afraid that she was to some little degree offended by the pertinacity with which he had proposed the continuation of their acquaintance. He could not bear to think that this bright and beautiful creature should think less favourably of him than he could wish her to do; and moreover there were other and scarcely definable sentiments which were prompting him to seek another interview with the Hon. Miss Osborne.

Thus was it that, taking the chance of finding her at Charlton Villa, Edward Walpole returned into that neighbourhood. It was not his purpose to present himself at the house as an ordinary visitor might do; for he did not know but that he might be denied admission by Lady Ameshbury after the remonstrances which Azaline was sure to have addressed to her. Besides, he thought there was something peculiarly romantic in Azaline's disposition, and that his own proceedings towards her would acquire an additional charm if they were conducted in a kindred vein.

After these explanations, the reader will not be astonished to find Edward Walpole making his way stealthily through the grounds of Charlton Villa between nine and ten o'clock in the evening. He saw that there was a light in the room from which the sounds of the tambourine, and the castanets, and the silvery flow of laughter had emanated on the preceding night: he observed also that the casement was again open—and as he drew near, he heard voices in conversation. His heart beat more quickly, for he recognised those voices:—the presentiment which had brought him on this occasion to that spot had not deceived him.—For, Azaline Osborne was there!

He drew still nearer to the casement, treading noiselessly as he advanced; and he soon arrived sufficiently close to be enabled to look through the screen of verdure and of natural beauties formed by flowers on the green stand in the window recess. There was Azaline, in her evening toilet, reclining upon the sofa with that sort of self-abandonment which in itself was perfectly innocent because she believed that no male eye was near, but which in reality had an air most provokingly voluptuous. Near her Lady Ameshbury was seated; and she held a large piece of cardboard in her hand. There was a picture upon it—but what the subject was Edward Walpole could not immediately perceive.

"And so this is really your phantasy, my dear Azaline?" said Lady Ameshbury.

"I am positively serious," replied Miss Osborne; but at the same time her beautiful mouth was wreathed into a smile the good-humoured sweetness of which might have engendered a doubt whether she was really *quite* so serious as she pretended.

Edward Walpole was about to beat a retreat, that he might reflect upon the course which he should pursue—whether he should announce himself at the window, or go boldly round to the front door—for he did not like to remain any longer an eavesdropper and a listener where two ladies believed themselves to be completely alone. But something that Azaline next said, in reply to Lady Ameshbury's previous question, riveted him to the spot.

"You ask me, my friend, whether that is really my phantasy?—and I tell you that I am serious. I smile—and you look incredulous. But why



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should I not carry out some such wild idea as this? You know that I am not the sort of being to pursue any of the ordinary and well-worn ways of life. I must strike out a new path for myself; and after all it would not be completely novel—nor is the idea altogether so original as you seem to have fancied."

"I should think it original enough, Azaline," said Lady Amesbury, in her usual quiet tone, and as she still contemplated the picture which she held in her hand.

At that moment Edward Walpole's curiosity received an irresistible impulse; for he caught a glimpse of the subject of the picture, and venturing to peep still further forward through the leafy scene, he was enabled to survey it in all its details. It represented a beautiful creature in an oriental costume; and the face was by no means unlike that of Azaline herself, except that the eyes, instead of being wide opened in the frankness and candour of her disposition, were half-closed as if with a species of voluptuous languor. We should observe that it was a lithographic print, beautifully coloured; and the fair heroine of the subject was depicted as reclining upon cushions spread upon the terrace of an oriental harem, and overlooking the sea. Near the foot-stool on which her exquisitely modelled limbs rested, were the two embroidered slippers which she had tossed from her shapely feet; her right arm supported her well-formed head; and she looked as if she were in the midst of a voluptuous languor, or else about to sink off into a soft repose after imbibing the fragrant coffee which was supplied from a tray that stood near her. Such was the subject of the picture—which was about two feet in width, by about one and a-half in height.

"No, the idea is not novel," pursued Azaline. "Did not Lady Stanhope naturalise herself as it were in the East—assume the dress of oriental women—and settling her abode in the sacred clime of Palestine, acquire the admiration and respect of the native people, so that they called her the Queen of Tadmor?"

"Yes—I remember to have read of that eccentric person," said Lady Amesbury. "But do you really mean me to understand that you have an ambition to follow in her footsteps? Do not say so, Azaline! You are only jesting—and I think I can understand it all."

"What is it that you understand, my dear friend?" asked Miss Osborne, with a smile.

"Listen," said Lady Amesbury. "I purchased this picture because it struck me that the face bore a great resemblance to your own beautiful countenance—"

"Beautiful or not," said Azaline, carelessly. "I am only as God has made me. If ugly, I could not help it; and if good-looking, there is no merit on my part, and therefore nothing for me to be vain of. But go on. You purchased that picture because you fancied it to be like me?"

"And then," continued Lady Amesbury, "in one of those pleasant moods which often characterize you, happy creature that you are, Azaline! you think to amuse and mystify me by pretending that you would like to dress yourself in that very costume, adopt that very self-same mode of life, and convert yourself into a second Lady Stanhope, to be wondered at by one half of

the world, and to be laughed at by the other half!"

"I assuredly should not court a notoriety sufficient to inspire wonderment; neither on the other hand should I feel particularly distressed at finding myself the object of ridicule. I tell you, my dear friend, that I hate the artificial forms of the society of our Western Europe—I abominate its selfishness and despise its hollowness. It is barbarism in the midst of civilization. But to lead an untrammelled life in orient climes,—surely that is civilization in the midst of barbarism? Then, I prefer the latter!"

"You would not become a female hermit?"

"Not I!" ejaculated Azaline. "I could not exist without human companionship. To dwell alone would be to shut oneself out from the sound of the human voice, which, when kind in its tones and natural in the ideas which it conveys, is the sweetest of all music! No—I must live amongst my fellow-creatures; but I would fain seek another society than this, which, as I have before said, is all artificiality and hollowness, egotism, and insincerity!"

"And perhaps, my dear Azaline," interjected Lady Amesbury, with a certain slyness of look, "you would like to find some very agreeable companion amongst this English society of our's, who would share your own sentiments—sympathise with your ideas—and abandoning London for ever, go and fix his abode with you on the banks of the Bosphorus or in one of the isles of the Levant? I mean, Azaline, that if any handsome, genteel, and elegant young gentleman, feeling a disposition to convert himself into a Greek or Turk, were to throw himself at your feet, you would not prove cruel to his suit?"

"I have never yet loved, my dear friend," answered Azaline; "but rest assured that I believe in the existence of that sentiment in all its strength and its purity—and I am neither so miserably affected nor so presumptuously self-sufficient as to pretend that I am beyond reach of its influence."

"And will you really tell me, Azaline, that with such ideas as these, you did not feel that Edward Walpole made the slightest impression on your heart?"

"You have joked and bantered me enough within the last ten minutes, my dear friend," replied Azaline, good-naturedly, "to enable you to grant me a little respite—"

"But about that young gentleman?" persisted Lady Amesbury; "was I altogether wrong—"

"Wrong in introducing him into my presence?" exclaimed Azaline, with some degree of vehemence, while the colour mounted to her cheeks: but instantaneously repressing that rising anger, she went on to say mildly and gently, "You cannot have forgotten, my dear friend, what I told you last night after he had taken his departure—"

"You were inclined to scold me very severely, Azaline!"

"Perhaps I did speak more sharply than I ought to have done—because you know you were very foolish—"

"I did it for the best—I really thought he had made an impression on your heart. I know what lovers are!"—and then suddenly stopping short, Lady Amesbury heaved a profound sigh.

Her humour had hitherto been gay, and even at moments merry, as she chatted with Azaline on the topic which the coloured lithograph seemed to have engendered. But now all in a moment a shade came over her countenance—her looks grew profoundly pensive, until she absolutely appeared to have fallen into a blank despondency. Azaline surveyed her attentively for upwards of a minute: compassion and curiosity were in the looks of the beautiful young lady; and Edward Walpole—the unseen and unsuspected witness, who was still riveted to the spot—thought that never had the charming Azaline appeared more truly lovely in his eyes than at this moment.

"My dear friend," Miss Osborne at length said, in a soft voice, as she laid her hand upon that of Lady Amesbury, "you must not give way to gloomy ideas. You know that I am here to render you gay and cheerful—it is for this purpose that I yielded to your wish, and postponed my departure—"

"I know it, Azaline—I know it!—and you are very, very kind!" said Lady Amesbury. "Indeed, I love you so dearly and so fondly, that there are times when I feel I ought to have no secrets from you—but that I should unbosom myself—"

"Give me not your confidence on any point," interrupted Miss Osborne earnestly, "without the maturest consideration. If you cherish any secret cause of grief, think not that I have any undue curiosity—"

"No, Azaline—I would not wrong you thus! You are all kindness and goodness—strange and peculiar in views—but, Oh! how excellent-hearted! But I, Azaline—there are times when my brain seems to be confused—and though I see clearly with my outward eyes, my mental vision gets clouded and misty—"

"Come, cheer up," cried Azaline, starting from the sofa. "Shall I dance to you? shall I sing?"

"No, dear friend: sit down," said Lady Amesbury, gently but firmly; and there was something in her look and her tone which made Azaline comply with her request, or rather command. "I feel that I must speak to you of the past," she continued. "Yes—I do not know why—but I cannot restrain myself. There is a secret *here*, Azaline"—and she laid her hand upon her heart—"which has been to me the cause of indescribable misery—a secret dating from many years back—"

"Many years, my dear friend?" interposed Azaline. "Why, you are but thirty-five!"

"But what if I speak of a date belonging to that period when girlhood was ripening into womanhood?—when I was eighteen or nineteen, for instance?—and that was when you were a mere infant, my sweet friend!"

"And does your heart possess a sorrow," inquired Azaline, in a soft voice, "which goes back to that date? Ah! I will confess my earliest impressions with regard to you were associated with some vague floating idea that you were not altogether happy!"

"When you were young, Azaline, you were far more intelligent and observing than other girls," said Lady Amesbury; "and it is no wonder if your mind should have acquired such an impression concerning me. Oh, yes! I have indeed cause for grief and anguish—almost for

despair! We were speaking just now of love. Did any woman ever love as I loved? And yet—strange caprice! 'twas one much older than myself! But still I loved him dearly—and I was so blindly confident in his rectitude that I believed all the reasons he alleged as necessary for the concealment of our love! Ah, Azaline! you do not already think too well of human nature; but your ideas on that point will possibly receive a still severer shock when I tell you how cruelly I was deceived—how infamously beguiled—how treacherously wronged! Oh, the idea is still madness!"

"Quit the subject, dear friend!" cried Azaline entreatingly.

"No, no!" responded Lady Amesbury, with feverish excitement: "I must pursue the theme unto the end! Listen then!—hear of what iniquity man is capable! Listen, I say—and shudder and tremble—Oh! and weep for me likewise, when you learn that never was a deceit more stupendous than that which was practised upon me! For he to whom my young heart was so devotedly given—*he* was already the husband of another!"

"Oh, this was infamous!" exclaimed Azaline; "infamous beyond all the power of language to describe or the imagination to conceive!"

"And have you comprehended me, my dear friend?" asked Lady Amesbury; "have you understood me in the fullest sense? It may be that you have not; for your mind is so pure—"

"I did indeed dread to arrive at the worst possible conclusion," answered Azaline: "but now I can no longer doubt—"

"Oh, I was more to be pitied than to be blamed!" pursued Lady Amesbury; "for I was so young—so confiding—so loving—that every advantage might be taken of that inexperience and that devotion on my part! Thus he beguiled me—and when it was no longer possible for me to conceal my condition from the eyes of my mother, I besought him, my seducer, to delay not the act of justice which he was bound to render me. Then it was that he was necessitated to reveal the truth!—he was a married man! Conceive my despair! No!—you cannot!"—and Lady Amesbury, burying her face in her kerchief, sobbed under the influence of those terrible recollections of the past.

"I can imagine, my dear friend," rejoined Azaline, in a soft and compassionating tone, "that of all beings who deserve sympathy for their earthly sorrows, you stood in need of it more than any!"

"I flung myself at my mother's feet," resumed Lady Amesbury, "and confessed everything. It was impossible to conceal it from the knowledge of my father likewise. But what was to be done? To seek to punish my seducer would have been to expose my own disgrace; and the more prudent alternative was adopted—namely, that of hushing up the matter. *He* who was the author of all this wrong and fearful mischief, was only too anxious and ready on his own side that it should be hushed up; and measures were taken accordingly. But I will not dwell upon the details; suffice it to say that I became a mother, and that my seducer, being possessed of ample means, provided the requisite funds for the maintenance of the unfortunate offspring that was to be repu-

diated and ignored from the very instant of its birth!"

"Alas, poor babe!" murmured Miss Osborne, who was deeply touched by the narrative of her unfortunate friend.

"And now, Azaline," continued Lady Amesbury, "you will no longer be surprised that there should have been something thoughtful and pensive in my looks when you first knew me, and that I did not seem as if I was completely happy. Good God! how could I be? Often and often used I to lie awake of nights, wondering whether the poor child were alive—and if so, whether it were well and kindly treated?—and I used sometimes to think that I should go mad! Then General Amesbury was introduced to me: but so completely was my mind abstracted from everything save the *one* dread topic—the *one* fatal incident of my life—that I did not observe how I had become the object of his particular attentions, until he one evening offered me his hand in marriage. I started as if from a dream; I gazed upon him in wonder and doubt. It was in the midst of a brilliant assemblage that the incident took place—Or rather I ought to say, it was in a conservatory to which he had drawn me apart from the gay company that were assembled. And then as I did not answer him, but gazed in such a strange way, he took my hand and conducted me into the principal drawing-room, where he led me to my mother's aide; and still in a half-dreamy state of bewilderment, methought that I heard some words issue from his lips to the effect that 'silence had given consent.' But not to weary you, my dear Azaline, with the details of this sad and strange history of mine, I may simply observe that General Amesbury had interpreted my doubt and consternation into a bashful confusion, and my silence into assent. When I understood it all, I was for dealing plainly and candidly with him; but my mother entreated and implored that I would accept the offer which had been made; and when I was still reluctant to practise a deceit upon an honourable and confiding man, I learnt for the first time that my father's affairs were far from prosperous, and that more than I could possibly anticipate now depended upon my alliance with General Amesbury. And thus I yielded, Azaline—and we were married!"

There was a pause, during which Lady Amesbury kept her eyes bent down; she was evidently absorbed in deep and mournful meditation; and Azaline did not venture to interrupt it. Outside the casement Edward Walpole still stood, riveted to the spot—drinking in all the strange revelations and confessions to which accident had rendered him a listener—and so completely enthralled by the interest thereof that he no longer thought even for a single instant whether it were honourable on his part to remain an eavesdropper there.

"When once the indissoluble knot was tied," pursued Lady Amesbury, at length breaking silence once more, "I resolved to become the most faithful and devoted of wives. I felt that my husband had been deceived in me, and that it was therefore my duty to make every atonement and every recompense by the kindness and tenderness of my conduct. And thus I so far did my duty; and heaven only knows how often I strove to appear contented with my lot—aye, and even happy and gay when remorse was gnawing at my

heart and the recollections of the past were tearing like vulture-claws at my brain. We went out to India, as you know, very soon after my marriage; and years passed away. At length my husband died full of honours: and I lost not a moment after the funeral obsequies in returning to England. One thought was uppermost in my mind!—one idea was dominant! I was now my own mistress; and what recked I even if the secret of my earlier years should transpire to the knowledge of the world? I had no longer a husband to be horrified or shocked thereby! My parents also were dead; and I had no near kindred whose feelings there was any necessity of consulting. Now therefore, Azaline, can you guess, I ask, what idea must have been uppermost in my mind—what project I was forming—what plan I was yearning to carry out? Ah! could I ever forget that I was a mother?—and for long years my heart had yearned towards my child—the poor ignored one—the cruelly repudiated and heartlessly abandoned offspring of my first and only love!"

There was another pause—but not one of silent meditation on Lady Amesbury's part; it was now an interval of sobbing and weeping, for she was well-nigh overcome by her emotions as she approached the climax of her sadly interesting narrative.

"For heaven's sake console yourself, my dear friend," said Azaline, who was almost as much afflicted by the spectacle of this grief as the unhappy victim of the grief itself. "You must not thus give way to sorrows which ought to be met by a Christian fortitude!"

"Oh, speak not to me of Christian fortitude, Azaline!" cried Lady Amesbury, almost fiercely, and in a manner which was very different indeed from her usual mildness, meekness, and melancholy amiability; "speak not to me of Christian fortitude! You cannot possibly appreciate the pang which I suffered when on arriving in England I learnt that my poor child was no more! Yes—the daughter whom I should have clasped to my bosom—whom I should have covered with kisses—whom I should have taken from her abode amongst strangers, to find a home with her mother,—she was no more! I do believe, Azaline, that the effect of that intelligence was to cloud my brain; and God knows it would not have been astonishing if the affliction with which I was thus smitten had destroyed my intellects altogether!"

"Alas, my poor friend," said Azaline, in her soft gentle voice, "this is indeed a sad tale which you have told me!"

"O God! that my sufferings may soon cease, and that I may not exist much longer to endure a weight of mental woe which is fast becoming intolerable!"—and as the unfortunate lady thus spoke, she clasped her hands together and raised them towards the heaven where dwelt the divine power unto which she so agonizingly appealed.

By that action on her part the sleeves of her dress fell back from the lower part of the arms; and as the eye of Edward Walpole caught sight of three moles placed triangularly upon the right forearm, a cry escaped his lips—and obedient only to the wild impulse which suddenly seized upon him, he dashed through, the casement, cleared his abrupt and rapid way amidst the screen of verdure, and appearing in the pre-

sence of the two startled and affrighted ladies, he exclaimed, "No, no! your daughter is not dead! She lives, and shall be restored you!"

CHAPTER LXV.

EDWARD AND HESTER.

It was the day following the incidents which we have just related: it was about the hour of noon—and upon a sofa in a small but comfortably furnished apartment, Hester Sergeant was reclining. She was very pale and very languid; and the medicine-bottles on the table showed that she had been receiving medical attendance. Most assuredly the house where we now find her was not the odious habitation of the Grills; neither was it the den of infamy kept by the Morphews: but it was a respectable lodging-house, in a quiet street at no great distance from Hanover Square. It was kept by a widow woman of matronly appearance, and whose disposition was kind and benevolent; so that even without the munificent earnest of his liberality which Edward Walpole gave her on consigning Hester to her care, she would have treated the young female with every possible attention. We should observe that Walpole had borne Hester away from the Morphews' house in Granby Street,—and placing her in a cab had driven at once to his own lodgings in Hanover Square,—not with the settled purpose of outraging all decency by introducing a mistress there, but simply for the purpose of inquiring at once of his own landlady where he could procure a suitable lodging for one who had been unfortunate and in whom he was deeply interested? Though it was in the middle of the night when this occurred, yet as gold is omnipotent in the British metropolis, as elsewhere, the landlady of the house in Hanover Square did not grumble at being called up from her bed for such a purpose; neither did the landlady of the other house, in the neighbouring street, to which the recommendation was given.

The reader is now aware under what circumstances Hester Sergeant became the inmate of this respectable and comfortable abode, where we find her reclining upon a sofa, at the hour of noon, as we have already said. She heard a knock at the front door: her heart palpitated with suspense, until the steady and regular tread of the footsteps which began to ascend the stairs, announced the coming of the physician, instead of the approach of him whom she longed yet almost dreaded to see. The doctor—an elderly, good-tempered man, with a benevolent countenance—entered the apartment; and sitting down near his patient, he asked her a few of the usual questions with the utmost kindness of tone and look.

"You say you are better," he pursued; "and that is pleasing intelligence. But I must see you quite well; and in order that this result shall be brought about with the least possibly delay, I must still interdict you from whatsoever may prove of an exciting character. Thus you must keep yourself perfectly quiet for a day or two—"

"Doctor," interrupted Hester, "has Mr. Wal-

pole told you anything connected with the past?"

"Nothing more than this, my dear girl,—that you loved one another some time ago—that you were separated—that you were utterly lost to each other—and that you suddenly met again the night before last."

"Well then," said Hester, "you can easily guess how much we have to say to each other!"

"Did I not allow you," asked the physician, with a smile, "to be together two whole hours yesterday?—and were you not much the worse for the excitement? and did you not go off into a swoon? and was not I sent for? and did I not then feel it my duty to exact from Mr. Walpole a solemn pledge that he would not see you again until I gave him my permission?"

"And when will that permission be given?" inquired Hester, with a visible anxiety depicted on her countenance.

"Have you not comprehended, my dear girl," asked the physician, with a benevolent smile and a deprecating look,—“have you not comprehended from what I just now said that I meant you to be kept very quiet for a few days?—which in plain terms means that I would rather you would not see Mr. Walpole just for the present.”

"And I can tell you, sir," answered Hester, with some degree of violence, "that there is such a thing as killing one with nervous suspense and anxiety just as easily as by the excitement of interviews with one from whom there has been a long separation."

"You surely can have nothing more to say to each other," asked the physician, "after having been together two whole hours yesterday—besides all the opportunities for conversation when you met the night before last? Surely, I say, nothing could have been left unsaid?"

"Pardon me, sir," answered Hester; "but much indeed *was* left unsaid; and it is in order that the remainder should be told, I am now so anxious to see Edward Walpole. I beseech you therefore—"

"Well," interrupted the physician, "if this is the case, I see that I must consent. But remember, it is only because you assure me that one sort of excitement is worse than another. For there is much truth in your observation: but still, in cases of this kind, I like to hear what my patients may have to say for themselves before I finally yield to their wishes."

"And therefore, kind sir," exclaimed Hester, "you will let Mr. Walpole come to me without delay?"

"I will drive to his house at once, and signify that permission is accorded him to this effect. For to tell you the truth, Miss Sergeant, you are not the only one who is impatient; for Mr. Walpole himself has already sent me one note and two verbal messages this morning—"

"Then in heaven's name, sir, hasten and tell him that he may come!" cried Hester.

The good-natured physician complied with this request; and taking his seat in his carriage, drove direct to Hanover Square. Edward Walpole, who from the window of his drawing-room had seen the vehicle approach, darted down the staircase, and rushed out of the front door just as the equipage drew up before it.

"May I go to her?" was the young man's

eager and anxious inquiry. "You see how faithfully I have kept my word!"

"But not without a violent inclination to break it," interjected the physician, with one of his good-tempered benevolent smiles. "Witness the note and the two messages——"

"Yes—I was indeed urgent!" exclaimed Edward; "aye, and at the earliest hour this morning, too, at which I could in propriety send to you; because I have something of the utmost importance to communicate to that poor girl!"

The doctor's countenance became grave; and he said, "I do really hope, Mr. Walpole, that it is nothing which may renew the excitement of yesterday?"

"Do you mean, doctor, that there is anything serious to be apprehended on the part of your patient?—anything more than what you have told me? Speak!—do speak, I conjure you!"

"Mr. Walpole, I am not one who has the habit of making molehills into a mountain; nor do I ever study to increase my own professional importance by assuming mysterious airs, or by enhancing the danger of the cases brought under my cognisance. I would not for the world trifle with the feelings, nor unnecessarily work upon the fears of those who are interested in my patients——"

"Good God!" exclaimed Walpole, with dismayed looks; "to what is this preface to lead?"

"Simply to this," answered the physician,—"that Miss Sergeant's nerves have sustained a very great shock—there is indeed every indication of their having been strongly wrought upon for some time past—she is moreover very young—and she has evidently suffered much. She therefore requires all possible care; for every fresh source of excitement is a blow struck at a vital part; whereas she needs every species of anodyne."

"But if the intelligence I have to communicate be good?" asked Walpole eagerly.

"Ah, well—that is certainly something," returned the physician; "and heaven knows that I should be the last to stand in the way of such species of anodynes being administered! But yet happiness has its excitement as well as affliction has; and the very state to which Miss Sergeant is now brought arose from her joy in meeting you. However, you must go to her—that is clear enough. But pray be cautious in breaking your good news gradually and considerately."

Walpole pressed the physician's hand, and was about to dart away from the carriage window at which this colloquy took place, when the worthy doctor beckoned him back, and said in a low but earnest tone, "Now mind and be cautious, Mr. Walpole; for it is not without reason, I assure you, that Miss Sergeant requires the utmost mental tranquillity. Without attempting to penetrate into whatsoever may have been the nature of the sufferings through which she has passed, yet I am bound as an honest man to tell you that they have left upon her an effect which can only be repaired by the mode of treatment I have suggested. I do not say this to frighten you: I have been still more studious in endeavouring to avoid frightening *her*: but I repeat my warning, that this is indeed no case to be trifled with."

The carriage then drove away, and Edward

Walpole stood looking after it for several moments, as he with some doubt and anxiety weighed in his mind what could be the precise meaning of the physician's words, and whether indeed there were even more danger in the case than he had chosen to admit? But youth is a period of hope; and therefore Edward did not long remain depending; nor did he willingly abandon himself to the contemplation of the worst side of the picture. No!—he suddenly started away from the spot where he had remained standing; and as he hurried in the direction of Hester's lodgings, he felt his spirits rise almost into complete buoyancy as he mentally ejaculated, "The good doctor is naturally cautious!—his warning shall not be neglected! But the tidings which I have now to break to Hester, will be inevitably fraught with all the most healing influences!"

On entering the apartment where Hester reclined upon the sofa, Walpole hastened towards her with inquiries anxiously and tenderly put; and as he took her hand, he pressed his lips to her brow. His conduct towards her was that which a brother might display towards a sister. The instant the door had opened a vivid blush appeared upon Hester's cheeks, which the next moment became deadly pale; and she half averted her looks as if ashamed to encounter those of Walpole. He sat down by her side; and still retaining her hand in his own, he said in a gentle voice, "The kind doctor tells me that you must not be excited, Hester—and he has told you the same. Therefore we must be very quiet in our discourse——"

"And at all events," interjected the young woman, "I shall feel much better when this interview is over. I know not how it is, Edward—Ah! how strange it seems to me to call you by this Christian name instead of that by which I knew you in other times!"

"What were you going to say, Hester? You know not how it is——"

"No—I can scarcely define my own feelings," continued the girl, pressing his hand, but averting her looks; "for my emotions are so contradictory and so inconsistent one with another! I like to see you—and yet I feel ashamed in your presence! I looked forward with a tender yearning to your arrival—and yet I dreaded it!"

"You need not blush in my presence, Hester," said Edward, with mingled tenderness and solemnity. "You are not responsible for the past—circumstances made you what you were. For the present you are safe—and for the future there shall be atonement and happiness."

"The future?" repeated Hester softly. "Oh! if you mean the future of this life, you are not speaking of a very long period; for I feel, Edward, as if death cannot be far off—And perhaps his presence will not be altogether unwelcome!"

"Speak not thus, Hester!—speak not thus!" exclaimed Edward Walpole vehemently, and yet shudderingly; for he recollected all that the good physician had said, and he now thought, as he gazed upon the girl's pale face, that it was indeed only too possible the bloom of health might never be brought back to it.

"Well, dear Edward," she answered, smiling with a sweetness that had not for a long time past appeared upon those lips of her's, "I will say nothing to vex or grieve you, for you are so kind to me!"

"Why did you just now say," asked Walpole, "that you should be relieved when this interview was over?"

"Because," replied Hester, "all our mutual explanations are not as yet given——"

"Now, you must not excite yourself," interrupted Walpole, "with reverting to the past. It is unnecessary—at least, I mean, it is needless for you to retrospect painfully. Nothing can be amended—nothing altered!"

"God knows this is true enough!" murmured Hester, clasping her hands together, while an expression of anguish swept over her countenance.

"Hester! Hester! do not torture yourself thus!" said Walpole urgently. "Oh, believe me, there is happiness in store for you!—yes, much happiness! I am not speaking wildly nor at random——"

"Listen to me, Edward," she suddenly interrupted him. "I told you my history down to the very instant when we met the night before last; and you may easily suppose that I am anxious to learn what has occurred to you since we parted under such cruel circumstances. Good heavens, that parting! And now when we meet, I find you rich and prosperous—and as yet you have given me no explanations on this point; you merely said that circumstances had taken a most wondrous turn in your favour."

"And if I did not enter into full explanations yesterday, Hester," responded Walpole, "it was simply because I feared to excite you by too much conversation. You had been speaking nearly the whole time that we were permitted to remain together——"

"Alas, yes!" murmured the young girl; "and a dismal history was it that I had to reveal! But still I did not tell you all! There was one thing I kept back——"

"Does it enter into the thread of those circumstances which are connected with all the mysteries of your birth?"

"No, no!—it has naught to do with that!" interrupted Hester with a visible shudder.

"Then, if it be a painful subject and needless to speak about," said Walpole, "for heaven's sake do not think of it, Hester—much less allude to it any farther!"—and then with a generous consideration the young man went on to say in hurried accents, "I will divert your attention from such subjects as those by entering at once on such details as concern myself. Yet my history is short enough, and few are the details which lead to the climax so marvellous and so providential! You know, Hester, what my sentence was:—four months' imprisonment in the City Compter, and to be afterwards transferred for a term to the Parkhurst Reformatory in the Isle of Wight. My conduct during my captivity in the Compter was such that I bore a good character with me to the Reformatory; so that on my arrival there I was appointed under-schoolmaster—and in that situation enjoyed certain advantages and privileges. It was originally ordered that I should be kept there for two years; but at the expiration of a few months I was told that I was free if I chose to avail myself of the pardon thus afforded me. I thought of you, Hester—and I longed to fly back to the metropolis to seek you. But then I asked myself of what avail it was for me, penniless and characterless, to attempt such a search? I

reasoned that if you had done well, I might only be compromising you or unsettling your mind by appearing before you, even if I should succeed in finding you out at all;—and on the other hand, I thought that if it should not be well with you, it would only be dragging you down still more deeply into the mire to ask you to join once again your destinies with mine. And then, too, I will candidly confess that as you never came near me after my condemnation to the Compter—as you never wrote to me either there or at Parkhurst—I did entertain the hope that some kind friend had been raised up by heaven to take you by the hand."

The young girl moaned; and Edward Walpole hastened to continue his narrative.

"Well then, Hester, for those and other reasons I did not choose to avail myself of the freedom that was offered me. I begged that I should be permitted to fulfil my time at Parkhurst, so that I might have a chance of accumulating some little savings if I were allowed a trifling stipend for instructing the young lads. My prayer was granted—time passed on, until one day I was summoned into the governor's parlour, and certain questions were put to me. I was asked if I were really, as I had represented myself to the chaplain of the Compter in London, the same Thomas Robinson who had fled from a particular workhouse; and to this and other queries I gave truthful answers. Then a gentleman was introduced into the parlour—he told me that his name was Seymour, and that for certain reasons which he would not then explain, he had become interested in my welfare; he proposed to take me away with him, and to provide for me in such a manner that I should be thenceforth placed above want. Conceive the effect produced upon me by this announcement! Methought it was a dream: and yet how quickly was it realized! The very next day I was in London, and established in my present lodgings in Hanover Square. Fortune continued to shower its bounties upon me with a hand so lavish that there were actually times when I mistrusted the very source of all this wonderful prosperity and dreaded lest there might be some sinister and ulterior motive. But no!—everything was real and genuine, and I was gradually being led on to learn the full extent of the happiness that was now to compensate for long years of neglect, sorrow, and misery. In a word, Hester, that Mr. Seymour of whom I am speaking proved to be my uncle—my parentage became known to me—it was eminently respectable—and start not, Hester, nor think that I am exaggerating, when I tell you that I possess a fortune of five thousand a-year."

"Heaven be thanked, Edward," replied the young girl, "that such prosperity should have overtaken you! But how was it that with a parentage so wealthy and respectable you could have been so cruelly abandoned in your infancy?"

Not even to Hester Sergeant would Edward Walpole reveal the secret of his uncle's treacherous and infamous conduct towards him: that secret he considered to be a sacred one; and he therefore naturally fell back upon a portion of the tale which Mr. Seymour himself had devised as a means of accounting for the fact.

"I was stolen," he said, "by gipsies in my

infancy; and they, afraid perhaps of the consequences of the deed, consigned me to the work-house. Years and years passed away—and I was looked upon by my relatives as irrevocably lost, until by some means a whisper reached Mr. Seymour's ear, which led him to make inquiries. It is too long a tale to tell now, Hester—but you know the result. And now," hastily continued the young man, "let me add something to render my history complete. No sooner was I installed in my luxurious apartments in Hanover Square—no sooner was I in possession of ample means and could lavish gold as profusely as it was bestowed on me—than I again wondered, Hester, what might be *your* lot;—and now, there was no longer a reason why I should forbear from making inquiries concerning you. And so I lost no time in calling at the lodgings which I knew you occupied when last I saw you—I mean on the day of my trial; and there—and there—"

"Yes—I understand you, Edward," murmured the young girl, in a scarcely audible voice, and again speaking with averted looks; "you learnt sufficient to make you aware that I had fallen very low; and though all trace was lost of me, yet was it surmised that I must still be plying a loathsome traffic for my bread."

"And then I vowed to find you," continued Walpole hurriedly: "I swore that I would never rest until I should have learnt what had become of you. And so, night after night I plunged amidst all the scenes of crime and debauchery—scattering about my gold as if it were so much dross, in the hope that by the inquiries which I set on foot I might obtain the clue that I sought. Yes—night after night—"

"Good heavens!" interrupted Hester, shuddering from head to foot, and with a look which for a moment was absolutely ghastly; "what fearful risks you incurred in visiting such hideous dens! Oh, I know them but too well!"—and the young girl shivered visibly as she lay half-reclining upon the sofa.

"Yes, I am aware of it now," responded Edward; "but I entertained no such apprehensions at first. I too tremble when I think of the fearful risks I ran—the horrible perils I may have escaped! I used to visit those places dressed in the same costume in which perhaps I had just quitted the theatre—displaying my jewellery, not from any idle vanity, but simply from an utter thoughtlessness of the folly of such an unguarded proceeding. And thus I went on until two or three days ago, when a circumstance which filled the entire metropolis with horror, suddenly had the effect of rendering me cautious; so that before I again set out on my expeditions, I dressed myself in shabby attire, threw on a rough loose overcoat, and imitated the part of some profligate of a lower degree, instead of the reckless spendthrift of a higher order. But, good heaven, Hester! you are fainting!"

"No, no!—I shall be better presently," murmured the young girl, who was as pale as death. "Give me some water, Edward. Thank you! Yes—I am better now. Oh, how deep is my gratitude for these self-sacrifices which you have made on my account!—plunging into those haunts of infamy which must have been loathsome to you—seeking those vile neighbourhoods which were so perilous—"

"Say no more upon the subject, Hester! Heaven be thanked that my efforts were crowned with success, and that I discovered you after a comparatively short search; while on the other hand I escaped all such perils as those whereof the hideous crime of the other day may be regarded as a fearful and mysterious illustration! But, Oh! again you look very ill, Hester! Ah, your nerves are fearfully unstrung—and I am exciting you!"

"No, no—it is not you!" murmured the young girl, recovering herself with a desperate effort just as she was about to sink off into a swoon: "it is not you that are exciting me, Edward! It is the horrible subject which haunts my brain! Did I not just now tell you that when I recounted the particulars of my history, from the date of our separation down to that of our meeting the night before last, I omitted one incident?"

"Yes; and I enjoined you not to think of it any more if it were a painful topic. I repeat that injunction, Hester," added Walpole emphatically.

"But I cannot obey you, Edward: it is something that I *must* tell you!"

"Do not harass or distress yourself thus, Hester!—do not, I conjure you! But listen to me. I wish to speak to you seriously—there is happiness in store for you—much happiness! I have a revelation to make—prepare yourself—"

But the young girl was too much absorbed in the horrible recollections that were now uppermost in her mind to heed what Walpole was saying to her, or even to catch the sense of his words; and suddenly grasping him violently by the wrist, she exclaimed impatiently, and almost petulantly, "Listen to me!—do listen to me! Let me speak."

"Think how you are exciting yourself, Hester! I tremble—"

"My excitement will grow fearful if you do not let me unbosom myself of this dread secret!"—and there was now something so strange and peculiar in the young girl's look, tone, and manner, that Walpole gazed upon her with mingled bewilderment and consternation. "And yet it is a secret which must be kept even by you when I tell it. Swear to me, Edward—swear that you will never open your lips to reveal this secret unless you receive my permission!"

"Good heavens! what mean you?" asked Walpole, struck with a vague and horrible suspicion as he recollected to what fearful topic allusions had recently been made in the conversation.

"Swear first of all, Edward! swear," cried the young girl vehemently, "that you will never betray the horrible secret!"

"Hester, you will kill yourself with this excitement!"

"No, no!—it is you who are killing me, because you will not do my bidding. Swear, I ask you!"

"I cannot, Hester! I dare not—I must not take such an oath! You distress me cruelly—you frighten me horribly! Oh, what—what do you mean?"

"I mean that I have no longer a confidant nor a friend in Edward Walpole," responded the girl, rising with a sort of sullen dignity from her seat; "and therefore I will not for another moment accept the asylum he has given me."



HESTER.

"Hester, you are mad!" cried Walpole, goaded to the very verge of despair. "Stay, I beseech you! Heavens! how pale you are! Oh, come back to your seat! I will do everything you desire! I will swear to keep your secret!"

"Ah, now you are my friend—my brother once again!"—and Hester pressed both his hands in her own as she thus spoke: then resuming her place upon the sofa, she said, "Sit near me again
No. 44.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

—nearer still, for I must speak only in whispers! The walls themselves would have ears for such a fearful secret as this!"

The young man's face was almost as white as that of the young woman: he gasped for breath—he could not give utterance to a syllable—he felt that he stood upon the threshold of some horrible revelation—and he had already something more than a vague suspicion of what it

might be. And he listened with a glacial terror and with an awful consternation, as Hester proceeded in a low whispering tone, which was hollow and gloomy, to reveal the particulars of the tragedy so far as it had come to her knowledge. She had seen the corpse in the house where she had dwelt—she knew that Grills and his wife had been bribed by Henri Ponchard to dispose of it—there could not be a doubt in her mind that Mrs. Grills was the woman who had been seen by the toll-keeper on Waterloo Bridge, or that the carpet-bag contained the remains of the dead body of which she had caught a glimpse in the scullery!

Was it wonderful that Edward Walpole should be appalled as he listened to this tale of horror?—or could he be any longer surprised if Hester's mind should have been labouring under an impression stronger, and either more exciting or more overwhelming than any for which she could previously account? When the narrative was finished, a deep silence prevailed,—a silence as solemn and as awful as that which reigns in the churchyard by night!

At length Edward said in a low tone, "And you lived in the house where you knew that all this was going on?"

"What could I do, Edward?" she asked, with a look that seemed to reproach him for putting the question. "I knew that I was watched—that my footsteps were dogged—and that at the first sign of an intent to betray the secret I should become the victim of those wretches."

"But when you went out, even though you saw that you were followed, you might have suddenly claimed the protection of the first policeman whom you met?"

"Ah, I see, Edward," cried Hester, bitterly, "that your experiences of the sorrows and miseries of the world have not been half so acute and terrible as mine! Ever since you and I were separated, when the arm of the law tore you from me, I met with but one person who spoke to me with kindness. And, Oh! to a lost, fallen, degraded creature such as I was, the slightest look of sympathy is a pearl beyond all price! the least benevolent word is as manna falling from heaven itself! Henri Ponchard was the one who thus looked compassionately upon me and spoke kindly to me. I experienced an illimitable sense of gratitude to that man: I would not have injured a hair of his head even though he had committed ten thousand murders and I was cognizant of his stupendous turpitude! But how much less, therefore, would I say or do aught to implicate him, when I know that he is guiltless of the deed of blood; for, as I just now explained to you, I learnt sufficient by eavesdropping and listening to convince me that the unfortunate deceased must have met his death at the hands of some other. Frequently methought that Henri Ponchard suspected that I knew something of the matter—and, Oh! I will confess that there were times when I was afraid of him: I feared lest he should be prompted by desperation itself to ensure the safety of the secret by making away with me!"

"And this," exclaimed Walpole, with a look and tone of irrepressible disgust,—“and this is the man whom you studied so scrupulously to shield?”

"Hear me out, Edward!" the girl interrupted him. "I tell you I was grateful to that man, even though for awhile I was afraid of him! But then all of a sudden he displayed so much goodness of heart towards me, when thinking that he had the means of placing me in the right track towards the discovery of my parentage,—he took so much trouble—he spoke so kindly and encouragingly—that at last I felt convinced I had wronged him in the idea that he was capable of doing me a mischief even though it were for the ensurance of his own safety!—But enough upon the subject! I see that I have disgusted as well as horrified you, Edward. Perhaps I myself have become more loathsome in your eyes than I was before!"

"Hester, Hester! speak not thus!" exclaimed Walpole. "Oh, it is a frightful secret which you have revealed to me!"

"And which you have sworn to keep!" added the girl impressively.

"Yes, yes!—fear not that I shall betray it!" cried the young man, scarcely able to repress a shudder as with a quick mental glance he reviewed all he had heard.

"It was a secret which I could not keep to myself," pursued Hester; "and though I really know not the good of scaring and horrifying you with the revelation, yet it seems to have relieved my mind!"

"Then in that case," interjected the generous-hearted Edward, "I will no longer appear to regret that you should have taken me into your confidence on the point. No!—enough upon the topic! And now let us turn to another one—though really, Hester, I tremble at the possible consequences of all this excitement——"

"Do not entertain this fear on my account, Edward," interrupted the young woman. "After all that I have just gone through in revealing that tremendous secret, there is nothing you can now have to tell me that will do me any harm. Besides, after all, what *can* it be? There is no greater happiness can possibly await me in this life," she added, with a sigh, "than that which I experience in meeting you and in learning of your miraculous prosperity: while on the other hand I do indeed begin to feel as if fortune had ceased to persecute me, and that I never again can know so great an amount of misery as that from which you have dragged me. Ah! Edward, if in the whole world there were one being at whose hands I would have received honties in preference to another, that one was you! But think not—think not," the young girl hastily went on to say, while a blush overspread her cheeks,—“think not by this language on my part that I am again courting your affection otherwise than that of a brother towards a sister! No, no, Edward! it were impossible! I am aware that I cannot be your wife—and as to again becoming your mistress—no, never! never!"

There was a pause—during which Edward Walpole gazed with mingled admiration and surprise upon this young girl of so singular a disposition, and who still retained so many good qualities intact and so many right principles unimpaired after having been dragged through the mire of all possible pollutions and contaminations.

"No!" she resumed, with sudden vehemence;

"not for worlds would I destroy or sully the pure feeling of friendship which now exists between us!—or may I not call it the fraternal love which on our restoration to each other has superseded whatsoever passion formerly subsisted between us? No, Edward! I would not be your mistress!—for even without all the considerations which I have just now set before you, I declare that come what will and happen what may, Vice and I have shaken hands for ever! I would sooner perish as a suicide than return into the life of misery from which you have rescued me!"

"And there is no chance, Hester, that you will ever be tempted to such a relapse," exclaimed Walpole vehemently; "still less that you will be driven to the horrible alternative that you have suggested! But now that you have unfolded all your mind to me, do you not feel calmer?"

"I do, Edward—I do. I wished that this interview should see everything explained and cleared up between us, so that nothing might remain unsaid and there should be no unnatural excitement for me after to-day. Yet it was for this very reason that I dreaded as well as longed for the present meeting!"

"Now you are exciting yourself again, Hester! Pray be calm! There is a subject which I have been endeavouring to approach for the last half-hour; but scarcely do I get near it, when you say something to repel me."

"Speak, Edward. I am now perfectly calm. Besides, I am bound to listen to you!"—and as she thus spoke, she reclined back gently on the cushions again.

"We have been talking upon subjects of a varied character," resumed Walpole, "most of them disagreeable and unpleasant enough: but now the one which I am about to approach is calculated to be fraught with the purest and most unalloyed happiness—and it interests you most deeply. I was telling you this much just now—but you did not hear me at the time: other things were uppermost in your mind."

"Edward," said Hester, "after all that has been done for me, I can conceive no new source whence happiness may arise except in a quarter where all hope appears to be dead!"

"There is always hope while there is life," replied Walpole significantly; "and who shall venture to define the power or the readiness of providence to develop even those mysteries which may appear most inscrutable?"

"Oh, Edward!" cried the young girl, catching at his words; "are you indeed destined to prove a good angel to me altogether? Speak, speak! Has not a sufficient amount of happiness been as yet awarded me for the miseries of the past?"

"Now, thank heaven, that I have got you in the right track, Hester," pursued Walpole, with a smile, "you will be prepared to receive the happy tidings—"

"What? what? Speak! Oh, speak! Do not hesitate! I will command myself!"

"Yes, Hester—you must be as calm as possible! I am about to speak to you of—of—"

The young girl gasped, she essayed to speak—but she could not; and Walpole, fancying that she was sufficiently prepared and that further suspense might only prove injurious, proceeded to say, "The secret of your parentage is not altogether lost. On the contrary, heaven has placed

me in a particular path, for its own purposes, that I might become the means of giving a daughter to the arms of a mother now fervently longing to strain her to her bosom!"

Hester took Walpole's hand and pressed it between both her own, while the tears were trickling down her cheeks, and the workings of her countenance showed how deeply stirred were the tenderest, the liveliest, and the strongest emotions of her heart. Her power of speech was still suspended: but, Oh! what a volume of eloquence in her looks!

"You must prepare to learn, Hester," continued Walpole, drawing aside the veil with as much delicacy as possible, "that though a mother is ready and eager to claim, and to recognise you, yet that you will know no father's love! Not that the author of your being is dead—No! he lives—and although I am acquainted with his name, yet it were perhaps better that you yourself should not ask it; for he deeply, deeply wronged your mother—and this poor mother of your's cannot look upon him otherwise than with feelings that are even stronger than repugnance."

"Enough, Edward! enough!" murmured Hester; "I will not ask concerning my father. But my mother—Oh, my mother! when may I see her? when may I embrace her?"

"Presently, Hester—this very day—"

"Oh, Edward! did I not say that you were to prove unto me like an angel from heaven? My mother!—is it possible? my mother!"—and the poor creature, again sinking back upon the cushions from which in her excited feelings she had raised herself, placed her hands before her eyes and yielded to the hitherto unknown luxury of feelings which were engendered by the power of being enabled to pronounce the sweet and touching name of "Mother!"

The young man then proceeded, in the same delicate way as before, to give Hester some few requisite explanations,—telling her that her mother was Lady Amesbury, the widow of the celebrated General Officer—that she was affluent—still young, and of prepossessing appearance—but that her intellects were to some little degree disordered, chiefly it might be believed, from the supposition that her daughter had ceased to exist, and that there was consequently now every hope of a complete mental improvement when that daughter should be restored to her. It were useless to elaborate this portion of our tale with reiterated descriptions of the sentiments and feelings displayed by Hester as she listened to the various revelations that were being breathed in her ear; but there is one particular point which requires explanation, and which we shall now give in the young man's own words.

"I should tell you, Hester, that your mother knew of the pecuniary arrangements that were made on your behalf by her unprincipled seducer: she knew likewise that these arrangements were effected through the medium of his broker, Mr. Warren, the father of the individual who at present carries on the business. It was because your poor mother was constantly expressing a wish to her mother to embrace her child, if only for a moment, that it was determined to remove you from one seminary to another; and hence your sudden transference from the care of the Morpewes at Lewisham to Miss Thompson's at Brompton. The

Morphews, be it understood, were strictly enjoined to afford no information on the point to your mother if by any chance she should take it into her head to call upon them for the purpose. Well, it was not very long after your removal to Brompton that your mother married General Amesbury and went out to India. On her return about three years ago, she at once applied to Mr. Warren for information concerning you, and was assured by that gentleman that you were dead. She believed him to be a respectable man—as respectable as his father was before him; and never for a single instant did it occur to her that for any reason she was being grossly deceived.”

“And why should this stockbroker have thus deceived her?” asked Hester: “why should he have acted so cruelly and so villainously?”

“I have been to him this morning,” responded Walpole. “As I have already told you, it was last night that accident rendered me a listener to the conversation of your mother with Miss Osborne; and, Oh! the scene which ensued when I burst through the window, declaring that her daughter was not dead and that she should be restored unto her! But of that I have already spoken. Well, then, it was agreed that I should see Warren this morning, to ascertain the real truth from his lips, and discover upon what ground he had declared you to be dead—to find out also why the remittances had been stopped if he did not really believe you to be no more. I will not trouble you with details, Hester. Suffice it to say that when I announced my mission to Warren, the confusion which seized upon him heralded a confession of guilt. He threw himself on my mercy—he avowed all the stupendous wickedness whereof he had been guilty. It appears that at his father’s death he became frightfully embarrassed, and he laid hands upon every available sum in order to maintain his credit and prop up a failing business. The capital which had been lodged in the Bank of England, to furnish an income for your maintenance, was drawn out by virtue of the power of attorney held by Mr. Warren. He thought to himself that as your mother was married and gone to India, she would be little likely to ask any questions thenceforth in reference to her child; and he did not anticipate any trouble on the part of your father. Thus, poor Hester! he thought he might deal with thee in the manner best suited to his own selfish interests: he plundered thee of thy fortune, little thinking that the day would ever come when there might arise a questioning on the subject! And that day has at length come. Thoroughly humiliated was that man as he stood before me just now, confessing the truth, and beseeching that time might be given him for making restitution.”

“And what did you do, Edward?” asked Hester. “It was not the time to be vindictive, when heaven was working out its own good purposes despite the machinations of the wicked!”

“Thus I also reasoned, Hester—and I left the miserable man with the assurance that his guilt should be overlooked. But now that these explanations are complete, let me ask whether you think that you are sufficiently strong—”

“To meet my mother? to fly into her arms? to receive her kisses? Oh, Edward! if I were upon the bed of death,” cried the young girl, with a

wild enthusiasm, “I should be enabled to spring from it to be welcomed by a mother!”

Walpole looked at his watch; and then he said, “I am afraid, Hester, that the worthy doctor will blame me very much for all this excitement—”

“No, no! it is inspiring me with new life!” exclaimed Hester. “I feel—Oh! I feel that if any medicament could resuscitate the vital powers, so as yet to give me a chance of a few more years of life, it is all this happiness which I am now experiencing!”

“And therefore your felicity may as well be crowned with the least possible delay, Hester,” rejoined Walpole. “It is now two o’clock:—at four your mother shall be here.”

“Two hours?—only two hours? And yet they seem an age! May I not go to her?”

“No:—that is a step which I cannot possibly permit without the sanction of the doctor: for if anything serious were to occur—Besides, Hester,” continued Walpole, interrupting himself; “if you pass through this coming ordeal of happiness without suffering too much from its excitement, there can be no doubt that your mother will take you away to-morrow, and you will go to that home which I feel convinced she is now preparing for your reception!”

“I will submit to all you suggest or advise,” answered Hester; and then, with the vivid scarlet mantling on her countenance, and with downcast looks, she murmured, “You have been compelled to tell my mother how low I have fallen—Are you sure that when the first gush of feeling is over, she will not despise and loathe me?”

“Good heavens—no, Hester!” exclaimed Walpole vehemently. “Perhaps, if it were possible for her to yearn all the more eagerly to embrace her child, it is because she knows that this child of her’s has been unfortunate—that she has fallen—and that she has suffered! But think not, Hester, that I have told your mother the very worst! No, no! she knows not *how* low you have been!—she knows not everything!—and she need never know it! It is a topic on which she will be little likely to speak to you of her own accord. Need I add, Hester,” faltered the young man, now blushing in his turn, “that I have said but little relative to my antecedents—and naught in respect to the crime which separated me from you and rendered me the inmate of a gaol.”

“Edward,” responded the young woman, seriously and impressively, “whenever by word or deed I shall injure you, then may you declare that no such feeling as gratitude exists upon the earth, but that the human heart is indeed the grave instead of the well-spring of all virtues!”

Walpole pressed her hand; and rising from his seat, he said, “I shall leave you now, Hester; and at four o’clock may you rely upon welcoming your mother. Meanwhile compose yourself to the best of your ability—sleep if you can—yield to no despondency—mistrust not the happiness which is now yours in all its most substantial reality!”

The young man departed; and the recommendation which he gave in a short time found its accomplishment. Hester slept. There are feelings which overwhelm even with their soothing influence; and excitement must necessarily be followed by reaction. Thus slumber stole upon the

girl's eyes; and it was well that such proved to be the case; for her mind became refreshed and strengthened against the hour appointed for her meeting with her mother.

CHAPTER LXVI.

AZALINE AND EDWARD.

It was past four o'clock in the afternoon; and in the ground-floor parlour of the lodging-house where dwelt Hester Sergeant, Edward Walpole was now seated with Azaline Osborne. The young lady was attired in an elegant walking dress: she had on her bonnet—her gloves were upon her hands; and from these circumstances the reader may rightly opine that she had not been long there, and that neither did she purpose that her visit should be of any considerable length. In fact, she had good-naturedly accompanied Lady Amesbury, and she was now carrying a little while to ascertain how the meeting between the mother and daughter passed off in the room overhead, and to assure herself that her own services would not be needed in any respect by either of them. Edward Walpole remained at the house for precisely the same purpose; and thus were the two young people thrown together in the parlour upon the ground floor.

"The meeting must inevitably have proved," said Azaline, diverging from other topics, "one of the most pathetically interesting and affecting that can possibly be conceived."

"Oh, most interesting! most affecting!" exclaimed Walpole ardently.

"I am quite curious to see this new-found daughter of my friend Lady Amesbury's," said Azaline. "I shall remain until I think that I may without indiscretion ascend to the room above, tap at the door, and request a few minutes' admission."

"And you will see Hester, Miss Osborne?" exclaimed Walpole.

"Most assuredly. Why should I not?"—and it was with almost an air of surprise that the beautiful Azaline gazed upon the young man.

"You are the most liberal-minded and generous-hearted being," he cried with fervour, "that I ever encountered!"

"And you, sir," she replied, with a smile, "are the most inveterately disagreeable person that I ever encountered; because you will insist on paying me compliments although you know how utterly distasteful they are."

"A thousand pardons, Miss Osborne!" ejaculated Walpole. "But really it is impossible to behold without emotion so much true magnanimity on your part. You know," he added, in a low tone and with hesitating manner, "how this poor girl has proved erring and frail——"

"I only know that she is a fellow-creature and that she has suffered. I call myself a Christian—and I feel bound to perform a Christian's duties. Next to her own mother I will be the first to take her by the hand."

"Good heavens, Miss Osborne!" exclaimed Walpole, actually startled and thrilled in his enthusiastic admiration of the noble-minded and generous-souled young lady; "such words

coming from your lips bespeak you to be an angel!"

"One of a very poor terrestrial mould, I am afraid," she responded, with an ingenuous smile, which displayed the pearly treasures of her teeth.

"Not so!" rejoined Edward, enthusiastically; "but so high above all other earthly beings whom I ever knew or dreamt of, that I could fall down and worship you!"

"And if you choose to render yourself an idolater, Mr. Walpole," responded Azaline, with another smile—one of those smiles, so frank and good-tempered, which seem most appropriate for such beauteous lips—"it does not by any means follow that I should consent to be set up as the idol of your worship."

"But Oh, Miss Osborne! the worshipper asks not whether his idol will consent to receive his adoration! The incense of his homage ascends spontaneously, unchecked, unrestrained!"

"Do you write poetry, Mr. Walpole?" inquired Azaline, with a carelessness of air and indifference of look which struck him for the instant as being the studied affectations of a coquette.

"I do not pretend to be a poet, Miss Osborne," he answered, humbly and meekly. "But if I were, would it not be cruel on your part to check the poetic enthusiasm?"

"On the contrary," she interrupted him, half smiling, half seriously: "it would be the greatest possible benefit I could confer upon you. This is not a poetical age, Mr. Walpole——"

"And yet methinks, Miss Osborne," he answered, recovering courage, and speaking with a smile of sly significancy, "the age of poetry can scarcely be said to have passed when beautiful young ladies bend their longing eyes upon the East, as if in adoration of the rising sun—and indulge their imaginations with romantic dreams of a delicious existence in those climes—clad in the picturesque costume of the Orient, and seeking even to emulate the eccentric glories of the Queen of Tadmor!"

Azaline blushed and smiled as she listened to this speech,—to which she rejoined, "I know, Mr. Walpole, that you are an excellent listener to conversations which you ought not to overhear; and rest assured that I should have taken the most serious offence at your conduct of last night, if it had not brought about a result which I hope will completely redound to the happiness of my friend Lady Amesbury and her daughter. For this reason your behaviour," she continued, in a sort of serio-comic style, "must be regarded as having been under the direction of some preternatural influence; for otherwise it would be completely indefensible, and therefore unpardonable."

"I thank heaven, Miss Osborne," replied Walpole, "that there should exist excuses which plead for me in your favour. I could not possibly have endured your displeasure——"

"Enough of this style of language, Mr. Walpole," interrupted Azaline. "Must I over and over again remind you that I hate compliments—and most of all those that are conveyed by implication or inference rather than in a direct manner. Pray talk rationally! You are not a simpleton—and I flatter myself I have some little common sense. You would think it a miserable

affectation if I were to tell you that I by no means understand the language in which you have ventured to address me; and therefore, to prove to you at once that I *do* comprehend it, and that I wish it to cease, I will ask you seriously and gravely whether you have no duties to fulfil towards her who is now being strained to the bosom of a mother?"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Edward with vehemence, "how is it possible that I can discuss such a subject with you?"

Azaline did not immediately reply: she reflected—and then she said, "If you think it worth while to say anything upon the subject, Mr. Walpole, I shall listen—because it were needless as well as useless to deny that circumstances have established a certain degree of friendship between us."

The young man's heart thrilled at this admission; and it occurred to him that Miss Osborne was attaching something more than a casual interest to the explanations which she evidently sought; nay, he even hoped that she regarded them as important.

"You know," he said—"for you were present at all which last night took place between Lady Amesbury and myself, when I so unceremoniously broke in upon your discourse—and for which offence I thank heaven that I have received your forgiveness——"

"Keep to the main point, Mr. Walpole," said Azaline. "Proceed. You were about to tell me that I know something. What is it that I know?"

"You know," pursued the young man, "that relations of a certain intimate character took place two years ago between Hester and myself, when we were both boy and girl—and I was not then rich—indeed I was very poor—and poverty separated us—for I was compelled to go and take a situation, while she poor girl—But really, Miss Osborne, this is a topic on which I ought not to dwell!"

"The long and short of it is, Mr. Walpole," said Azaline, "that Hester somehow ago was the same to you as your wife, and at that time you were so poor that you could not maintain her; and thus you separated. Well, now you meet again, and under circumstances that are completely altered. You are rich, and she will be rich! Will you not now make her your wife in reality? for I repeat that she was as good as your wife ere your separation."

"But, Oh, Miss Osborne!" exclaimed Walpole, "during that interval——"

"Ah, well," said Azaline; "I comprehend that poor Hester was not altogether virtuous: but her position was such that with all her might and main she could not resist the force of circumstances. Yet you yourself assured her anxious and almost anguished mother, when she questioned you last night,—you yourself assured her, I say, that Hester's conduct must be held as venial, if not justifiable—that it was very far from having been downright profligate or depraved."

"True—I said all this, Miss Osborne," interjected Walpole. "But, Ah! can you not surmise that I spoke mildly upon that subject—I glossed over the real truth—because I was fearful of planting the dagger too deeply in the bosom of

a mother who was questioning me in reference to a daughter!"

"I will take this for granted," said Azaline; "it was generous and considerate on your part to spare that mother's feelings as much as possible. Well, but just now, when I said that I would be the very first to take the poor frail girl by the hand, did you not eulogize my conduct in terms so enthusiastic that I was compelled to rebuke them and to beseech that you would not address me with such flattering words? Surely, Mr. Walpole, if you so well understand what constitutes the magnanimous and the generous, you must be prepared to give a practical illustration to your own views? In a word, you must marry Hester."

Edward rose from his seat—paced twice or thrice through the room—and then suddenly throwing himself at the young lady's feet, he said, "Miss Osborne, I love you—and you only! Nay, do not repel me! I beseech you to hear me! I will give you a proof of this love of mine. Listen! I constitute you the arbitress of my destiny. Command me to wed Hester, and I will do so. Yes—I swear that I will obey you, and then you will not doubt the sincerity of this self-sacrificing devotion on my part!"

Azaline did not give any immediate answer: she even permitted the young man to continue kneeling for a few moments longer at her feet ere she made him rise.

"Leave that position, Mr. Walpole," she said: "it is not for you to kneel in my presence. The conversation has taken a turn but little foreseen by me in the outset; and the terms in which you have now addressed me, entitle you to attention and deliberate consideration on my part. You appoint me the arbitress of your destinies: it is a strange position for me to find myself in, seeing how short, how *very* short our acquaintance has been; and yet on the other hand it appears as if the current of circumstances had flowed on naturally to this issue. Well, then, I accept the position. And now let me question you. Do you no longer love Hester?"

"I never loved her!" was the answer emphatically given.

"What, sir?" exclaimed Azaline: "are you trifling with me? Do you mean to deceive me?"

"I beseech you to listen, Miss Osborne!" resumed Edward Walpole, with the mingled calmness and impressiveness of candour and sincerity. "I always thought that I loved Hester until I first beheld you. Then I experienced a sentiment that was quite different from anything I had ever known before. I did not understand this at first: neither did I find it easy to analyse my feelings:—and perhaps it was not altogether until this very day—only a few hours ago—that I completely understood them."

"And what brought you to this understanding?" asked Azaline.

"Hester herself told me that we must henceforth look upon each other only as brother and sister."

"Ah, she said that—did she?" observed Miss Osborne, as if quite in a careless way, and as if the discourse were becoming tedious to her.

"I am telling you nothing but the truth. Not for worlds would I deceive you! Besides, Hester herself would corroborate all my assertions——"

"Mr. Walpole, can you think for a single moment that I should appeal to Hester for a corroboration?"

"Pardon me, Miss Osborne," said the young man, meekly, and looking as if the rebuff had deeply humiliated him. "I flattered myself that the topic might have a little more interest for you than I see that it has."

"Well, at all events," rejoined Azaline, "you may as well tell me what Hester did say, since you are upon the topic: for after all, I do take a friendly interest in the matter."

"And just now," Edward hastened to exclaim, "you admitted that I had a right to demand your attention and your deliberate consideration!"

"True—I think I did say something of the sort:" and Azaline seemed to be playing carelessly with her parasol.

"Said something of the sort?" cried the young man, astonished and bewildered at this humour of seeming indifference which Azaline was displaying. "Why, you even accepted the position of arbitress of my destinies!"

"That is likewise true," she said. "But proceed. I think you were going to tell me——"

"That Hester assured me this day," resumed Walpole, still feeling rebuked, hurt, and humiliated by what he naturally took to be a capricious change of manner on Azaline's part, so that it was in the midst of deep discouragement he thus pursued the theme,— "Hester assured me that she never could become my wife, and that as for receiving me on terms equivocal—or—or—immoral—it was impossible. She in every sense appreciates the delicacy of her position; and I feel convinced that if I were to fall down at her feet and implore her to marry me, she would refuse."

"And you yourself, Mr. Walpole," said Azaline, "experience sentiments so changed in reference to Hester that you are by no means sorry she has come to this determination?"

"I should have been prepared to do my duty to the very utmost towards that poor girl, Miss Osborne: but I should indeed be speaking falsely and should be endeavouring to mislead you, if I were for a single moment to pretend that I am not rejoiced at the decision to which she herself first arrived. Oh! and it was when she was speaking to me this day in those terms, that I attained the full and complete appreciation of my own sentiments. Pray grant me your attention while I speak with candour—perhaps with boldness—for a few minutes only! I never loved Hester Sergeant. Circumstances originally threw us together in a way which engendered feelings that had to me the semblance of love. But love, in its purity, its holiness, and in the sanctity of its devotion, it was not! You will ask, then, why after a separation which might have deadened and destroyed a feeling so feebly grounded, I sought for her so anxiously when I became rich? It was a mixture of impulses—a variety of motives. Compassion—sympathy—curiosity—a friendly feeling on behalf of the poor girl whom I had known under other circumstances—with perhaps more or less a sense of something resembling a duty to seek after one whom I had known in my poverty and whom I might at length provide for in the period of my wealth—these were the causes that instigated me in that search: but if they be all

assembled together, they do not constitute the sentiment of love!"

Azaline was still playing with her parasol; and when Walpole had done speaking, she said with a half-smile, the meaning of which he could not understand, "And so this is your pleading in the presence of one whom you have made the arbitress of your destinies? Well, I must admit that if you do not love Hester it would be very hard to order you to marry her. But that is not all: for inasmuch as she has declared that she cannot marry you, even if you were to propose such an alliance, you are in no sense wronging her and you leave no duty unfulfilled. Therefore, Mr. Walpole," added Azaline, while a slight flush seemed for an instant to flit over her cheeks, "you are undoubtedly free to—to—I mean, you are at liberty to consider everything at an end between Hester and yourself."

"And may I not hope—may I not flatter myself," faltered the young man,—"or shall I be esteemed too daring, if under existing circumstances——"

"I do really think, Mr. Walpole," Azaline interrupted him, with a smile, "that I shall now venture up-stairs and introduce myself to Hester. Perhaps it would be better that you should not follow me just at present—and therefore you can remain here until I come back to tell you how it fares with the mother and daughter, and whether there are any further services you can render them."

Having thus spoken, Azaline glided from the room; and as the door closed behind her, Walpole struck himself violently upon the breast with his clenched fists.

"By heaven, I understand her now!" he mentally ejaculated. "She is a whimsical, heartless coquette—pretending all kinds of eccentricities—affecting all sorts of peculiarities! Ah, that smile which was upon her lips as she turned to leave the room! it was full of mockery! I do believe that she is malignant and mischievous as well as heartless! She has led me on to make a perfect fool of myself! Oh, that I should have been so blind as to think that she took the slightest interest in aught that concerned Hester or myself! Infatuated madman that I was! The idea, that she, the high-born daughter of a peer, should condescend to notice with favour one so obscure and humble as I! Ah, I have played the silliest game that ever was!—I have rendered myself a laughingstock to that capricious beauty! How she drew me out! How she led me on into the minutest explanations! I am almost inclined to vow that I will be revenged! But no! this were unworthy of me!"

The young man paced to and fro in the apartment, a prey to all the varied feelings which found expression in the train of thoughts we have just been describing.

"And yet she is so beautiful!" he suddenly ejaculated, in a tone that was loud enough to have been heard if any one had been present. "Must I renounce her altogether? must I resign myself to the hideous conviction that I have been trifled with by a finished coquette whose pride exists in the pretence of humility, and whose vanity seeks to gratify itself by means of the compliments that are paid to an affected liberalism? But, Ah! what said Lady Amesbury the other

night? *Faint heart never won fair lady!* 'Tis an old adage which she quoted: but may I not regard it as a species of prophetic encouragement offered to myself! Why should I renounce a love-siege which has only just commenced? why should I abandon all hope and yield myself to despair? Even the defences which the most finished coquette throws up around her heart, may not be impregnable. What if I were to persevere? Was a grand success ever achieved without some trouble? was a mighty result ever accomplished without previous toils and labours, perplexities and difficulties? But, Oh! that half-mocking smile which appeared upon those heauteous lips as she turned to quit the room! it has shed its baleful influence upon me in a way but too well calculated to discourage all hope!"—and then again the young man found himself giving vent to such mental ejaculations as, "Miserable coquette! heartless creature! malignant trifler! and yet how lovely!—good heavens, how fascinating! how beautiful! how bewitching! Syren—Circe! Yet how like an angel and a goddess!"

Upwards of half an hour elapsed while the young man was passing through all these strong and rending transitions of feeling, until at length the door opened and Miss Osborne reappeared. There was a heightened colour upon her cheeks: a tear glistened in each eye; and Edward's heart seemed to bound within him as the thought flashed to his brain, "After all, she is not unfeeling!"

She sat down upon the sofa; but it was again with that peculiar smile which Edward could not understand, and which in one sense seemed so sweet upon those beautiful lips, yet in another sense did him harm to behold it. She said, "Well, I've seen your Hester, Mr. Walpole."

"My Hester, Miss Osborne?" he ejaculated.

"Oh, you need not catch me up so quickly as all that, Mr. Walpole!" replied Azaline: "you knew very well what I meant. I will call her your friend Hester, if you will."

The young man thought there was something flippant and light in Azaline's manner; and his opinion again turned dead against the possibility of her possessing any real good feeling; so that it was with a mingled bitterness and cold reserve that he said, "I should have thought, Miss Osborne, you would have had something more grave and serious to remark upon after having witnessed the scene up-stairs. For though I myself chose not to intrude upon it, yet can I fancy what it must be."

"I am enabled to assure you, Mr. Walpole," exclaimed Azaline, smiling, "that it is a scene of complete happiness—yet a happiness which in itself is touching and affecting."

"It is fortunate, Miss Osborne," interjected Edward, as if with the bitterness of a retort, "that you have at length found something to touch your heart."

"Oh, yes," cried the young lady; "it was indescribably affecting to hear how Hester spoke."

"And may I be permitted to inquire what was the chief topic?"

"She spoke of many things, Mr. Walpole. But, Oh! she is not ungrateful—and I am bound to confess that it was of *you* principally she spoke."

"Of me?" said the young man. "But yes: I know that Hester would speak well of me."

"As in duty bound, Mr. Walpole," suggested Azaline.

"And therefore you have only taken what she has said of me as a mere matter of course—But of what consequence is it? I think, Miss Osborne, I shall now take my leave:"—and there was something restless, agitated, and perturbed in Walpole's manner, tone, and looks.

"Perhaps, as you have constituted me the arbitress of your destinies," resumed Azaline, "and therefore invested me with more or less of a judicial character towards you, I ought in justice to declare that never did one human being speak more highly of another than that grateful girl has just spoken of you. And it was with no false enthusiasm—with no strained effect—that she spoke, but with the most genuine sincerity. Indeed, the veriest sceptic in the world, Mr. Walpole, could not doubt the value of a character when proclaimed in such terms. And then too, when all this panegyric comes to be associated with whatsoever other little circumstances had transpired in your favour—other proofs I mean of your generosity and honourable feeling, your magnanimity, the goodness of your disposition,—when, I say, I take all these things into consideration, I must confess that I am by no means sorry to have formed your acquaintance; and—and—I will even admit that I have perhaps reason to be proud of your friendship."

Azaline had first begun this long speech with a smiling mien, which still appeared to the distorted vision of the young man to be full of banter and mockery; then, as she progressed, her manner became more grave, until her voice ceased speaking amidst an affability, a kindness—almost a tenderness—which were now no longer to be mistaken.

"Oh, Miss Osborne!" exclaimed Walpole, his heart again leaping within him; "is it possible you can thus think well of me?"

"How can I think otherwise, after all I have seen and heard of you?"

"But you have only known me for so short a time!"

"Ah! now you yourself are raising objections!" said the young lady, with an arch smile indescribably sweet.

"Good heavens! what do you mean?" exclaimed Edward, full of rapture and suspense: "what am I to understand? what may I hope?"

"You may understand, Mr. Walpole," rejoined Azaline, bending upon him a look full of tenderness, "that I believe you to be a worthy and excellent young man; and if any words of hope falling from my lips can constitute your happiness, they shall be spoken—you may consider them already as good as said!"

It was a cry of joy with which Edward welcomed this assurance: and throwing himself upon his knees at Azaline's feet, he took her hand and pressed it to his lips. He gazed up into her lovely countenance: there was a long silence—and by the looks which she bent upon him, she showed that he was indeed very far from being an object of indifference to her.

But all of a sudden Walpole started up as if a serpent had stung him; and springing up to his



feet, he began pacing the room in an excited manner.

"What is the matter with you, Edward?" asked Azaline, stopping him, taking his hand, and looking with affectionate anxiety in his face.

"I am not worthy of you, Azaline!" he cried.

"Not worthy of me? Surely it is for me to make the appreciation of your good qualities," she said; "and did I not ere now specify and enumerate them?"

"But there is something which has been kept back! something which has been withheld from your knowledge! Oh, do not ask me!—but let me leave you, Azaline! Forget that this scene has taken place! I tell you that I am not worthy of you!"

"And I tell you, Edward Walpole," answered Miss Osborne, impressively, "that you are worthy of me—and I love you—and I am prepared to present you to my parents as my intended husband. No. 45.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

band. Heaven knows that I care but little for the advantage of wealth that you possess—and it has no weight in influencing my feelings. I love you for yourself alone. Nevertheless, your pecuniary position will smooth down every difficulty which my father and mother might possibly raise up; and therefore on this point you need entertain no apprehension."

"Admirable Azaline!" cried the young man: and then the enthusiastic admiration which his looks for an instant expressed, was succeeded by a look of anguished bitterness, as he dashed his open palm against his brow, exclaiming, "Oh, why am I unworthy of you? why have I so foully deceived you?"

Any other young lady would have been frightened and shocked by these self-accusings: but it was different in respect to Azaline. With firmness, decision, and emphasis, blended with feminine tenderness, she said, "If there be any inco-

dent of your past life which you have hitherto kept unrevealed until this moment, I have no reason to complain. It is only within the last few minutes that I had acquired any right to penetrate into your circumstances at all. And let me add, that I already know too much to your credit to be easily swayed in an opposite direction."

"O Azaline! as amiable as you are beautiful! I tremble at the idea of losing you—and yet I dare not deceive you!"

"I like you all the better, Edward, for this honest assurance. It is perhaps," continued the young lady, "some youthful error——"

"Worse than an error, Azaline!" he ejaculated: "it was a crime!"

"You may call it a crime if you will," she responded, with unalarmed looks; "but I cannot bring myself to believe that you were ever guilty of any cold-blooded deliberate wickedness proving your whole nature to be corrupt and your entire disposition to be thoroughly debased and degraded."

"No—thank heaven, no!" cried Walpole. "It was an impulse of desperation's self—want goaded me to crime—destitution—misery—aye, and shared too by another!"

"Well, tell me all this, Edward," interrupted Azaline. "You know that there is no ridiculous fastidiousness about me; and I am inclined to view offences precisely as they are, and not in the light in which society's laws seem to ordain that they shall be considered."

Thus speaking, she resumed her seat upon the sofa: she motioned Walpole to place himself by her side; and calmly, and without excitement, as also without too much encouragement on the one hand or any mistrust on the other, she said, "And now tell me your secret."

Then the young man revealed to her that one fatal episode in his history: he narrated it in a few words; and she listened with a countenance that remained unmoved in its expression, as we have just described it.

"Edward," she said, when he had finished, "my good opinion is in no way changed concerning you. Tranquillize your feelings. Not for a single instant do I hesitate to declare my readiness to become your wife! But perhaps after all that has occurred, it would please you to leave your native country for a period—indeed I may say for years; so that you should never stand the chance of meeting any one who may have known you in less prosperous times?"

"And do you mean me to separate myself from you until all recollection of the past is, so to speak, blown over?"—and it was with the anguish of indescribable suspense that the young man gazed upon the beautiful countenance of Azaline Osborne.

"No:—such was not exactly my meaning," she responded: and then, with one of those smiles so deliciously sweet, displaying the pearly teeth, she went on to remark, "There is perhaps such a thing as realising a certain dream which happened to come to your knowledge."

"Oh, I understand, Azaline!" cried Edward: "that wished-for journey to the East!—that abandonment of England's barbarism in the midst of civilization, for the purpose of seeking a civilization in the midst of barbarism!"

"So that the circumstance of your having listened at the casement, Edward," rejoined Azaline, with another smile of arch sweetness, "shall have had its uses in more ways than one."

"Oh, blessed be that evening!" exclaimed the young man enthusiastically: "blessed be the inspiration which led me to listen at that casement!—for to this circumstance may be ascribed all the happiness which is now being enjoyed by a mother and daughter in the room above, and all the ineffable bliss which I am experiencing with you here!"

"And therefore, added Azaline, as she abandoned her hand to her lover, who pressed it with rapture to his lips, "the dream of oriental travel in which I indulged, was not a mere phantasy on my part; and there was also something prophetic in the words that Lady Aimesbury spoke when she said that if I were to meet one with congenial sentiments who would become the companion of my voyage, I should not go alone!"

CHAPTER LXVII.

TIM GAFFNEY AND HIS FRIEND.

THE British public has had the assurance of no less a person than Mr. Thomas Gaffney that the *Hog in Armour*, situated in Marylebone Lane, was a highly respectable public-house: but perhaps the assertion might be doubted from the simple fact that this worthy had taken to frequent it. We are not however going to inflict so much tediousness upon our readers as would be involved in the discussion of the point; and therefore, without farther preface, we will proceed to state that on a particular evening, some few days after the incidents we have just been relating, Mr. Gaffney might have been seen occupied with his grog and his pipe in the parlour of the public-house aforesaid. He was flashily dressed, as on a previous occasion when we saw him: namely, at Thornbury Park in the adventure of Sir Abel Kingston and the water-tank; but his appearance was still more dissipated than ever, and his garments were somewhat soiled with the liquors that had been spilt over them when he was in a state of intoxication. Every now and then he looked up at the clock; and then gave a slight gesture of impatience, as if he were expecting some one who was behind his time. There were half-a-dozen other men present in the parlour of the public-house; and the conversation chiefly turned upon horses, betting, sporting matters, and prizefighting—with all of which Mr. Gaffney was exceedingly familiar.

Presently the door opened; and an individual, still more flashily dressed, and looking more dissipated than himself, made his appearance. Gaffney's countenance brightened up, as he said, "Well, Jack—you're come at last. I'd begun to give you up."

Mr. Peppercorn—for he was the new-comer—called for something to drink; and when he had thus refreshed himself, he obeyed a sign which was made by his friend to follow him. They had the persons in the parlour "good night," as if about to leave the house; but instead of doing so, they ascended to a little back room on the first floor, where candles were lighted, and materials for

drinking and smoking were ready prepared upon the table.

"I couldn't come before, Tim," said Jack Peppercorn, as they sat down together: "I only got back from the country an hour ago; and while I was getting a bit of summut to eat, the slavey at my lodgings delivered the message you had left for me. What's in the wind? Anythink good?"

"How's the cash department with you, Jack?" demanded Gaffney, without immediately answering his friend's question.

"At low watermark, Tim. I traced the feller as took me in with that horse-transaction and t'other matters, down as far as Ashford, and there I lost sight of him: so I come back no better than I went—but perhaps a little the worsen. And you, Tim?"

"Why, you know, Jack, the night I got so infernal drunk at the boozing-keu over in Southwark, that blackguard Irish fellow picked my pocket——"

"Well, well, I know that, Tim—and you swore a oath as you'd never rest till you'd ferreted him out. My eyes! wasn't you wild, Tim?"

"And wasn't it enow to make a chsp wild—so many good bank-notes changing hands in such a cursed fashion! But I wasn't wilder than you, Jack, when that horse-chaunting scoundrel let you in, and then not satisfied with swindling you out of half your blunt, set them two skittle-sharpening fellows to rob you of the rest."

"Well," said Jack Peppercorn, making a wry face, "I 'spose the long and the short of it is, Tim, that you and me is both in the same case—regularly sewed up, with scarce a feather to fly with, and deuced little better off in the world for all them fine affairs which we had a few weeks ago, with Dukes and Duchesses, and that ere unbeknown cove which sent us down into Dorsetshire to Squire Ponsford's."

"You've put the matter just as it stands, Jack," replied Mr. Thomas Gaffney:—and here we may parenthetically remark, that though his Christian name was really Thomas, yet he was usually known as Timothy, or plain Tim, by his comrades—a change of nomenclature being not altogether uncommon amongst gentlemen of his dubious avocations.

"Then we are both what's called stumped, Tim?" remarked Peppercorn; "and I 's'pose that you wouldn't have sent such a pressing message for me if you hadn't got some nice little business in-hand?"

"That's about it, Jack," responded Gaffney; "and I'm werry much deceived in my man if you ain't the chap as is game for the transaction."

"Tell us what's to be done, Tim, and you'll see that I shan't flinch. Besides," continued Peppercorn, "even if one's courage wasn't screwed up uncommon tight, this hungry state of the pocket would soon goad and aggrawate a feller into all sorts of bravery. But what's in the wind, Tim?" he again asked.

Mr. Gaffney slowly expelled a long whiff of smoke from between his lips; and then fixing his eyes with an almost solemn degree of significancy upon his companion, he said, "Jack, I've made a dialivery—and I mean us to profit by it. The Unbeknown is no longer unbeknown."

"D've mean the chap that sent us off into Dorsetshire on the Ponsford business?"

"The same," rejoined Gaffney. "You recollect I told you that I wasn't at all sure about him—I didn't know whether he himself was Rupert Pringle or not—I didn't even know his name, or where he lived—he gave me the appointment on one of the bridges——"

"And to do him justice," interjected Jack Peppercorn, "he paid you the price agreed upon for the little business down in Dorsetshire, although you hadn't got the papers to hand over to him. That was what I call doing the thing handsome, Tim—and I said so at the time."

"Well," observed Gaffney, with a peculiar dryness, "if you're so deuced well pleased with our customer, it's werry likely you'll hesitate to enter into the business that I was a-going to propose."

"I don't understand you, Tim," replied Peppercorn. "I never had no scruples yet—and I don't think I'm likely to become a wictim to any weakness in that kind of way just at present. But does this Unbeknown now want us to do summut so werry desperate that you thinks as how I shall flinch?"

"In the first place, I tell you," replied Gaffney, "that he's no longer a unbeknown; and in the second place I must make you understand that we are not going to work for him, but in a certain sense against him."

"Well," said Peppercorn coolly, "if anybody else will pay us better——"

"It's not that, Jack. I doubt whether any one can pay us better: but there's a slight difference betwixt the feller's paying us of his own accord, or without his will."

"Ah! now I begin to twig," said Jack Peppercorn with a knowing leer. "Go on, Tim."

"Why, the long and short of it is," pursued Gaffney, "this Unbeknown, as we used to call him, is a werry rich genelman—or miser, they say, with lots of tin—and his crib is worth the cracking."

"Then let us crack it," said Peppercorn. "Who is he?"

"His name's Casey; and he lives up in Hatton Garden. I found this out the day before yesterday. It was quite by accident. I was going along Holborn, when I saw a cab pass—and who the deuce should be in it but my friend the Unbeknown, as he still *was* at that hour to me. I esw it turn into Hatton Garden. Then my genelman got down, walking werry feeble and looking werry pale, as if he had been ill; and he stops to quarrel with the cabman about his fare for five minutes—so I'd a good stare at him from a distance, and was sure I couldn't be mistaken. Well, in the evening, I makes inquiries when it was dusk, and finds out who my genelman is."

"Then he's not Rupert Pringle arter all?" said Peppercorn.

"How should I know? or what does it matter to us? Perhaps Casey is a false name: perhaps it isn't. It's all the same to us."

"I don't know that," said Peppercorn thoughtfully. "If so be he's raly Rupert Pringle, we might get out of him by threats as much or more than we shall by violence."

"Noneens, Jack! I'm ashamed on you for your hignorance!" replied Gaffney. "Suppose

he is Rupert Pringle—who could do him a injury except Squire Ponsford? But the Squire himself can't without the help of them dockments; and I don't suppose that Stephen Ashborne, the bailiff, took 'em from me, after all he said, just to give 'em back into the Squire's hand. No, no! He said that precisely what he wanted was that the chap which employed *us* in the matter, should apply to *him* for the papers. So no doubt he has done so; and them papers have long ago been burnt to tinder."

"You're right, Tim," said Peppercorn: "there's nothing to be done in that line. I see I'd better listen to what you've got to propose than sit here argufying."

"I've deuced little more to say," rejoined Gaffney, "except this much—that Casey is a rich man, and a miser—that misers generally keep the best part of their gold under lock and key in their own houses—and that therefore this pertikler house in Hatton Garden may prove a verry convenient one for us to visit. I haven't been idle, Jack, since the idea first entered my head—"

"What did you do, then?" asked Peppercorn.

"Why, rayther a bold thing," pursued Gaffney. "I dressed myself up as a policeman—You know Ben Bunk, the landlord here, always has two or three disguises of that sort for the use of any pertikler friends of his—And I came into the neighbourhood last evening after dusk; and blowed if I'd been five minutes in Hatton Garden before I was in the midst of a most tender and loving conversation with the housemaid, who had just slipped on her bonnet and shawl to go on an errand to the clear-starcher's. Well, I played my cards so skilfully, that what betwixt the pretty housemaid and a chimbley-sweep that I met coming out of the house this morning, and whom I questioned, I managed to get all the information wanted. The family consists of father and mother, son and daughter. The father has been ill lately, and so he sleeps in a room by himself; and Mrs. Casey also sleeps alone at present. The daughter's chamber is next to the mother's. The young man—Sylvester's his name—a deuce of a swell!—occupies a room on the third floor. Howsomever, I tell you I know the whole geography of the place; and there's a good business to be done if you like to do it with me."

"I'm your man, Tim, without another word," answered the worthy who was thus appealed to. "When is it to be done?"

"To-night," responded Gaffney. "It's now about ten o'clock—and midnight shall be our time."

"Good," rejoined Peppercorn: and then the two villains proceeded to discuss the details of their intended expedition.

There we will leave them for the present, in the up-stairs parlour of the *Hog in Armour* in Marylebone Lane,—while we shift the scene to another quarter of London.

It was about a quarter before twelve o'clock, that Stephen Ashborne was walking with another individual up Holborn Hill. The latter personage was about forty—with an open, frank, but somewhat careworn and even dissipated countenance; and he was dressed in the style which indicates the lover of field sports, while the unmistakable

gentility of his bearing forbade the belief that this style of costume was any mere vulgar gentish assumption on his part. We may as well at once inform the reader that this was Sir Norton Bridgeman, in whose service Stephen Ashborne had been prior to his application for the situation of bailiff on the estates of Squire Ponsford.

"And thus, Stephen," said Sir Norton, "you have been doing nothing since you left me in Hampshire?"

"Next to nothing," responded Ashborne, faltering for a moment. "It is true I did enter the service of Squire Ponsford, as I told you just now, sir—"

"Ah, but you said it was only for a few days," interjected Sir Norton; "and you did not like the berth?"

"True enough!—and I left it. Then I came up to London, looking out for something to do—Indeed to tell you the truth, Sir Norton, I thought of emigrating—and so I was making inquiries on the subject—"

"Well, well," interrupted Bridgeman, who was evidently a kind-hearted personage, and who spoke with a friendly familiarity to Ashborne, "you shan't think of emigrating now. It is lucky I have fallen in with you—and you shall soon return to your old berth in Hampshire. You see, my affairs weren't quite so desperate as I fancied—and then the sudden death of that distant cousin of mine, with the consequent tumbling-in of a legacy that I had never expected—together with the generous forbearance of my principal creditor, the eminent contractor Mr. Seymour,—all these circumstances have helped to facilitate a settlement; so that in a week or two's time, my lawyer assures me that I shall be set upon my legs again."

"I am rejoiced to hear it, sir," remarked Ashborne feelingly.

"I know you are, my good fellow. I am sure of it," replied Sir Norton. "But, as you perceive, I am living very quietly just now—because if I were to launch out before the business is finally settled, my other creditors might prove more difficult in being brought to terms. That's the reason you found me dining at the comparatively cheap and humble tavern where you happened so singularly to drop in to take your own dinner."

"And where," added Ashborne, speaking with additional fervour, "I have passed so pleasant an evening, Sir Norton, in your company."

"Well, here we are at the corner of Hatton Garden," said Sir Norton, now stopping short. "This is where I am lodging for the present, next door to my own lawyer's—so it is very convenient, you perceive. However, there is my card—you must come and see me to-morrow according to the appointment I just now gave you—and then we will settle all our future arrangements. Good night, Ashborne, my dear fellow! I am really quite rejoiced that I should have fallen in with you!"

There was a warm shaking of the hands, and then the baronet and the bailiff separated. The former turned into Hatton Garden—which, for the benefit of some of our country readers who are unacquainted with London, we may as well observe is no garden at all, though in former times it was: but it is now a rather wide street

leading out of Holborn. It was along this latter thoroughfare that Stephen Ashborne was about to continue his own way, when he was suddenly struck by the appearance of a man who in company with another individual, passed him somewhat hastily at the moment. Ashborne glanced back, and lost sight of the two men as they turned into Hatton Garden. Ashborne hesitated: he thought he must be mistaken—but the next moment he mentally ejaculated, "No, I am not wrong! It must have been the fellow Gaffney! And here too, in this neighbourhood! Can it be possible that *he* is still employing such ruffians for any purpose of his own?"

Ashborne no longer hesitated to follow the two men. He soon came within view of them again; and as they were hastening along Hatton Garden, he was careful not to let them perceive that he was watching them. He was convinced that the recognition had not been mutual; for Gaffney had passed him by in a hurried and preoccupied manner which showed that he had something important upon his mind. As for Peppercorn, Ashborne did not know him; for he it recollected that the bailiff had not fallen in with the inferior villain on the night when he had encountered the principal one at The Firs.

Stephen Ashborne, still acting cautiously and warily, kept his eye upon the two men, and speedily saw them halt in front of a particular house, fling their regards around, and then look up at the windows of the habitation itself.

"Yes, it is *this* house!" muttered Stephen to himself: "and it is therefore with *him* that their business lies! Yet can they have any evil intent? do they meditate any treachery or mischief against him?"

Such were the questions which for a moment flashed to Stephen's mind: but the suspicions which engendered them were almost instantaneously dispelled. He knew that the men had been employed—or at least one of them—by Mr. Casey to perform the particular service at The Firs in Dorsetshire; and ought it therefore to be looked upon as very extraordinary that they should now be seeking that same Mr. Casey? Might he not have fresh employment to give them? Might they not be coming to that house according to his own appointment?

Such was naturally the train of reasoning which now swept through the mind of Stephen Ashborne; and if he were not perfectly convinced on the point, he at all events did not think fit to interfere—at least at this stage of the proceedings. But still he watched at a little distance, and from the shade of a doorway which effectually concealed his person from their view.

Hatton Garden is no considerable thoroughfare, even in the daytime: but at night it is comparatively deserted. There was not literally a soul to be seen by Tim Gaffney and Jack Peppercorn as they once more swept their looks to and fro ere descending into the area of the house. Stephen Ashborne saw them disappear down those steps: he waited a minute or two—then he walked past—he looked over the area-railings—but the two men were already inside the dwelling.

"Such prompt admission seems to prove that they were expected," he said to himself. "Alas, that he whom I am compelled to call my father

should still be pursuing those paths which render the assistance of such men necessary unto him!"

With this reflection Stephen Ashborne was about to retrace his way, and interfere no farther in the proceedings which had up to this point interested him, when his mind was smitten with a certain vague misgiving; and retiring to a little distance, on the opposite side of the street, he paused and watched anew.

But let us now follow in the footsteps of the villains whose conduct was more or less the subject of perplexity with him. A skeleton-key had quickly unlocked the area-gate:—down the steps the two men had descended: and another of those implements so useful in the burglarious profession, had promptly procured admission into the front kitchen. For amongst the particulars which the prudent and foreseeing Mr. Gaffney had contrived to learn previous to undertaking the campaign, was the fact that no bolts were fastened inside the door that afforded this ingress. Once within the house, the burglars soon ascertained that all was still; and they delayed not their operations. A dark lantern was quickly lighted; and by the aid thereof the lower rooms were inspected—namely, the breakfast-parlour, the dining-room, and the little study or office specially appropriated to Mr. Casey's own use.

"No silver, Jack! Nothink but plated articles!" whispered Mr. Gaffney, with a look and tone of infinite disgust, to his companion, after they had made a rapid search of the contents of the side-board in the dining-room. "The silver forks and spoons is gone up-stairs—if so be they uses any at all. No wine neither! Nothink but a drain of sherry in this decanter"—placing it to his lips:—"and blow me if even *this* isn't Cape Madeira at one-and-three the bottle! Depend upon it, Jack, they're werry mean people!"

"Misers' families always is," responded Mr. Peppercorn. "But it's no use wasting time here—"

"Not a bit, Jack," interjected his comrade. "Come—let's creep up-stairs to the miser's room—I know which it is. Here—hold the darkey while I get ready the *settler*:"—thus using the slang term for chloroform.

The two ruffians, having made all the preparations which they deemed requisite, crept noiselessly up the stairs; and Tim Gaffney, who acted as leader, halted at length at a particular door, where, with suspended breath, he and his companion listened. A complete silence prevailed within: but a peep through the key-hole showed that a rushlight or taper was burning in that chamber. Gently did Tim Gaffney now try the handle of the door: it was not locked—it yielded to his touch—and he opened it. But the moment his looks were plunged into the interior of that apartment, he gave a slight start as he beheld articles of female apparel scattered about. Then he glanced towards the couch; and there, instead of the cadaverous and wrinkled countenance of the miser, he beheld the fresh and youthful face of a female of exquisite beauty.

Gaffney's first impulse was to withdraw,—when his attention was suddenly drawn to certain articles which he beheld upon the toilet-table where the wax taper was burning. These were a gold watch and chain, a purse, some rings, and

other articles of jewellery: so that it suddenly occurred to the principal burglar that as he had once found his way into that chamber, it would be a sin not to stretch forth his hand and grasp the booty which lay almost within reach. Selina Casey—for she it was—slept soundly: but Tim Gaffney, by way of making sure doubly sure, applied the chloroform to her nostrils—and the dreamy repose of slumber at once passed into a state of trance-like unconsciousness. Meanwhile Jack Peppercorn, who had followed his leader into the room, was securing the jewellery about his person, and for a moment glancing at the contents of the purse to satisfy himself as to the value of this portion of the booty.

Tim Gaffney—confident that no alarm was to be apprehended on the part of the young lady—was not disposed to quit the chamber until he had made sure that there was nothing else which was worth carrying off; and a box, having the air of a jewel-casket, standing upon a side-table, caught his eye. It was locked: but by the aid of one of the convenient little instruments with which he had provided himself, he forced the lid in the twinkling of an eye; while Jack Peppercorn as skilfully and as rapidly played a similar part in reference to a writing-desk which was standing upon the same table. The jewel-casket contained a few more trinkets, which were at once taken possession of: but the contents of the writing-desk rewarded not the trouble of the rigger. Jack Peppercorn tossed out all the papers which it contained, in the hope of finding some bank-notes: but his search was vain; and as for the papers themselves, they looked more like legal documents of some species or another than those little packets of letters and billets which one might have expected to find in a young lady's writing-desk. Without taking the trouble to replace these documents in the repository whence he had tossed them, Peppercorn left them strown in disorder about the table, and silently followed Tim Gaffney from the chamber.

They closed the door, and paused for a few moments upon the landing. Tim Gaffney looked puzzled; and his companion gazed upon him with a certain air of anxiety and perplexity. In short, the difficulty was in respect to Mr. Casey's room. Gaffney saw that he had either made a mistake in respect to the information he had received; or else that some change had that very day been effected in reference to the sleeping apartments. In the one where he expected to find Mr. Casey, Selina had been discovered sleeping. Where, now, was the miser himself to be looked for? But Tim's doubt and hesitation only lasted for a few moments: his mind was quickly made up, as he said to himself, "What a fool I am! I must have mistook the two rooms!—so now we shall find the father in the one which I thought belonged to the daughter."

He thereupon led the way, softly, and on tiptoe as before, to the room which he supposed was the one where he should find the sinner; and on trying the door he was not very much astonished to discover that it was locked. By aid of the dark lantern, he quickly ascertained that the key was in the lock: then he applied his ear to the key-hole; and listening with suspended breath, he could catch the regular heavy breathing of the occupant of that room. That the individual was

of the male sex, he was tolerably well convinced; and he delayed no longer to commence operations upon the door by means of the implements with which he was provided. We have already described, in a previous chapter, the process by which a door locked from the inside might be opened from the outside; and it will therefore now be sufficient to state that Tim Gaffney adopted in the present case precisely the same means which he had used to effect an entry into Squire Ponsford's sleeping-room at The Firs.

All continued still within the chamber, except the regular heavy breathing of its-occupant: darkness likewise prevailed in that room; and as the curtains were drawn close over the window, no ray of moonlight could penetrate to show the burglars who the sleeper was. They carefully closed the door, and stole on tiptoe towards the bed, guided by the sounds of the sleeper's breathing; and then Tim Gaffney turned the dark lantern so as to fling a ray of light upon the couch. The countenance of the miser was at once recognised; but before the chloroform could be applied to his nostrils, he started up—for the light had suddenly awakened one who was but little accustomed to sleep heavily. Yet the cry which rose to the very brim of his lips found no farther vent; for the eyes which thus suddenly became wide open, had not even time to twinkle ere a terrific blow, dealt by the butt-end of a pistol upon the unfortunate man's forehead, struck him down: senseless upon his pillow. It was Peppercorn who had thus been prepared for any emergency that might arise; and he received a look of approval on the part of his friend Tim Gaffney.

"Now for a rummage, Jack," hastily whispered the latter; "and let's look sharp about it. Hullo, now! take care, clumsy!"

This ejaculation was called forth by the fact that as Jack Peppercorn was striding across the chamber towards the toilet-table, where a hunch of keys and a purse were lying, he caught his foot in one of the window curtains, which flowed upon the carpet; so that he not only tore it open for a moment, but likewise made the rings rattle upon the pole to which the draperies were suspended.

"All right, Tim," said Peppercorn, closing the curtains again; "there's no harm done!"—and with these words he proceeded to assist his friend in what the latter had been pleased to denominate a rummage.

The purse contained but little: an old greasy pocket-book, which was rapidly examined, afforded not the agreeable spectacle of bank-notes: fruitless also was the search into a chest of drawers and a trunk, the contents of which were tossed out upon the floor: vain likewise was the special endeavour of Tim Gaffney to ascertain whether there were any iron safe concealed in the cupboards or in the walls, or any strong-box in which the miser's hoards were kept. For he had the vulgar notion which is entertained relative to all persons of a griping, hoarding, usurious character—namely, that they always secure their money-bags in the place which they think best adapted for their own personal *surveillance*.

"Well, here's a go, Tim!" whispered Jack Peppercorn: "a regular forer! Where can the old hunks have put all his tin?"

"I'm blessed if I can tell, Jack," answered

Tim, also speaking in a low whisper, and with a look of deep disappointment. "Yet them keys must belong to somewhere!"

"Ah, if we only knowed where," said Jack Peppercorn gloomily.

"Hark!" suddenly ejaculated Tim Gaffney, though in a subdued tone; "what's that noise?"

"I'm blowed if there isn't footsteps somewhere!" said Jack. "Douse the glim, quick!"

"Stop! hush!"—and Gaffney stole towards the door, which he partially opened: then listening for an instant only—for that space of time was sufficient—he turned towards his companion; quickly whispering, "We must look out for it, Jack! There's an alarm somehow or another!"

Gaffney shut up the lantern as he spoke: then he again listened. The sounds which had previously alarmed him had ceased; but as he peeped over the banister of the landing, he beheld a sudden gleam of light thrown across the hall below. The glare of a policeman's bull's-eye was familiar enough to the ruffian; and grasping Peppercorn abruptly and violently by the wrist, he said in a hurried whisper, "This way, Jack! On tiptoe, and tread like a mouse, for your very life!"

Tim Gaffney led the way to a window at the back of the landing: for by the topographical knowledge which he had acquired in respect to the premises, he knew that this window opened upon the leads of a small building abutting against the back part of the house. His hand felt for the latch, the unfastening of which made a sharp click—which however signified but little, for the next instant the noise occasioned by flinging up the window caused a hurried rush of footsteps to proceed from the flight of stairs below that landing-place. Through the open window sprang Tim Gaffney: after him went Jack Peppercorn; and they alighted upon the leads of the projecting building, which was some eight or ten feet lower than the window from which they had descended. The moon was shining brightly; and a glance flung over the parapet of the building, showed Tim Gaffney in a moment that he was once more somewhat out in his reckoning. He had fancied that there would be a comparatively easy descent from the top of the out-building into the yard below, whence he had reckoned that he and his companion might escape into some of the adjoining premises, from which they should finally discover the means of egress: but now to his consternation he saw that the yard at the back of the house was much lower than the level of Hatton Garden upon which the front looked. Thus, to be brief, instead of having merely a dozen or so of feet to lower themselves down, the burglars found to their dismay that it was into a depth of more than double that distance that they must now leap!

They hesitated—they recoiled from the precipice over which they looked.

"Hullo, my men! you'd better give in and surrender!" exclaimed the voice of a policeman, whose head was now thrust out of the window.

"Take them! capture them! shoot them!" cried another voice, speaking in tones that were vehement and excited. "Murder has been done! seize the wretches!"

"Murder?" echoed Tim Gaffney. "Then here goes!"—and down from the building he leapt, just

as the police-constable sprang out of the window upon the roof of that abutting edifice.

"I surrender," said Jack Peppercorn, who did not dare follow the desperate leap taken by his comrade.

The policeman sprang his rattle and raised an alarm; and when the sounds had subsided, groans were heard coming up from below.

"Poor Tim! I'm afraid it's all over with him," said Jack Peppercorn, as he looked down and beheld his companion lying all doubled up like a bundle of old clothes in the paved yard beneath.

We will just interrupt the thread of our narrative for a moment to inform the reader that Stephen Ashborne, while watching the house from the opposite side of the street, had seen a light suddenly appear and then as rapidly disappear in one of the front rooms on the second floor. This, be it understood, was when Jack Peppercorn clumsily kicked apart the draperies in Mr. Casey's chamber. Ashborne was at once struck by the suspicious nature of the incident. Without exactly comprehending how the circumstance occurred, he thought it was the quick vanishing of the light of a dark lantern. If so, then those men had entered stealthily and with an evil intent. Besides, was it to be supposed that if they had gone thither by Mr. Casey's own appointment, he would have received them in one of the upper rooms, with the chance of alarming his family and the domestics?—but would it not have been somewhere in the lower part of the house that he would have given an audience to visitors arriving at that hour and evidently under circumstances of secrecy and stealthiness?

All these ideas passed much more rapidly through the brain of Stephen Ashborne than we have been enabled to commit them to paper; and as at the moment a police-constable happened to be passing, the young man communicated his suspicion that a burglarians attempt was then being made in respect to the house opposite. The officer at once agreed to accompany Ashborne: they first of all tried the area-gate—and on finding it unlocked, they descended. When the door leading from the area into the kitchen was found to be unfastened, suspicion grew still stronger: the constable and Ashborne ascended into the hall—and in less than a minute afterwards the sudden opening of the window on the second landing led to the catastrophe already described.

But we should observe that Stephen Ashborne had snatched the bull's-eye, or dark lantern, from the hand of the policeman; for he was in a horrible state of uncertainty as to what might have been going on in the house. He saw a chamber-door half open on the second landing, which was the same whence the burglars had descended from the window: he entered—and there he beheld the spectacle which caused him the next instant to rush forth again, and proclaim with horrified looks and excited tones that murder had been committed!

Alarm and confusion now prevailed throughout the house. Mrs. Casey, half-dressed, was hurrying from her own chamber: Sylvester, in a gaudy silk dressing-gown, and armed with poker and tongs, but looking deadly pale and desperately frightened, had ventured to descend half-way down the stairs from the higher storey, where he slept; and the two maid-servants, who constituted

the entire domestic staff of the establishment, were clinging to each other, half appalled as they were, a few stairs above the one on which the valorous Sylvester had so discreetly halted.

"What is it?" he exclaimed: "what's the row? I say, policeman, spring your rattle again, old fellow—and if nobody else comes—"

"There is nothing to apprehend, sir," said Stephen Ashborne, mournfully yet sternly. "The fatal mischief, I fear, is done."

Here Mrs. Casey sprang forward from the threshold of her own chamber; and darting into the room which her husband had occupied, she began to give vent to piteous lamentations. Sylvester flung down the weapons with which he had armed himself, and hurried after his mother; while Ashborne quickly demanded of the trembling and affrighted maid-servants where dwelt the nearest medical man.

"Doctor Scott—over the way," was the response: and in the twinkling of an eye Ashborne was speeding to fetch the professional gentleman.

As he tore open the front door, two or three other police-constables arrived upon the spot, to which they had been attracted by the sound of their comrade's rattle; and we may add a great portion of the neighbourhood had been aroused by the same din, so that the utmost excitement began to prevail, every worthy householder being smitten with the dread apprehension that if it were a house on fire it *must* be his own, or that if thieves had broken in anywhere it *must* be his own special habitation that was invaded.

Dr. Scott was speedily called up; and he was close upon the heels of Stephen Ashborne as the latter retraced his way into the house. They ascended straight to the miser's apartment; and there they found Mrs. Casey supporting her husband upon her bosom—while Sylvester, in obedience to her instructions, was bathing his father's brow with water and applying salts and essences to his nostrils. Dr. Scott approached the couch; and Stephen Ashborne stood by with a deep cloud upon his countenance. He indeed saw that all was over: he had suspected it from the very first—and it was only in obedience to a last faint hope, and in the usual spirit of Christian precaution, that he had rushed across the street to fetch the medical man. Dr. Scott's judgment was soon given:—Mr. Casey had ceased to exist!

The widow threw herself with tears and lamentations upon the body of her husband: Sylvester set up a howl, which was too noisy to have much sincerity in it; and Stephen Ashborne stood by with folded arms and tearless eyes, gazing with a profound mournfulness upon the face of the dead. He felt his father's loss,—that father whom he however dared not or chose not to proclaim as such!—and if he wept not outwardly, it was that his heart was shedding tears of blood inwardly.

"Madam," he said, abruptly starting from that species of stupor in which he had been standing—and as he thus approached Mrs. Casey, he spoke with a tone of the kindest sympathy,—“your daughter—where is she? Must she not be informed—”

Mrs. Casey started: she had utterly forgotten her daughter—or else perhaps she thought that Selina must be somewhere near, as Sylvester himself was; for her mind was in a cruel state of agitation, dismay, and affliction. Her daughter!

Good heavens! where was she? how could she have forgotten her? Had any mischief befallen her? had any evil overtaken the poor girl?

With passionate vehemence the poor woman gave vent to these queries: but we do not record them precisely in her own language, because this is not a scene which will admit of the infusion of that spirit of ludicrousness which pertains to the speaking of bad grammar. She besought Sylvester to accompany her to Selina's chamber: but the young man hesitated:—there might be a whole host of desperadoes concealed under the bed—indeed he would rather *not*, unless there was at least one police-officer to accompany them! Then Stephen Ashborne stepped forward and offered the poor lady his arm, saying, “Permit me to escort you, madam, to your daughter's chamber.”

“Oh! whoever you are, kind sir—”

“Ah, by the bye, who are you, sir?” inquired Sylvester, thus cutting short the expression of gratitude which was issuing from his mother's lips. “I'm sure we're much indebted to you, sir—”

Mrs. Casey asked his name; and after a moment's hesitation he replied, “My name is Stephen Ashborne, madam; and it was by a mere accident that I was just now led to suspect something and that I gave the alarm. Would to God,” he added, with mingled bitterness and fervour, “I had done so at first, instead of hesitating and delaying as I did!”

Mrs. Casey did not understand what he meant; and she had not time to ask, for the door of her daughter's chamber was now reached. She opened it and entered, followed by Sylvester: but Stephen Ashborne remained outside the threshold through a feeling of delicate respect for the sanctity of a young lady's sleeping apartment. It was again with a wild shriek that Mrs. Casey precipitated herself towards the couch;—and the ejaculations of despair which burst from her lips overcame every other consideration beyond that of a terrified curiosity on Ashborne's part, so that he no longer hesitated to enter the room. There lay Selina, looking as if she were dead! But Dr. Scott now appeared upon the scene; and he quickly relieved the agonies of a mother's suspense—for even at the first moment a certain odour which faintly prevailed in the room told him that chloroform had been used.

“Thank God!” cried Mrs. Casey; and giving vent to the natural feelings of a parent, she threw herself into her son's arms, bidding him express his gratitude to heaven that he had not lost a sister that night as well as a father.

Dr. Scott hastened to apply the proper restoratives to Selina, the mother soon rendering her assistance; and Stephen Ashborne was about to retire from the chamber, when all of a sudden Sylvester Casey ejaculated, “Hullo! what's all this here? Papers! deeds! Why, I'm blowed if the thieves haven't been here too!”

A cry of terror from Mrs. Casey's lips indicated the feeling with which she was inspired at the bare idea of the ruffians having been in her daughter's chamber.

“My eyes!” cried Sylvester, who, having approached the table, was now turning over some of the documents which had been tossed out of the writing-desk: “here's a go!”

“Sir,” said Stephen Ashborne, turning back



No. 46.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

from the door to which he was advancing, and addressing Sylvester with that same mingling of sternness and mournfulness which he had before displayed towards the young man,—“The voice should not be raised so loudly in the house of the dead—especially when it is a father’s loss whom you have to deplore!”

It was almost with fierceness, and certainly with sharpness and irritation, that Sylvester Casey turned round upon Stephen Ashborne as if he were about to demand of him by what right he interfered or administered a rebuke. But there was something in Stephen’s demeanour which overawed the ill-conditioned young man; and turning again towards the table, he exclaimed, “Look, mother! here’s the documents that father lost!”

At that moment Selina opened her eyes; and Mrs. Casey, heedless of what her son had just said, folded her daughter to her bosom, weeping and sobbing bitterly.

“Yes—by Jove! here they are!” exclaimed Sylvester; “the very deeds themselves! sixty thousand pounds’ worth, as the governor himself said! *That* at least is good—for they’re mine now! I’m the heir—and I’m just so much the richer than I should have been without the documents!”

A scream burst from Selina’s lips, as she sat up in the couch with her eyes glaring wildly upon her brother, who stood at the table gathering up the papers that were strown about.

“Ah, poor girl!” said the afflicted mother, “you don’t know what has happened!”

“How came the papers here, Selina?” asked Sylvester.

“Don’t talk of it,” said Mrs. Casey reproachfully, “when your poor father lies dead——”

“Dead? No! no!”—and in wildest accents did the words peal forth from Selina’s lips.

Mrs. Casey could give no reply; and Dr. Scott hastened to explain to the young lady in a few words that a mournful tragedy had characterised the hour then passing—that ruffians had broken into the house, and that her father was murdered!

“God forgive me!” moaned the wretched Selina, clasping her hands in an agony of grief. “But tell me—tell me—did my father know that ‘twas I who stole from him those papers?”

“Don’t say it child! don’t say it!” exclaimed the mother, terribly excited.

“I did do it!—alas, I did do it!” cried Selina.

“Tell me—tell me—has my father cursed me?”

“Unhappy child, how could you have done such a thing? But your poor father did not know it!”—and the mother again wept and sobbed as if her heart would break.

“God be thanked that my father knew not what I had done!”—and it was with indescribable fervour that Selina spoke these words.

Not daring to tarry longer upon the scene—fearing indeed that he had already lingered too much amidst the sanctity of those family revelations to be consistent with a strict delicacy of conduct—yet astounded and bewildered by the things which had thus become known unto him—Stephen Ashborne stole forth from the apartment, gently and noiselessly closing the door behind him.

On inquiry of the police-constables, he found

that Jack Peppercorn had been conveyed to the station-house, and that Tim Gaffney was at the same time borne, horribly maimed, to the nearest hospital. The young man gave his address to the constables in case he should be wanted to assist with his evidence the purposes of justice; and then leaving the ill-fated house, he betook his way in mingled sadness and horror to his own lodgings.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

STEPHEN ASHBORNE.

It was but a little past nine o’clock in the morning after the tragic occurrences just related, that Stephen Ashborne issued from the humble lodging where he dwelt, and proceeded to the West End of the town. On entering one of the principal streets, he appeared to be seized with a sudden hesitation: his manner, hitherto decided and firm in its purpose, grew abruptly irresolute; and stopping short altogether, he mentally ejaculated, “Shall I go? or shall I not?”

The workings of his features indicated the strength of the emotions that were agitating within; his cheeks grew red and pale in rapid transitions—his lips quivered—and a strange sinister light gleamed in his eyes. But the fit quickly passed; and he muttered to himself, “Yes, I must go! So solemnly adjured am I that I dare not refuse the summons! And then too, it is an appeal, and not a threat; and there is the fervid asseveration that no mischief is intended. Yes—I will go!”

Stephen Ashborne continued his way, all the more resolutely perhaps after that temporary hesitation; and in a few minutes he reached the door of a handsome house in the fashionable quarter of the town to which his steps had brought him. His summons at the bell was quickly answered by a servant in livery: he gave his name, and was ushered into a parlour, where he was not kept many moments waiting ere the personage who had sent for him made his appearance. This was Squire Ponsford. He looked pale, ill, and careworn: the calm gravity which was wont to sit upon his countenance, had been superseded by an air of distress. He was enveloped in a morning gown; and though only five or six weeks had elapsed since Stephen Ashborne saw him last, on the fearfully memorable occasion which the reader cannot fail to remember, yet his form appeared to have shrunk and to have become emaciated even in that comparatively brief space of time.

Yes—this was the first occasion on which Stephen Ashborne had met Mr. Ponsford since that terrible day on which so fell a deed was done and such terrific revelations were vented from the lips of the young man to smite the ears and paralyse the heart of the horrified father of the ruined Pamela! This was the first time they had met since that day; and if on the one hand Mr. Ponsford adopted the air of a suppliant, Stephen Ashborne did not on the other hand display any vindictive satisfaction on account of the crime he had perpetrated towards the beautiful and innocent Pamela.

"You have found me out, air," said Ashborne; "you have besought me to come hither—and I have not thought fit to disregard the summons. Yet it were well that our interview should be short, and that whatsoever you may have to say should be spoken in the fewest words possible."

"Yes—my demand shall be briefly made," replied Mr. Ponsford; "and let your answer be as quickly given. You have outraged my daughter—Perhaps there may ensue consequences which would cover her with shame if she had not a father's name to give to the possible fruit of your crime! In a word, therefore, Mr. Ashborne, you will not refuse to marry her?"

"And you, the father of that young lady," said Stephen, with a cold voice, manner, and look, "can make this request of one who has inflicted such a terrible injury upon your daughter!"

"I do, Mr. Ashborne," was the response.

"But your daughter herself," continued Stephen—"is it possible that she would accept as a husband the man who inflicted upon her so stupendous an outrage?"

"She will accept you as a husband, Mr. Ashborne," rejoined Ponsford.

"Have you told her everything, sir?" demanded Stephen: "have you explained to her how it was not the mere kindling of a desire on my part, nor a paroxysm of uncontrollable lust—but that it was a hideous revenge which I wreaked—despoiling your daughter of her honour because you, John Ponsford, violated the chastity of my mother!"

The unhappy father trembled visibly from head to foot—his pale countenance grew paler still—his lips quivered—and it was with nervous accents that he said, "No, no—I have not told my daughter all this! How could I look my own child in the face and talk to her on such monstrous topics? The veriest ruffian on God's earth would revolt against such gross indelicacy!"

"Then what have you said, sir?" demanded Ashborne, folding his arms across his chest and speaking in a stern peremptory tone. "Have you thrown the whole weight of the iniquity upon me,—presenting my crime to your daughter's view as one utterly unprovoked, and therefore so savage, so barbarous, so hellish indeed in its nature, that none but a demon incarnate could have perpetrated it?"

"No, Mr. Ashborne," replied Ponsford; "I have not sought to leave this impression upon my daughter's mind. Was I not compelled to offer some excuse for not invoking the law to smite you with all its awfulest vengeance? Well, then, it was not merely sufficient to tell Pamela that the hideous incident must be hushed up for her own sake—because in the frantic ravings which succeeded her return to consciousness, she demanded every species of retributive justice that human laws could possibly afford!—she recked not for her own fame or honour *then*! And therefore you see, Mr. Ashborne, I was compelled to say something—to—to——"

"To invent an excuse," interjected Stephen sternly, "for not handing me over to the grasp of the law."

"Yes—it was so," said Ponsford, in a trembling tone. "I told my daughter that your parents had sustained great wrongs at my hands in times past—I confessed that I had been very guilty

towards them—Oh! I did not spare these self-accusings! No, no! I did not!—for I told Pamela that in the same hour which should behold you, Stephen Ashborne, given over to the grasp of justice, my own repute would be blasted by the terrific exposures which would issue from your lips! And Pamela asked me for no more: she sought no farther explanations:—she shuddered—she shrank within herself—for then, for the first time, she found herself compelled to look upon her own father as far from being the upright faultless man she had always thought him, but one who had heavy sins upon his conscience!"

"And thus," said Ashborne, "your daughter thinks that if it be possible for extenuation to exist for the wreaking of so horrible a vengeance, it is to be found on my behalf? Is this her impression, Mr. Ponsford?"

"For a young creature who has sustained so deep a wrong—so foul an injury," answered the Squire, "it is difficult indeed to soften in any sense the keen bitterness of her appreciation of that wrong. But still, Mr. Ashborne, it must be evident to you that I have succeeded in reasoning somewhat with Pamela when I repeat that she is ready to receive you as a husband."

"And what if I were to refuse?" asked Stephen, speaking suddenly after a pause of nearly a minute.

"No, no—you cannot!" exclaimed Ponsford: "you cannot—and you will not! You are not naturally deficient in good feeling——"

"No!—heaven knows that I am not!" interjected Ashborne bitterly. "There used to be an angel in the sanctuary of my heart; and it must have been a terrific sense of my mother's wrongs which could have expelled that divine tenant to make room for the entry of a demon!"

"Well, then," cried Ponsford eagerly, "you will not refuse my request—my supplication—my prayer? I know that the injuries inflicted upon your mother were great and manifold: but surely they are now avenged!—surely you have wreaked upon me an adequate punishment! Ah, and there are some—nay, doubtless there are many in the world, who would say that the chastisement is too great, even as it falls upon me only; while in respect to my poor daughter, who of herself never injured you, you can scarcely feel that you had a right to wound me so deeply through her! But suppose, Stephen Ashborne, you had come to me and said that you meant to kill me—that you had prepared the means of inflicting horrible agonies upon me—and that I might vainly cry out for succour,—and then if you had begun to carry your threats into execution, you would have been justified!—yes, justified, I repeat, even though the mode by which you put me to death should have outvalled the tortures of impalement or of flaying! Yes—you would have been justified; because in striking that blow you would have smitten me only! But you did not do this!—you wounded me through another—and that other a being clothed with purity and innocence!—one who had never injured you! You inflicted two distinct vengeancees, Stephen Ashborne! You were not just—you have exacted more than your due! You had no right to strike *two*! Against one only—and that one myself—should your arm have been raised!"

"Where men deal with vengeance and retributions," answered Stephen Ashborne sternly, "they are not likely to prove over nice in the means which they adopt for carrying on their warfare. Where the provocation is terrible, the chastisement must be commensurate, and the sins of parents may become visited upon the children. But perhaps, from all you have been saying you may have meant to deduce some special argument?"

"Yes," rejoined Ponsford, "to prove to you that inasmuch as your vengeance has gone too far, you are bound to make some little atonement."

"Proceed," said Ashborne, seeing that the Squire paused for a response.

"You have doomed my daughter to a life of wretchedness; and for her sake I implore you to take the one step that may in some little degree mitigate the magnitude of her woe by at least ensuring her against the possibility of shame and dishonour. In a word, I ask you to marry her. Think not that I imagine it possible for you to live together—nor could she desire it. But consent to accompany her to the altar, Mr. Ashborne—and on leaving the church you will separate, most likely for ever!—You do not answer me?"

"I am reflecting—I am thinking of all you have said," responded Ashborne. "If I were to reply promptly, inconsiderately, and in my present state of mind, I should decide in the negative—I should say, No! I should proclaim that the oath which I took when I knelt by my mother's corpse, has only been adequately met by the vengeance which I have wreaked, and that if I now do aught to mitigate the effect of that vengeance the oath itself would become proportionately deprived of its complete fulfilment. Yes—such would be my decision if I gave it now on the spur of the moment;—and yet I am still accessible to argument—so that if you have aught more to adduce, Mr. Ponsford, I will listen."

"I have implored only for my daughter's sake," replied the Squire. "I know—or at least I fear it would be useless to urge anything on my own behalf. And yet, as you are not altogether without compassion—as your's is a soul not lost, but merely warped—you may perhaps feel moved somewhat towards me, when I tell you that I have a disease which may at any instant strike me down—and the only marvel is that I survived the blow which smote me on that terrible day! But it is no invented tale which I am telling for the mere sake of exciting your sympathy; and I declare that death may at any instant lay his hand upon me—for it is a heart disease which I have—and not more rapid is the thunder-stroke of apoplexy than will be the lightning-velocity of the arrow which, thrown from Death's hand, shall strike me down a corpse!"

"If you had continued to plead only for your daughter's sake," said Ashborne, with an implacable sternness of tone and look, "I might have been moved—I should have yielded! But now that you have dared obtrude your own sorrows upon me as a reason why I should exhibit leniency or do an act of mercy, I say, No! no!—ten thousand times—no!"

The voice of Stephen Ashborne rose thrillingly as he thus spoke; and John Ponsford shrank back aghast, for he thought that everything was at an

end and that the young man's resolve was unalterably proclaimed. But as Stephen Ashborne lingered in the room and did not offer to leave it, Ponsford took courage; and suddenly going upon altogether another tack, he said, "Mr. Ashborne, I have forgotten to name one thing—and perhaps you will still grant me your attention for a few moments."

"Proceed," said Stephen sternly. "What more have you to urge?"

"It may now be too late—it may be unnecessary and useless—but still I would not have you think that a debased and biggared meanness forms an item in the category of faults with which your imagination doubtless invests me. No!—far from it! I should have said to you that as I am rich, he who weds my daughter shall be likewise well cared for—yes, even in such a case as this when marriage would be followed by immediate separation! And surely, Stephen Ashborne, it must be a matter of more or less moment with you to be able to reckon with certitude upon your pecuniary resources—to know whence the means of your livelihood may come—to have no care for the morrow—in a word, to be independent—"

"Enough, sir! enough!" exclaimed the young man, with vehement indignation. "Would you have me sell myself for gold? By heaven! this insult—this outrage—"

"Nay—I meant it not as such," interrupted Ponsford. "Listen! be reasonable! Did I not ask you to marry my daughter?—and if you complied, would it not be but right that I should make over to you a portion of the wealth which at my death must become her's? My daughter, sir, is not dowless—"

"Again I say enough!" interrupted Osborne. "If I have lingered to hear the speeches which you have last addressed to me, it was only that I might satisfy myself to what length your cunning speciousness could reach. Your pecuniary offers I reject with scorn! If you flung all your gold at my feet, I would not accept it as a bribe to induce me to lead your daughter to the altar! No," continued Ashborne, his voice faltering and quivering slightly; "if I did yield—if I did consent to the demand which you have made—it would have been for the sake of her who was perhaps too cruelly wronged! Yes—my God! I have had my doubts!—and Ah! the way in which you yourself ere now shaped the matter, when you bade me observe that I had wreaked *two* vengeance instead of *one*—this assuredly made an impression upon my mind! Therefore, I repeat, if any consideration could have weighed effectually with me, it would have been for your daughter's sake, and not for the bribes which you have proffered me!"

An inner door flew open at this moment; and Pamela, gliding into the room, threw herself at Stephen Ashborne's feet, exclaiming in wild and heart-rending accents, "Then if not for my father's sake, at least for mine! for mine!"

We have before said that Pamela was exceedingly beautiful. The masses of her rich chestnut hair—flowing either in heavy tresses, or else scattering themselves in myriads of hyperion ringlets—enframed, without shading, a countenance which was wont to be characterised by an angelic loveliness until the destroyer of her innocence had appeared to shed his pestilential breath upon all

the best feelings and sweetest sentiments of her soul. Indescribably beautiful she still was: but, Oh! how changed under the goading sense of the terrific and irreparable injury which she had received! The whole world appeared to her in a new and different light. She had been wont to look upon it through the mirror of her own innocence: she now regarded it as it were through a glass darkly. She had well-nigh lost all her faith in human nature. She—naturally so pure, so good, so kind, and so generous—to have been visited by such a calamity—it almost made her doubt the justities of heaven itself! And thus the change that had taken place in her mind, had necessarily produced its influence upon her countenance. If she smiled now, it was no longer with an expression of unalloyed sweetness upon her lips: but there was a sad commingling of bitterness. Her looks no longer beamed with the soft satisfaction of an innocent and contented heart: there was something in her regards that would have seemed singular and unaccountable indeed to a stranger—and the compassioning individual would have turned in surprise and sorrow to look again at the young creature who was so beautiful and yet so unhappy!

Such was the unfortunate being who now knelt at the feet of Stephen Ashborne,—her chestnut hair flowing wildly over her shoulders—her pale anguished countenance upturned towards his own—her hands clasped—and the accents of her appealing voice vibrating all tremulous yet rending in his ears. A deadly pallor seized upon Ashborne's cheeks: he recoiled likewise for a moment, as if smitten with a remorseful sense of his deep guilt; and then he shaded his eyes with his hat. He could not bear to look upon the lovely creature whom he had destroyed:—vengeance against the father was at the moment forgotten in the illimitable compassion and sympathy which he experienced for the daughter!

"You will grant my prayer!" cried Pamela, now seizing one of the young man's hands and holding it forcibly in both her own.

"Answer me a question," he said, in a deep hoarse voice. "Tell me—have you overheard anything that has just now passed betwixt your father and myself?"

"No," answered Pamela. "I scarcely know why you ask me—but I tell you the truth. Throughout my life I have been accustomed to tell the truth; and on no account will I give utterance to a falsehood. I knew that you were here—I thought the interview a long one—I was full of suspense—Oh, a suspense so painful!—and so I approached the door to listen to what was passing; and then my ear caught the few last words which you said."

As Stephen Ashborne glanced towards Mr. Ponsford, he saw that this gentleman suddenly experienced an immense relief on finding that his daughter still remained ignorant of those facts which he would have little liked to come to her knowledge.

"Rise, Pamela," said Stephen Ashborne; "and answer me yet another question!"

The unfortunate creature rose from her suppliant posture; and as she now met Ashborne's pitying and mournful look fixed upon her, a burning blush suffused itself over her countenance: but the next instant she once more became pale as death. Her

violet eyes were bent downward: and as she stood there, the very personification of Beauty in distress, Stephen Ashborne asked himself how he could ever have been such a miscreant as to carry his vengeance to such a length, and with a false notion of retributive justice crush the purest and loveliest flower that ever bloomed in this world?

"Miss Ponsford," he asked in a voice that was deeper and hoarser than before, and which indicated a powerful concentration of feelings, "tell me deliberately and calmly from your own lips—do you desire that I should lead you to the altar?"

"I have knelt at your feet," she responded, in a faint and almost dying tone, "to implore that you will give me a name instead of that which is now sullied."

"But I am only an obscure and humble individual—"

"And I," she interjected, with a look of direct woe; "how lowly am I fallen in my own estimation!"

"But you must hate and detest the very sight of me!" pursued Stephen, now speaking with vehemence; "you must look upon me as the most abominable of miscreants—the most leathsome of reptiles—the most hideous of monsters!"

"Cannot you understand," asked Pamela, with a look and voice of mingled reproachfulness and entreaty, "that this interview is a painful one?"

"Yes!" ejaculated Ashborne; "and I ought not to prolong it! But before I say the parting word, let me put one more question, Miss Ponsford—Let me ask whether you really look upon me as a villain of the blackest die?"

"Oh, my God!" cried the miserable girl, literally wringing her hands, and quivering from head to foot as she spoke; "he is dragging me purposely through an ordeal of questionings!—he is wilfully and wantonly goading my soul to madness! Stephen Ashborne, if there were ever a single moment when from what my father has told me, I could have fancied that you were perhaps less guilty towards me than I might otherwise have deemed you,—you are now pursuing a course of cold-blooded and refined cruelty which is going far towards making me think the very worst of you! Oh, if you have yet one single remaining spark of honour or generosity—"

"Enough, Miss Ponsford!" interrupted Ashborne. "I only wished to satisfy myself that your father had really told you something which may have the effect of rendering me less odious in your eyes!"

"I have told you that I love truth," said Pamela; "and every word which flows from my lips is hallowed by the sincerity of the heart. Believe me, therefore, when I declare unto you that my father has done you this justice,—that without entering into particulars (and heaven knows I do not require them!) he has given me to understand that he is far from being without a fault towards your kith and kindred—and that you might well smart under the sense of keen and poignant wrongs! And now, in heaven's name, let this interview end!"

"It shall, Pamela," interjected Ashborne. "I would go down upon my knees and implore your pardon, were it not that my vengeance would cease to be vengeance if I expressed contrition

for it! But the atonement you have demanded shall be made. One more meeting—and then will we separate for ever! Strange mockery!—*that* next meeting shall be at the sacred shrine where indissoluble bonds are woven; and yet ours shall be severed in a moment then and there! Poor girl! if I thought that one word of sympathy from my lips—”

Here Pamela bent upon her destroyer a look of indescribable misery and reproachfulness: her lips wavered for an instant as if she would fain have spoken something that rose to the tip of her tongue; but whatever it were, it remained unsaid—and in another moment she disappeared from his view.

“Mr. Ponsford,” he said, approaching the father, “make all your arrangements for this ceremony—and fear not that I shall fail in my promise or that I shall be otherwise than punctual.”

The Squire reflected for a few moments; and then he said, “To-morrow morning—here—at ten o’clock—I will procure a special license—and—and—all shall be concluded.”

Ashborne bowed coldly, and issued from the house.

The appointment was duly kept on the ensuing morning; and this singular marriage took place. The minister of the Gospel came, accompanied by his clerk: an elderly female-servant, who had long been in the Squire’s family and who acted as housekeeper of the town-mansion, was present at the ceremony. The bridegroom and bride were both as pale as death: the clergyman and clerk could not fail to conjecture that there was something strange, if not absolutely sinister and wrong, in this wedding so mysteriously conducted; but all the legal requirements were fulfilled—their fees were liberally paid—and there was consequently no pretext for them to interfere. As for mere curiosity, the entire circumstances of the scene repelled the thought that it might possibly be gratified. And when the ceremony was over and the clergyman and his acolyte had withdrawn, Stephen Ashborne tarried not, but promptly took his own departure, having imprinted no kiss upon the cheek of his bride nor pressed the hand of her father!

CHAPTER LXIX.

HESTER’S FATHER.

In the forenoon of that same day Edward Walpole called at Charlton Villa; for Azaline still remained a visitress there. Hester had been removed to the maternal abode; and as she still continued very ill, her mother was filled with affliction—so that the restoration of her daughter, instead of proving of benefit to the mental condition of her ladyship, seemed for the present to threaten to become the source of still greater grief. Thus the generous-hearted Azaline would not desert her friend Lady Amesbury in such an emergency; and she prolonged her visit to Charlton Villa instead of returning to Trentham House in Berkeley Square.

But perhaps the beauteous Azaline had another motive for preferring the abode of her friend to

the paternal habitation? perhaps she felt that she could more conveniently receive the visits of Edward Walpole at the former place than at the latter—or at least for the present, until she should have communicated to her father and mother the engagement which she had formed and obtain their assent?

But to continue the thread of our narrative, we must repeat that it was on the forenoon of the same day on which the strange bridal ceremony took place, that Edward Walpole alighted from his horse at the gate of Charlton Villa; and flinging the bridle to the man-servant who answered his summons, he passed into the dwelling. Not finding Azaline in the parlour which was usually occupied at that period of the day, he was about to seek her in another apartment, when encountering a female domestic, he learnt from her that Miss Osborne had gone a few minutes back into the garden. Edward went in search of her; and he presently caught sight of the well-known beauteous form, seated, or rather half reclining, upon the grass near a fountain in a secluded part of the grounds. Determined to surprise her, he approached stealthily from behind; and he soon discerned that she was turning the leaves of a large book, over which she was bending. At length Walpole had contrived to draw so near, without being overheard, that he was enabled to peep at the contents of the book; and just at that instant Azaline gave audible utterance to the musings with which her mind was occupied. Little suspecting that he who was thus uppermost in her thoughts was so near, she ejaculated, “How foolish he would deem me if he knew that I was really sincere in this oriental project of mine! But, Oh! this is assuredly the costume that I shall choose!”

It was a large volume of plates referring entirely to oriental subjects, representing the most celebrated cities and scenes of the East, and giving delineations of national costumes in a most picturesque and attractive manner. At the instant when Edward Walpole, bending his head forward, peeped over at the volume, the plate which Azaline was contemplating represented a beautiful female figure, reclining upon a divan, holding a fan in one hand, and extending the other to receive the refreshment which it might be supposed a slave was at the instant offering. The costume was light, elegant, and admirably calculated to develop the symmetry of a fine figure. Such was the subject of the plate on which Azaline’s eyes were fixed.

“Never shall I think you foolish, Azaline!”—and as the well-known voice fell upon her ears, she started, looked upward, and blushed deeply.

But instantaneously regaining her self-possession, she proffered Walpole her hand, saying with one of her sweet smiles, “You are welcome, Edward: but you stole upon me in a somewhat unhandsome manner, for which I have a very great mind to scold you severely—”

“Of that you are incapable, dear Azaline!” replied the happy youth, flinging himself by her side on the grass, and carrying to his lips the hand which she had given him.

“After all,” she resumed, “that you should have intruded on the privacy of my thoughts, I can scarcely deplore: for you had a proof that my mind was occupied with your image while I deemed you away. But once again tell me,

Edward—do you not think me a strange, wayward, silly creature—foolish even to childishness—in enjoining myself to be amused with these notions of our contemplated Eastern travel?”

“I love you all the more, Azaline,” cried Walpole enthusiastically, “for everything that there is so romantic and wild in your imagination—your tastes——”

“And would you really like to see me attired, Edward, in some oriental costume? But, Ah! I forgot!” she abruptly exclaimed, with another of her sweet smiles. “The very question I have put will only lead you into paying me compliments and offering me flatteries!—and therefore let us at once turn the discourse to some other topic.”

“Not before I have proclaimed my conviction,” answered Walpole, “that no matter what costume you may wear, you must ever be the loveliest of your sex——”

“Edward! I will not permit it!”

“You must shine peerless amongst all women—conspicuous above all!—more brilliant—more dazzling!”

“Are there no means of stopping your lips, Edward?”

“Only thus,” rejoined the youth: and he pressed a kiss upon the heauteous mouth of Azaline.

“And, now, sir,” she said, blushing and smiling—half affecting anger in her tone, and yet with tenderness and pleasure blending softly in her looks,—“and now, sir, that I have been punished for my thoughtlessness in putting a question which led you into that sphere of compliments and flatteries wherein you are so proficient, I trust that we are going to be rational. There are two or three subjects on which I desire to speak to you. In the first place I must positively return home this afternoon: the death of this Mr. Casey may have more or less effect—though I cannot tell to what extent now—upon my father’s pecuniary circumstances. I am naturally anxious to learn how this may be——”

“And if you return to Berkeley Square, Azaline,” said Walpole anxiously, “must I apprehend that——”

“That I shall cease to desire your society?” interjected Azaline, with an arch smile. “Oh, I daresay, Edward, you will be enabled to find your way to Berkeley Square by invitation, just as you have found it every day for a week past to Charlton Villa.”

“Oh, but that invitation, Azaline?” exclaimed the youth. “In spite of all your kind assurances, I tremble at the decision which your parents may pronounce when you appeal to them!”

“Fear nothing, Edward;”—Azaline paused for a moment, blushing as if ashamed of her own vehemence; and then she said in a slower and lower tone, “My parents and my brother will offer no barrier to our happiness, Edward. Indeed, of Lancelot I can speak with as much certitude as if I were enunciating my own sentiments. I have been liberal towards him in regard to the affections of his own heart—I took his part when my parents would have compelled him to contract an alliance which he detested—I smiled upon the object of his love—I proved to him that I at least possessed no prejudices; and therefore, even setting aside the natural generosity of his disposition, he has every reason to become *our* partisan.”

“Thanks, dearest Azaline—thanks, for this assurance!” cried Walpole enthusiastically. “But your parents?”

“Edward,” responded the young lady, with a serious tone, and yet with a smile upon her lips, “you know that I love you: I do not hesitate to proclaim this fact over and over again; and much as I reverence and respect my parents, I shall assuredly follow the dictates of my own heart in preference to the dictation of a paternal despotism, even if it were attempted. But I do not apprehend any such demonstration of cruelty on the part of my father and mother. Enough, however, upon this point for the present: there is another subject on which we must converse most seriously. Poor Hester was much worse last night——”

“And what says the physician now?” asked Walpole quickly.

“He looks gloomy, and answers evasively when Lady Amesbury adjures him in that impassioned manner which you have observed, that he will save her child! And during the past night her ladyship seemed to awaken to the full sense of the danger which threatens Hester, and of the bereavement which therefore menaces herself. This morning she came to my chamber at an early hour; and she avowed to me a certain wish which her heart cherishes, and the execution of which also appears in the light of a duty. She hopes that you, Edward, will become the means of fulfilling this desire on her part—and that too with the least possible delay.”

“Tell me how I can serve Lady Amesbury,” cried Walpole, “and you shall see with what alacrity I will undertake any task which she may assign to me.”

Azaline Osborne proceeded to enter upon explanations; but we need not chronicle the details which flowed from her lips. It will be sufficient for the purposes of our narrative if we follow in the footsteps of Edward Walpole, when he presently left Charlton Villa.

Remounting his horse, Edward repaired at once to the West End of the town; and alighting at the door of a handsome-looking house, he inquired for Mr. Ponsford. The servant who answered the summons seemed to hesitate: he said that his master was certainly at home, but that he did not think he would receive any visitors; for we should observe that after the ceremony of the private marriage, Ponsford had shut himself up in his library, with an intimation to the domestics that he did not wish to be disturbed.

“It is not a mere ordinary visit which I am paying your master,” said Walpole: “indeed I am personally unknown to him, as he likewise is to me. But I seek him on a matter of some importance—and for this reason I request an immediate interview.”

The domestic retired to convey this message to Mr. Ponsford; and Edward Walpole was promptly ushered into the library. Ponsford rose from his seat to receive him; and Walpole, who had been wondering what kind of a man it was with whom he was about to be brought into contact, was much struck with that pale, serious, and melancholy countenance, the features of which were still so handsome notwithstanding that the individual himself had numbered sixty winters. On the other hand Ponsford marvelled what could be the important business which had procured him this visit from

the young man of interesting appearance who now stood before him.

"It is not altogether an agreeable task which I have to perform, Mr. Ponsford," said Walpole, taking the chair that was indicated by that gentleman; "and I could have wished that one of maturer years and of a larger experience in the world might have acted as my substitute on the present occasion."

"Pray be explicit, Mr. Walpole," said Ponsford, "and in as few words as possible come to the point."

"You must permit me to remind you," resumed Walpole, "of an episode in your life which dating some seventeen years back——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Squire, giving a sudden start: "to what do you allude?"—and it was with a visible effort that he strove to tranquilize and compose the feelings which had become so suddenly agitated.

"It is not for me, Mr. Ponsford, to read you a lesson of morality—no, nor yet to act as the champion of one whose wrongs are of so old a date——"

"You allude, Mr. Walpole, to a certain indiscretion on my part. It is impossible I can mistake your meaning! But for what purpose have you come to recall to my mind one of those incidents which from their very nature it were desirable to blot out of a man's life?"

"If I mention the name of Lady Ameshury," continued Walpole, "it must be sufficient to prove not merely that I am well acquainted with all the details of that episode in your life, but also that I am now an accredited agent coming direct from her ladyship."

"Yes, yes! I know that she to whom you allude, married General Ameshury. Years have elapsed since I heard anything concerning her—unless indeed it were the intelligence that she was left a widow——"

"And has it never occurred to you, Mr. Ponsford," asked Walpole,—"has it never suggested itself to your feelings to make an inquiry relative to the offspring of that illicit love of yours?"

"By heaven, yes, Mr. Walpole!" exclaimed Ponsford; "I did make such inquiries—and more than once too! But why these questions?—to what is all this discourse to lead?"

"To a piece of intelligence which by Lady Ameshury's desire I come to impart."

"If it be, Mr. Walpole," rejoined Ponsford, "that the poor child is dead, you come somewhat late to make the announcement."

"And how did it at any time reach your ears?" asked Edward.

"From the only source to which I could apply for any information at all upon the subject. It must have been three or four years ago that I addressed myself to that source—and then I was told that the child was dead."

"And if she were now alive, Mr. Ponsford," interjected Walpole, "she would be in her seventeenth year."

"What, in heaven's name, do you mean?" exclaimed the Squire. "Why thus allude to her? Your words, Mr. Walpole, are calculated to engender a strange idea in my mind—but yet it is impossible! Warren could not have been mistaken!—and as for wilfully deceiving me, such a thing is altogether out of the question!"

"Mr. Warren has deceived you," exclaimed the young man impressively:—"your daughter lives! she is now clasped in the arms of her mother!—but, alas! Death seems to be following close upon her track—and this is the reason wherefore I am here to make an announcement which Lady Ameshury deemed it her duty to convey unto you."

Ponsford listened with the stupor of astonishment to the details of this intelligence: and then suddenly rising from his seat, he approached his visitor, saying in a voice that was low and tremulous, "Is it possible, Mr. Walpole—tell me, is it possible that one whom I believed dead, yet lives?"

"She lives, sir—she lives! But heaven only can tell how long she may be spared to the mother unto whose arms she has been restored!"

"Or to the father," added Ponsford emphatically, "who now likewise yearns to fold her to his heart!"

"Do you really mean, Mr. Ponsford," asked Walpole, "that such is the state of your feeling?"

"Most solemnly I declare it to be!" was the impressive answer. "You may think, Mr. Walpole, that I am not a man capable of entertaining such kindly sentiments—judging me from my antecedents, you may suppose—and naturally so—that I am callous as I was formerly treacherous—hard-hearted as I was once perfidious——"

"Now I do really know by the terms in which you are speaking," exclaimed Walpole, alike affected and delighted, "that all good feeling is not extinguished in your heart! I shall therefore return from my embassy with more satisfaction than I experienced when entering upon it; and I shall be enabled to assure Lady Ameshury that the father of her child is not altogether indifferent to that child's welfare!"

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Ponsford. "The time was, Mr. Walpole, when I should have treated your mission with indifference—perhaps scorn and contempt—and when I should even have deemed it an impertinence that you came to address me on such a subject. But now, on the contrary, I thank you! I am an altered man. It is not altogether the weight of years upon my brow that has made its pressure felt upon my heart: but it is that circumstances have combined of late to convince me that there is a heaven to take cognizance of misdeeds committed upon earth, and that sooner or later there must be retribution for all wrong-doing. Oh, if I were to enter into particulars!"—and for a moment Ponsford wrung his hands bitterly. "But no, no!—this cannot be! Suffice it for you to know, Mr. Walpole, that the heavy hand of affliction has been laid upon me, and that within the sphere of my own family circle I have been made to experience a terrible chastisement for much of my past wrong-doing. If I now tell you this, it is to prove with how much sincerity I proclaim my contrition—my deep, deep contrition—for the stupendous wrong which in times past I inflicted upon that tender, loving, and confiding creature who now bears the name of Lady Ameshury! Go to her, therefore—tell her all this—and ask her whether I may be permitted to throw myself at her feet, and likewise whether I may share with her the privilege of embracing the child of our illicit and fatal love?"



ADELAIDE CLARKE.

"Think you, Mr. Ponsford, that it was for a mere idle purpose, or in any aimless mood, that her ladyship sent me on my present mission to you? If I were bidden to come and tell you that your daughter lived, and was found, and was restored to her mother,—think you that it must not have been likewise to tell you that if your feelings prompted you to hasten to that spot and to clasp your child to your breast, you would be welcomed?"

"I will go, Mr. Walpole—I will go," answered Ponsford. "But tell me something of my daughter! When was she restored to her mother?"

"Only a week ago," rejoined Walpole.

"And why did Warren practise that gross deception upon me?" demanded the Squire: "why did he——"

"Question me not now," said the youth. "I
No. 47.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

have not leisure to enter into details: I must speed back to Highgate and report to Lady Amesbury the issue of my embassy. She dwells at Charlton Villa; and thither may you follow me, Mr. Ponsford—but not immediately; for I must have time to prepare her ladyship to receive you—it will be likewise necessary to prepare Hester to receive her father; for as yet she does not even know your name!"

"And I also, Mr. Walpole," responded the Squire, "must have some little interval to prepare my own mind—aye, and to compose the feelings which have just been so powerfully agitated by the intelligence you have brought. It were perhaps better, therefore, if a few hours were suffered to elapse——"

"Be it so," rejoined the young man, rising to depart.

"Yet one word more ere you take your depar-

ture!" said Ponsford. "Tell me—is the poor girl beyond all hope? has the hand of Death been so remorselessly laid upon her?"

"There is hope while there is life, Mr. Ponsford; and heaven can resuscitate those whose feet may appear to be touching upon the very brink of the tomb! At the same time, I would not inspire you with a delusive confidence, nor conceal from you the seriousness of poor Hester's condition. She has endured sufferings and trials—she has known poverty and sorrow—"

"Oh, that she may live," continued the Squire, with impassioned vehemence, "to afford me time to atone for the past and to shower upon her head all the bounties which wealth can bestow! One word more, Mr. Walpole! Is Hester all that a parent could wish to find in a daughter?—is she calculated to prove a comfort to her mother if it should please heaven to spare her?"

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Walpole, not daring to give any other answer, nor to tamper for another moment with a subject which might lead to the necessity of revelations but little agreeable to the ears of a father. "And now farewell for the present, Mr. Ponsford. Ere this day shall have closed, you will have knelt for pardon at the feet of one whom in years past you so frightfully wronged, and you will have embraced the daughter whom you believed to be dead!"

Having thus spoken, Edward Walpole hastily quitted the library, in order to avoid any further discourse on the topic which he felt to be so delicate, so difficult, and so perilous.

"It is not from my lips," he said to himself, as he was again seated on his steed, and riding away from Ponsford's mansion,—*"it is not from my lips that the father must hear of his daughter's disgrace and dishonour! Heaven forbid! There will be time enough for such sad revelations—even if it be necessary that they should ever be made at all! And, Oh! if poor Hester's life be already doomed, and if it be destined that she shall occupy an early grave—better, better far to draw the veil over the sad, sad part of her life, and that never even unto her own sire it shall be known to what a depth she was plunged down by the merciless hand of necessity, and from what a vortex of infamies and abominations she was redeemed ere finding herself restored to the arms of a mother!"*

CHAPTER LXX.

RETRIBUTION.

WELL and truly had Squire Ponsford said that sooner or later there must be retribution for all wrong-doing! The fact was already bitterly exemplified within the range of his own experiences. When casting a retrospective glance over the incidents of his life, he shuddered as he thought of the many heartless deeds he had committed—the many treacheries of which he had been guilty towards confiding women. And specially, when he looked back to the period of his criminal passion for Adelaide Clarke—and when he remembered how terribly he had outraged her—he writhed, he groaned inwardly, his whole frame indeed became convulsed with the violence of his

internal feelings, as he thought of the fearful retribution which had overtaken him through the medium of the foul wrong offered to his own daughter. When he had looked at Pamela, contemplated her loveliness, and thought of all the innocence of her mind, he had been smitten with a horrible stupor of wonderment at the idea that any one could have been such a villain as to violate the sanctity of so much beauty and virtue. But then conscience raised its voice within his breast, and asked him whether Adelaide Clarke was not also lovely and virtuous ere she became his victim? Looking back for a quarter of a century, Ponsford beheld that fair one as completely invested with innocence and purity as was his own daughter previous to the outrage which dishonoured her! And then, as Ponsford, while looking back over the past, beheld the image of Adelaide Clarke prominent amongst those who had become the victims of his evil passions, the regards of his mental vision next settled upon another sweetly beautiful countenance—the countenance of her whom he had so perfidiously seduced—the mother of the unfortunate Hester!

"Adelaide Clarke has been avenged—bitterly, bitterly avenged!" said Ponsford to himself, as he paced to and fro in the library after Edward Walpole had taken his leave: "has heaven decreed that the wrongs of the *other*"—and he now alluded to Lady Amesbury—"are likewise to be avenged? No, no! she will forgive me! It is for this that I have received permission to visit her and to throw myself at her feet! Yet what means this feeling which now oppresses me? why is it that I seem as if a presentiment of evil were haunting me? Oh, what farther atonement can I make for my past deeds?—Ah, a thought strikes me!"

Ponsford mused for some few minutes upon the idea which had occurred to him ere he proceeded to carry it into execution; but at length having arrived at a decision upon the point, he issued forth from the library. Ascending to his daughter's chamber, he knocked at the door. There was no answer. He knocked again—and then the door was opened; and Pamela, deadly pale, made her appearance upon the threshold. Yes—deadly pale! just as she was two or three hours back when she retired slowly from the drawing-room where the marriage had been solemnised. Her features were rigid—and, Oh, so sadly beautiful in that despairing fixedness of their expression! It was without the display of the slightest emotion of any kind that she beheld her father; and as it was evident by his manner he wished to speak to her, she led the way in silence into the species of boudoir which served as an ante-room to her own chamber.

She sat down: her father placed himself by her side—and taking her hand, he said, "Pamela, I thought to find you at least more resigned—I can scarcely say more cheerful—after the ceremony which has made you a wife."

"Would to heaven that for your sake, I could be cheerful and gay, dear father!" exclaimed the unhappy young lady. "Oh, you must have suffered terribly on my account!"

"And yet perhaps not more than I have deserved, my poor child," responded the Squire, gazing with keenest anguish and affliction upon his beautiful but grief-stricken daughter.

"Do not accuse yourself thus, dear father," she said. "I wish there was anything I could do to render you happier than you have of late been—to console you—to prove to you that I am not selfish in respect to my own sorrows—and that if I suffer from the sense of my irreparable calamity, I have lost none of the loving tenderness and devotion which I owe to you, my sire!"

"There is something you can do, Pamela," answered Mr. Ponsford; "and it was to speak to you on this subject that I have now sought you. Listen to me, my child! Some years ago—about seventeen or eighteen—at the time when you were an infant in the cradle—I was guilty of an indiscretion—a crime—Alas, that a father should be compelled to blush in the presence of his own daughter!"

"Then do not tell me anything to make you blush, father!" interjected Pamela, with a look and tone of anguished entreaty.

"But I must enter upon certain explanations, my child—and you must listen to them; for they constitute a requisite preliminary to the final revelation."

"Then rest assured, dear father," responded the generous-souled Pamela, "in whatever you may be about to confess, you will not be too severely judged by your own loving daughter."

"I was about to tell you, Pamela, that at the period to which I have alluded I was guilty of an indiscretion—Yes, I was very wicked—faithless towards your mother—perfidious towards the victim of my criminality! There was one who loved me—she knew not I was married—Suffer me to spare the details, Pamela—"

"Yes, father—yes!" and the daughter was much agitated.

"I tell you that I was very guilty, Pamela—and she who loved me became my victim—and—and—a child was born. The transaction was hushed up for more reasons than one—for the sake of the unfortunate and betrayed young creature whom I could not wed—and for my own sake, married as I was to another! But I made ample provision in a pecuniary sense for the maintenance of that offspring; and years elapsed, Pamela—and then I was told that the child was dead—but this day—yes, *this* day, I have learnt that it is otherwise! Indeed, within the hour that is now passing, have I been told that she lives—and therefore I have another daughter, Pamela, besides yourself!"

"And I therefore have a sister!" cried the young lady, clasping her hands in a paroxysm of mingled surprise and delight.

"Yes—you have a sister, Pamela—if thus you choose to call her, and if thus you will recognise her, despite the stigma that rests upon her birth."

"Heaven forbid that I should be so unjust and cruel," cried Pamela, "as to make that the subject of reproach to her who is guiltless of it! It is sufficient, dear father, that you have told me I have a sister! Oh, and I feel convinced that I shall love her as well as if she sprang from the same mother whose memory I so much love and revere!"

"God bless you for these assurances, Pamela!" murmured Mr. Ponsford, deeply affected. "You shall see your sister—I fear that she is very ill—she has suffered much—"

"What is her name?" asked Pamela, in a compassionating tone.

"Her name is Hester," was the reply.

"Alas, poor sister!" said the young lady, with a voice and look of still deeper tenderness: "how profoundly I feel for her!"

"And I am sure, Pamela," continued her father, "that your gentle and kind ministrations will prove beneficial to her. Oh! how delightful would it be if you were to become the means of raising her up from the couch of sickness!—if your attentions, and vigils, and watchings, were to be thus rewarded!"

"Oh let me try, dear father!" interrupted Pamela enthusiastically. "You have already said more than enough to interest me deeply in this daughter whom you have just discovered, and this dear sister who is to be given unto me!"

"Let me assure you, Pamela," added her sire, "that she is in every way worthy of the interest with which you are inspired. If it were otherwise, I would not for the world bring you in contact with her! But positive and without reserve was the answer which I received,—when in suspense and uncertainty—aye, and in fearful doubtfulness, I put the question ere now to the young gentleman who brought me the intelligence,—I put the question, I say, which was to the effect whether the poor girl had passed stainless and pure through the ordeal of sufferings and temptations which, alas! she has most probably been doomed to encounter?"

"Every additional word that falls from your lips, my dear father," exclaimed Pamela, "renders me more and more anxious to hasten and claim my new sister!"

"And in her companionship," said Ponsford, inquiringly, "you will more or less forget, my child, your own afflictions?"

"If there be yet a chance of happiness on earth for me," cried Pamela, "it will arise from imparting happiness to others. Oh, the thought of having a sister is delightful to a degree! And nearly my own age too!"

"And thus, if heaven should spare her," added Ponsford, "there will yet be the source of a pure and holy light to shine upon your life,—that life which, alas! I lately feared was doomed to the unbroken dulness of night!"

"Rest assured, dear father, that in the society of the sister whom I am sure I shall love, and who will love me, I shall find solace and comfort—perhaps even happiness!"

"I thought that it might be so," exclaimed Ponsford; "and this was one of the reasons which decided me in taking you into my confidence—even though in doing so it was necessary I should make a revelation that caused me to blush in your presence!"

"And now tell me, father," said the young lady eagerly, "when I shall taste the first draught of this new well-spring of happiness?"

"This evening, Pamela," was the response. "Yes—you shall accompany me! Hester is with her mother—that mother who was the victim of my perfidy, and to whom I shall kneel for pardon. Oh, it shall be an hour of atonement for me! Prepare yourself, therefore, Pamela, for the meeting which is thus to take place ere the present day shall have closed!"

With these words Mr. Ponsford affectionately embraced his daughter, whom he then left to

such thoughts and feelings as the announcements he had made were well calculated to engender.

Returning to the library, Mr. Ponsford was reminded, by hearing a time-piece proclaim the hour, that it was now incumbent for him to visit the medical man under whose care he had placed himself on account of the diseased state of his heart. He was just issuing from his house, when who should be passing at the very moment but Mr. Warren the stockbroker!

"Ah, Mr. Ponsford!" exclaimed the man of business, stretching forth his hand: "you again in London! But what means this?" he asked, as the Squire drew back, haughtily rejecting the proffered hand of the other.

"It means, sir, that I cannot possibly consider myself on the same friendly terms with you as formerly, until a certain matter which now looks black enough, shall have been cleared up."

Warren turned pale for a moment: but instantaneously recovering himself, he said with a composure which was doubtless more or less forced, "Of course we cannot talk in the streets."

"Decidedly not, sir. Be good enough to step in-doors with me."

Mr. Ponsford accordingly led the way into the library, whither he was followed by the stockbroker.

The latter threw himself upon a seat; and brushing his hat with the sleeve of his coat in a *nonchalant* way, he said, "I am ready, Mr. Ponsford, to hear whatsoever accusation you may have to bring against me: for that something of this sort is about to take place, may be argued alike from your words and manner."

"Mr. Warren, there is a certain subject," resumed Ponsford, in a grave tone, "which could not fail to be invested with a deep interest for me."

"What subject, in the name of heaven?" asked Warren, with a well-affected air of surprise.

"Do not trifle with me, sir," exclaimed Ponsford sternly; "you know very well what I mean. The child—the unfortunate child—"

"Ah! what the deuce, my dear Mr. Ponsford!" cried Warren, pretending to laugh, "do you begin to affect an interest in *that* matter?"

"Begin to affect?" repeated Ponsford indignantly.

"Why, yes. When did you ever before show any symptom of interest on that point? If so, it was in my father's time: but since the business has been in my hands I have never seen or met you except casually—"

"Perhaps not, sir," interrupted Ponsford. "But my solicitor made a certain inquiry some three years back—and I must tell you that during your father's life-time such inquiries were more than once made—"

"Very likely," observed Warren. "I knew little or nothing of what was taking place in my father's life-time. As for the inquiry which you say your solicitor has made since my father's death, I do recollect something about it now—"

"And the answer you gave, sir, was a false one!" cried Ponsford angrily. "You declared that the poor girl was dead!"

"Well—and what then?" demanded Warren, mustering all his impudence to his aid; for he wanted to ascertain to what extent Mr. Ponsford was instructed in all that had recently occurred.

"What then?" echoed this gentleman, his cheeks crimsoning and his eyes flashing: "why, sir, you gave utterance to a base falsehood! You were willfully deceiving me!"

"Deceiving *you*?" said the stockbroker, with an air of effrontery and assumed surpriae.

"Yes—*me*, through the medium of the solicitors by whom the inquiry was made!"

"And what if at the time I really thought the girl was dead?" said Warren.

"You did not think it! I feel convinced that you did not! You were practising a wilful and gross deception! I have yet to learn all the particulars—but rest assured that I shall investigate them down to the very minutest details; and as you have proved a villain in the case, prepare to find me merciless!"

Again did Warren turn pale, and his lip quivered for a moment: but again recovering his self-possession, he said, "And pray may I venture to ask to what point your knowledge does really extend, and upon what grounds you are addressing me as if I were a deliberate villain instead of the victim of a temporary mistake?"

"Let it suffice for you to know, Mr. Warren, that I am on the right track to unravel the entire skein of your iniquity. Retribution and vengeance is the order of the day; and you shall not escape the proper doom—Unless, indeed," added Ponsford, as a thought struck him, for he all in a moment feared that it was quite possible he might be going too far, "you can prove to me you were really mistaken when you represented the poor child to be dead, and that no motive of cupidity influenced you."

"And what proof can I offer you?" demanded Warren.

"Listen, and let me recall to memory a few facts," pursued Ponsford. "I placed in your father's hand, between sixteen and seventeen years ago, a certain sum to be invested in the Bank of England, and to serve as a capital for the support of my illegitimate daughter."

"That fact is not denied, Mr. Ponsford," said Warren. "Proceed."

"Your father was handsomely remunerated at the time for his trouble," continued the Squire; "and I furthermore agreed that if anything should happen to the child, the money should pass into your father's possession. I believed him to be strictly honourable—I still think so; for it was *you*, Mr. Warren, who regardless of the good example left you by your father, played the foulest and most iniquitous part! You proclaimed the poor girl to be dead, in order that you might self-appropriate the funds that had been furnished for her use!"

"It is easy to surmise evil motives on the part of others, Mr. Ponsford," said Warren, who was still fishing, through the means of his own interjected remarks, for a clue towards ascertaining the precise extent of the Squire's knowledge upon the subject.

"Then if you were really labouring under a mistake—if it were an error on your part when you declared my daughter to have ceased to exist—you will now at once prove the rectitude of your conduct by handing me over the power of attorney authorising your firm to receive the interest of the capital or to sell out in case of need; and you will refund me the capital itself—Unless indeed,"

added Ponsford, with an ironical smile, "it be still in the Bank of England—which I think you will scarcely venture to assert."

"No!—I confess at once," answered the stockbroker, "that I took possession of the money on hearing that Hester Sergeant was dead."

"And now that she happens to be alive," said Ponsford, coolly, "you will of course refund the money?"

"You can scarcely mean this, Mr. Ponsford!" exclaimed Warren. "What! surely such a secret is worth its purchase-money?—and have not I kept it faithfully?"

"So far as I am concerned, it will cease to be a secret—or at least I shall care not to whose ears it may become known; for this very day shall I embrace my poor daughter—my long neglected child!"

"But Lady Amesbury?" interjected Warren. "Surely, surely you must reflect that *she* has a reputation to lose?"

"She has acknowledged her daughter," rejoined Ponsford; "and she will allow the world to think or say what it likes."

"But your own daughter—I mean, Miss Ponsford—the lovely Pamela—your heiress!—you would not have her penetrating into the mysteries of her father's past life? No, no, Mr. Ponsford!"

"My daughter Pamela knows everything," interjected the Squire. "And now, Mr. Warren, I have borne with you long enough. The part you have played is infamous; and in order to punish you for it, I shall insist upon the immediate production of the money for which you are responsible."

The stockbroker, who had gradually felt the ground slipping away from under his feet, and who had seen each successive straw of hops float away from him as he tried to clutch it, now looked agitated and excited: he bit his lip—he played nervously with his watch-chain—and he revolved in his mind the various details of his predicament, to ascertain if everything was indeed lost.

"But still, Mr. Ponsford," he said, after a long pause, "you are not so mad as to invoke the public gaze to settle itself upon all the minute peculiarities of this case. Surely, surely, I say, for the girl's own sake, even though you and her mother may prove so reckless of public opinion—"

"My poor daughter, sir," interrupted Ponsford, proudly, "cannot suffer in the world's opinion. It is only the vilest prejudice that makes the illegitimacy of birth a crime against the individual. Sustained by her own approving conscience—knowing that despite all the sufferings and temptations to which she was exposed by your iniquity, she maintained her honour undefiled, her good name immaculate, her character stainless—"

Ponsford stopped short, because he was suddenly seized with astonishment at the manner in which Warren was gazing upon him.

"What on earth are you talking of?" asked the stockbroker, astonished and bewildered, and also looking as if he were ready to burst forth into a fit of ironical laughter.

"Is there anything strange in what I have been saying?" demanded Ponsford: "is it astonishing that I should experience a certain degree of pride in pronouncing this eulogy upon the poor girl who

so well deserves it! Ah, sir, when I think of all that might have happened as the result of your villany—when I reflect that Hester might have succumbed to the temptations which naturally rose up around her—when through your base dishonesty she was thrown penniless upon the world—and when the maddening thought occurs to me that she might have been plunged into the abyss of crime—she might have fallen deep down into the vortex of pollutions and abominations—Oh! when I think of all this, Mr. Warren, my blood tingles in my veins, but at the same time my flesh creeps shudderingly upon my bones!"

"Oh," said the stockbroker, with a half astonished, half mocking expression of countenance.

"And therefore," continued Ponsford, who had warmed so completely with his subject that he failed to notice the semi-ironical aspect of his listener, "when I reflect that this poor girl of mine, abandoned by her parents—plundered by the man who ought to have acted as it were her guardian and her friend—thrown adrift upon the world—exposed to heaven knows what amount of temptations—harassed by sufferings which I tremble even now to allow my imagination to depict—when I reflect, I say, that Hester, my child, thus situated, should have come forth from the ordeal pure, and chaste, and uncontaminated—fit to prove the comfort of her mother, if God should spare her life—I may well feel proud of her, and I may even rejoice at being enabled to present her to my Pamela as a sister!"

"Ha!" said Mr. Warren curtly. "But what if it were all the very reverse of this pleasant and agreeable picture?"

"Oh, mention it not! But do you, sir, go down upon your knees and thank heaven that the black turpitude of your conduct did not prove the cause of adding another victim to the painted and flaunting band of daughters of crime that render the streets of this huge metropolis odious and loathsome! Ah! and if this had happened, it would not have been the only consequence of your villany! For if I had only found a daughter, merely to learn that she was lost and degraded—a polluted and abandoned one—it would have proved to me a blow which I could not have recovered! Ah, then you might have laughed at me, villain that you are! and you might have held me in defiance! You might have rejoiced in the plunder of the young girl!—you might have chuckled in the certainty of impunity! Nay, more—you might have added insult to injury: for you might have told me to go and hide my diminished head—But what means this strange look on your part?" suddenly demanded Ponsford, again struck by the sinister mocking expression which the stockbroker's countenance had assumed.

"What does it mean?" said Warren, with insolence in his tone, and with a still more unmistakable expression of that sinister aspect.

Ponsford was now more than startled—he was almost affrighted; and he experienced a revulsion of feeling which filled him with a species of presentiment that he was about to hear something terrible.

"Speak, speak," he said, in a hoarse voice: "why do you look at me in this manner?"

"Perhaps it would be as well," replied the stockbroker, with an air of assurance, "if we were to drop the subject altogether. But don't

you think of asking for the return of your money, or of molesting me on that account—no, nor of even so much as daring to breathe a single syllable against the integrity of my character.”

“This is his consummate impudence! or he meditates some atrocious lie!” thought Ponsford to himself, partially regaining his self-possession and courage: then bending his looks sternly upon the stockbroker, he said, “Enough of your treacheries and machinations!—they will no longer avail you! I am not to be deluded by the base innuendoes which you seem so fully capable of throwing out. Ah! and for this conduct on your part I will prove all the more stern and implacable in wreaking vengeance and invoking retribution on your head! Mr. Warren, unless that money be forthcoming by nine o’clock to-morrow morning, I shall at once, and without farther notice, place the business in the hands of my solicitors, with instructions that they are to proceed to any extremity in order to inflict upon you the fullest measure of chastisement which your turpitude deserves.”

Warren laughed scornfully.

“Ha, villain! do you dare defy me?”—and Squire Ponsford foamed at the mouth with rage: but this was not altogether natural—he had in some sense lashed himself up to it, as a refuge, so to speak, wherein he might shroud himself from a certain vague terror which was again growing upon him.

“Who dares call me a villain?” demanded the stockbroker insolently. “Villain hack in your teeth! And now go and do your worst against me. Talk of vengeance! Dare to raise hut so much as a finger, and the vengeance that I will wreak shall be terrible!”

“Good heaven! what do you mean?”—and Ponsford quivered and trembled despite all his endeavours to maintain a firm and collected demeanour.

“Fool!” ejaculated Warren contemptuously; “to whose interest can it have been to mislead you so in respect to your new-found daughter? and by what infatuation have you been yielding yourself up to the comfortable belief of her matchless purity and stainless chastity?”

“Calumniate her not, villain!” thundered Ponsford: and then he stood gasping and panting for breath.

“Calumniate her indeed!—that would be a difficult job, I can tell you!”—and there was a withering scorn in Warren’s look, tone, and manner. “Your daughter so virtuous and good! your Hester such a paragon of excellence! Ha, ha! Why, there is not a street-walker more degraded!—not a prostitute more common!”

Ponsford literally shrieked; and he was springing forward tiger-like to seize upon Warren, when the latter caught him forcibly by the wrist; and making him sit down in a chair, said contemptuously, “There! be quiet! If you venture to lay a hand upon me, I will teach you a lesson that you shall remember for the rest of your life— which, by the bye, it might happen to shorten somewhat.”

“I will be revenged!” muttered Ponsford hoarsely: “I will be revenged! You think that I believe your calumnies? You—you—dare not offer to prove them! But come, Warren—if you want mercy at my hands, confess that you have

given a wild license to your tongue—I may not perhaps be unreasonable.”

“I trust in naught to your mercy,” answered the stockbroker: “but I know that in your fears and your pride I am safe! Look you, Mr. Ponsford! I do not know who may have deceived you concerning Hester’s character, or what the motive may have been—unless it be that you have seen the young fellow Edward Walpole.”

“Yes, ’twas he!” ejaculated Ponsford. “Surely, surely, he is a respectable young man?”

“Very likely,” answered Warren. “He came and got certain facts from my lips: but I did not then know all I have since learnt—or else I should not have looked quite so humble in his presence, I can assure you. Perhaps he still thinks I have not discovered all.”

“What do you mean? what do you mean?” asked Ponsford, with feverish nervousness.

“I mean,” continued Warren, “that a certain old lady named Morphew came and called upon me yesterday—it was the second time she had been. On the first occasion she was guarded enough; but yesterday she spoke out pretty plainly, and she told me what sort of a life Hester had been leading. If you doubt it, go and inquire for yourself. The Morphews keep a house of a certain description in Granby Street, Waterloo Road; and it was there that Edward Walpole fell in with your Hester, whom it seems he had known previously, but under what circumstances I am not aware.”

Ponsford was groaning heavily; and he offered no comment upon this last speech which the stockbroker had addressed to him.

“By the bye,” resumed Warren, “these Morphews were the very schoolmistresses in whose care your Hester was placed. The coincidence is singular and ludicrous enough. The pupil meets her old governesses after having for years lost sight of each other; and in what pleasant positions do they relatively appear! The girl, an unfortunate! the dames keeping a house of infamy! Ha, ha! There’s a pretty story to tell to the world! Go and tell it if you dare!”

Ponsford again groaned: this time he endeavoured to speak, but could not; and the stockbroker, who seemed to be implacable, went on to say, “We now understand on what terms we are placed towards each other. So long as you abstain from mentioning anything on the pecuniary topic, depend upon it that I shall know nothing about your new-found daughter. And tell that young Walpole, if you see him, that he likewise had better be careful, or else I shall deem it my duty to inform his uncle Mr. Seymour how he frequents such agreeable houses and forms such pleasant acquaintances. So now farewell.”

With these words the stockbroker bowed slightly, as well as with an off-hand jaunty air, and issued from the room. As he went forth from the house, humming an opera tune, he chuckled inwardly at the result of an interview which had at one stage assumed a somewhat menacing aspect.

Meanwhile Pamela was reflecting in her own apartment upon all that her father had told her; and endeavouring to wean her attention as much as possible from the contemplation of her own special sources of sorrow, she sought for promising sources of bliss in an approaching companionship

with a sister. Thus a couple of hours passed; and when it was about four in the afternoon, Pamela began to wonder why her father had not sent for her to take the usual airing in the carriage before dinner. She descended to the library, where he was accustomed to pass the greater portion of his time when at home; and as she entered, she beheld him in his chair apparently fast asleep, but in an attitude which at once struck her as being a most uncomfortable one. She hastened forward to arouse him—but she suddenly stopped short in dread horror, for the expression of his countenance was ghastly and death-like. Then she mustered up courage to approach nearer; and in another moment a rending cry burst from her lips as she became fully sensible of the fearful truth that her father was a corpse!

CHAPTER LXXI.

SYLVESTER AND THE PEER.

ACCORDING to the intimation which Azaline had given to Edward Walpole, she returned home to Berkeley Square in the afternoon of the same day of which we have been writing. As she descended from Lady Ameshury's carriage, which bore her thither, she became aware of the fact that she was at the moment serving as the focus of attraction for a quizzing-glass which was stuck in the eye of a young man who was approaching from a little distance. He was plain and common-looking: his hair was of that unmistakable red which the license of no poetry can soften down into auburn, and which the imagination of no romanticist could tinge with a golden hue. He was dressed in black; and the crape round his hat showed that he was in mourning: but his villainously vulgar taste was displayed in the quantities of jewellery which he wore about his person, despite the sombre shade of his garments. Azaline at once averted her eyes in mingled disgust and contempt from the ill-bred personage who was thus impertinently scanning her with his glass: but to her surprise he immediately joined her on the steps of the front entrance of Trentham House.

"Beg pardon, Miss," he said, with an air that was half familiar, and yet half subdued, or even daunted by the high-bred elegance and dignity of Azaline's appearance; "but I know you, though perhaps you don't know me. My name's Casey—t'other day Mr. Casey Junior—but now Mr. Casey Senior, at your service."

Azaline considered it politic and prudent to show an affable demeanour towards an individual who might have it in his power to exercise no small influence over her father's pecuniary position; she at once smiled graciously, saying, "I had not the pleasure of knowing you personally until now, Mr. Casey;"—then assuming a sudden seriousness of countenance, she added in a suitable tone, "Permit me to offer my sympathy on account of the loss you have sustained."

"Thank'ee, Miss," responded Sylvester. "Of course a loss is a loss—though it's more or less felt according to circumstances. The governor was ailing in health and deuced queer in temper;

so, barring the way in which he was knocked off the hook, one may say, 'twixt you and me and the post, Miss Osborne, that it was a happy release."

It was to Azaline's infinite relief that the front door was opened at this moment; for otherwise she could scarcely have repressed a manifestation of disgust at the low, vulgar, flippant heartlessness thus evinced by the young man in allusion to his murdered sire.

"I presume, Mr. Casey," she said, "that you were about to call upon my father?"

"Why, yes, Miss," answered Sylvester, who was now fixing his eyes devoutly upon the beautiful countenance which was once more turned towards him. "Me and your governor have got some little matters to talk about; and if so be his lordship's at home——"

"His lordship is at home, sir," interposed the domestic who had just opened the street door, and who perceived at a glance how unwelcome Sylvester's insolent look and vulgar speech were to Miss Osborne.

"That's just the ticket, then," said Sylvester. "I don't think his lordship knows me by sight: therefore just take my card, old fellow, and announce me in proper style. It isn't a black-edged one, because I haven't had time to get them printed yet."

The lacquey, who had drawn himself up to the full of his six feet two inches of height on being adjured as an old fellow, received the card with as much dignity as if Sylvester himself were the menial; and simply saying, "This way," without the complimentary adjunct of "Sir," he led Sylvester into an apartment where Lord Trentham was engaged in reading the newspapers. But the young man did not enter that room before he had flung a parting look over his shoulder at Azaline, as she moved gracefully across the hall towards the principal staircase.

"Mr. Sylvester Casey," cried the domestic, thus announcing the visitor; and as the powdered lacquey then quitted the apartment, an expression of unspeakable disgust and disdain appeared upon his countenance, which indeed was all screwed up as if some very disagreeable odour were assailing his nostrils.

"Sit down, Mr. Casey," said Lord Trentham, unbending as much as he possibly could from the height of his aristocratic dignity, and forcing himself to assume a friendly and affable demeanour, for the same reasons which had ere now influenced his daughter in pursuing the same course. "Believe me, Mr. Casey, that whatsoever little differences may have taken place between your late father and myself, I was much shocked when in yesterday's newspapers I read the horrid account of what had taken place on the preceding night."

"Well, my lord," answered Sylvester, running his hand through his fiery red hair, "it was a horrid business, you know—but it's a satisfaction to think that the rascals are in limbo—leastways one of them; for to'ther is laying in a dangerous state at the hospital that I'm blessed if I think he'll ever get up no more—which will be a sad loss to the hangman."

"I hope, Mr. Casey," said the nobleman, "that your mother and sister bear up with fortitude against their bereavement?"

"Pretty well, my lord—pretty well, for that

matter," answered Sylvester. "You see, my lord, as I tell them, it's a of no mortal use to go off into hysterics, or to sit down snivelling and whimpering all day long! It isn't Christian-like. One must grin and bear in this world: that's my maxim, my lord. I'm sure everything shall be done for the deceased that *can* be done; and I know I've ordered a deuced deal finer funeral for him than ever he would have ordered for himself. Because, 'twixt you and me and the post, my lord, the governor was precious close-fisted. But that's all the better for me, of course—because I'm now his heir."

While listening to this tirade, Lord Trentham was a prey to the acutest suspense, and he was trembling with an irritating impatience; for to him it was almost a matter of life and death to know how he stood in a pecuniary sense towards his visitor, and whether the lost deeds and documents, for the sum of sixty thousand pounds, had been discovered—and if so, whether they were to be put in summary force against him. But he was compelled to master his emotions as well as he was able, and to play the part of a willing, interested, and sympathising listener to the vulgarisms and impertinences of Sylvester Casey.

"You see, my lord," resumed this precious individual, "funerals isn't so expensive as they used to be. You can get a jolly fine one now for a twenty pun' note! I don't know whether you've seen 'em, my lord—but they've got the black coach and the hearse all in one, looking like a sort of 'bus; and it's deuced convenient, because if there's only half a dozen mourners or so, the same pair of horses and the same four wheels takes them and the coffin all in a lump, as one may say."

Lord Trentham affected to blow his nose that he might conceal with his kerchief the expression of unconquerable disgust which he felt was spreading over his countenance.

"Then, as I tell my mother and Selina," continued Sylvester, "they ought to bear in mind the other ways in which we are expressing our regrets for the deceased. You've got to-day's paper, my lord, laying on the table there? Well, just look among the *Dealhs*, and there you'll see the flourish I've put in—as a paid advertisement of course. But it speaks of the deceased as being beloved by a large circle of friends—"

"I have seen the announcement, Mr. Casey," interposed his lordship.

"But you haven't seen the epitaph, though, that I've drawn up," pursued Sylvester. "It's a rum 'un, I can tell you! What the deuce have I done with it?"—and he proceeded to thrust his fingers into all his pockets.

"Pray do not trouble yourself so," said the nobleman, scarcely able to maintain even the most distant air of politeness. "I have no doubt you have done due honour to the memory of the deceased."

"I should rather think I have too!" cried Sylvester. "I've laid it on precious thick, I can tell you, my lord! 'Deeply lamented by all who knew him—irreparable loss—void left in society not easily replaced—fond parent—stanch friend—true philanthropist—charitable to the poor—sincere Christian—and all that sort of thing. Of course your lordship knows as well as me that them epitaphs is all gammon—"

"Would you permit me, Mr. Casey," interrupted the nobleman, "to offer you some little refreshment before we enter upon the business which has procured me the honour of this visit?"

"Well, no, I thank'ee, my lord. I'm not peckish just now; and being rayther out of sorts with one thing or another, I daren't drink much before dinner. But now to business, as your lordship says. I'm sure," added Sylvester, with a sort of knowing look and a mocking grin, "your lordship will be uncommon pleased to hear that the lost securities have all turned up?"

"Indeed?" said the nobleman, in a faint voice, and with a heart that appeared to sink within him: and then he added slowly and deliberately, "Documents of such value could scarcely be supposed to have become lost altogether. No neglect or carelessness would reach to such an extent."

"Well, my lord, there wasn't much neglect or carelessness in the matter, anyhow. I may as well be plain with you, and tell your lordship at once that my sister Selina took it into her head that the papers were best in her possession; for all the truth has come out now—and, in a word, she didn't want to marry your son Lancelot."

"And now, Mr. Casey," said the nobleman, quivering with suspense, "these documents are doubtless in your hands—you are your deceased father's heir—"

"As a matter of course, my lord. So I thought I'd just step down to Berkeley Square and have a quiet chat over the business. Don't make yourself uneasy, my lord—I think I can see a way of putting matters in a channel that shall be pleasant and agreeable to all of us."

"Ah! I am delighted to hear you speak thus, Mr. Casey," cried the nobleman, beginning to breathe more freely. "Pray explain yourself. I think you said that your sister—"

"No offence, my lord—but she don't want to marry your son. Well, there's no harm done: for if all I hear is true, your son don't want to marry *her*. But that's no reason why there shouldn't be a union 'twixt the two families—"

"Hey? what, Mr. Casey?"—and Lord Trentham drew his chair a little closer to that on which his visitor was seated.

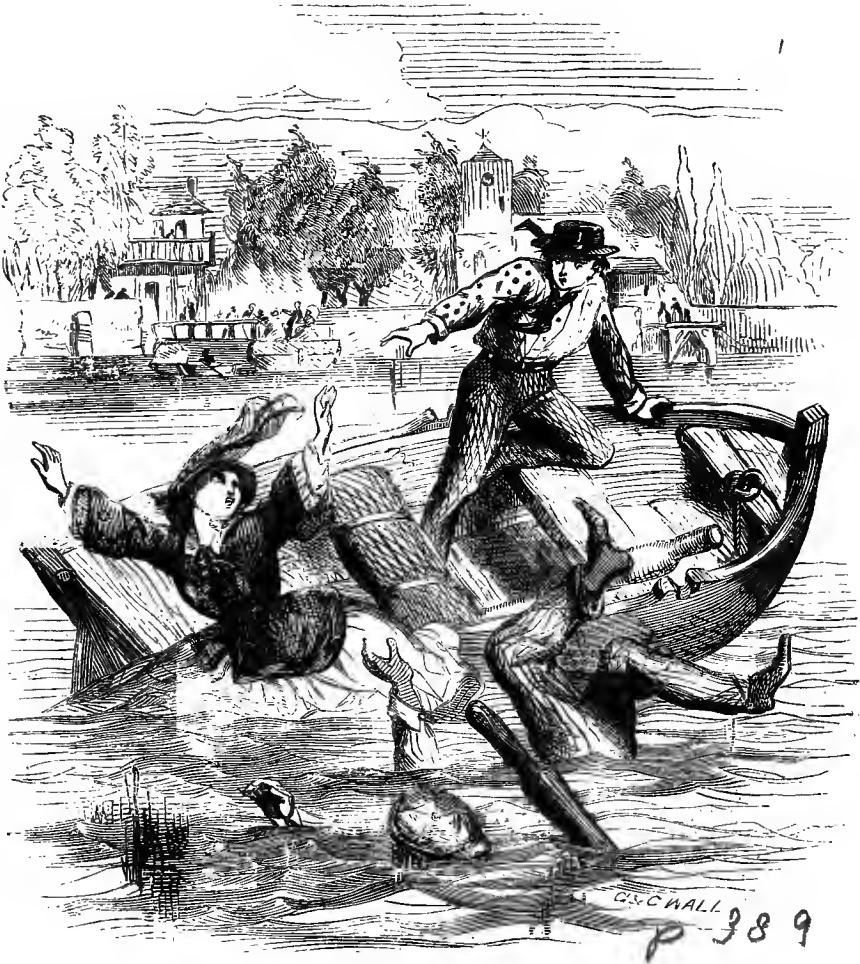
"I thought I spoke out plain enough, my lord," continued the young man. "I said there was no reason why there shouldn't be a union 'twixt the two families. Your lordship has always wished it—"

"Ahem, Mr. Casey! But if your sister entertains this repugnance—"

"Put Selina out of the question, my lord," exclaimed Sylvester; "and look at me! Well! what do you see? A dashing young chap that by the death of his father intestate has suddenly dropped into a matter of eighty or a hundred thousand pounds or so, and therefore an heir that isn't to be sneezed at. Well, my lord, that's me. And so, as I was thinking over matters yesterday, it struck me that your lordship has got a daughter as well as a son—"

"Ah!"—and the nobleman drew his chair with a movement of nervous uneasiness still more closely to that which his visitor occupied.

"And Azaline is a deuced pretty girl—uncommon genteel—and with just that air of dis-



unction that I love to see in the female sex. So it struck me, my lord, that you and I might jog on our horses pretty well together, and an arrangement might be made suitable to all parties. That was my idea—and that's why I came down to Berkeley Square just now. Well, thought I to myself, here's a good omen—"

"What do you mean?" asked his lordship.

"I mean that just as I reached the front door—for you must know I walked down, my lord—I flatter myself I'm a man of taste and know what's right—so I couldn't drive that stunning turn-out of mine with the spanking prads, while the governor is still above-ground—"

"I understand you, Mr. Casey," interrupted Trentham, rather impatiently: "you were saying that just as you reached my front door—"

"Who should I meet but Azaline herself? Don't think me familiar, my lord, that I call No. 48.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

her by her Christian name: it's only because I hope to have a full right very shortly to call the dear creature so always. Well, my lord, if from having merely seen your daughter a few times in the Park and other public places, as well as her portraits in the Book of Beauty and Keepsake and other Annuals, I was rather smitten with her, you may suppose what I must have felt when I found myself just now face to face with her. Indeed, I don't mind telling your lordship that she even looks handsomer close than she does at a distance—and that's saying a precious deal for any woman. But what I like in your daughter, is that when I told her who I was, she looked quite kind and affable—none of your infernal stack-up nonsense—"

"And so, Mr. Casey," interrupted Lord Trentham, "you have decided, from what I can understand, upon proposing for my daughter's hand?"

It is extremely unexpected—unforeseen—perplexing—Indeed, it is impossible for me to surmise what my daughter's sentiments may be—”

“Just listen a bit,” ejaculated Sylvester; “for I've got the whole thing cut and dried in my mind—and so it would be much better for us to come to a complete understanding at once.”

“Much better, Mr. Casey. Pray proceed.”

“You owe me, my lord, sixty thousand pounds,” resumed the young man; “and this sum I can claim at any moment—aye, and enforce too if I choose. There's all the papers in my possession. And I know very well it's a sum too large for you to pay all in a moment—while on t'other hand it's much too large for me to lose. Now, what I say is this:—Your family estates ought to go to Launcelot at your death—that's clear enough. I'll give up twenty thousand pound of the sixty—and we can let the other forty remain as a sort of charge on the estate, to be paid off at the rate of a thousand a-year; and as a matter of course Launcelot must become a party to this transaction. If you was to insure your life, my lord—you ain't too old—you're not more than five and fifty—it would make things still better for Launcelot, and at your death relieve the estates altogether from the burden. But that's your look-out—not mine.”

“The arrangement, Mr. Casey,” answered Lord Trentham, “is one which I might accept, provided my daughter would agree to the alliance which you have proposed. But really—I am afraid”—and the proud peer surveyed Sylvester from head to foot as he spoke—“I am afraid that Azaline—”

“Oh, that be bothered!” exclaimed the young man. “She'll like me well enough when she comes to know me better. Besides, love has nothing to do with money-matters. This was the maxim you acted upon, my lord, when you agreed to make your son Launcelot marry my sister Selina.”

The nobleman bit his lip, and observed, “True, Mr. Casey: marriage has become more or less a conventionalism. But still there are cases—Indeed I know not what to say—I must consult Lady Trentham—”

“Consult fiddlesticks!” exclaimed Sylvester.

The nobleman fell back aghast in his chair: then slowly drawing himself up to his full height in a sitting posture, he asked in a freezing tone, “What was that you said, sir? I think—I think I must have been mistaken.”

“Beg pardon, my lord—beg pardon:” and Sylvester coloured up to the very summit of his forehead, for he felt that he had been guilty of a fearful solecism in good manners. “It's—it's”—and he ran his hand through his horrid red hair in the bewildering attempt to seek for a sufficient apology—until lighting, as he flattered himself, upon a brilliant idea, he hastened to ejaculate, “It's the affection I bear for your lordship's daughter that hurried me away. However, no offence!”

“I accept the apology, sir:” and Trentham again suffered himself to become partially affable.

Sylvester felt humiliated, and it was therefore perfectly consistent with the obtuseness and narrowness of his ill-conditioned mind that he should suddenly feel himself animated by a certain spite against the individual in whose presence he was

thus humbled—so that he quickly began to wonder within himself how it was that he was cringing and apologizing where he fancied that he had a right to dictate, to menace, and to bully.

“Now come, my lord,” he said, with so abrupt a snappishness of manner that it for a moment startled the nobleman, “let's get on with our business. I'm not a fellow to dilly-dally. I've told you what I'll do—and it is for you to say whether you'll meet me on fair terms or not.”

“Mr. Casey, in one word,” responded Lord Trentham, “I can express the hope and the wish that I have formed. I beg that you will permit the entire sum of sixty thousand pounds to remain as a charge upon the estate, to be paid off at the rate of two thousand a year—Launcelot becoming a party to the transaction, and I insuring my life, if you desire it.”

“And what about Azaline?” demanded Sylvester impatiently.

“The arrangement I am now suggesting,” rejoined Trentham, “is in contemplation of the sure and certain fact that my daughter will decline the honour which you have proposed when seeking her hand in marriage.”

“Then I cry off altogether!” exclaimed Sylvester, with coarse dogged sullenness, as he rose from his seat. “So when Bulteel comes—”

“What do you mean, Mr. Casey?” inquired the nobleman, seized with alarm at the mention of the ominous name of the solicitor who had so very recently put an execution into the mansion. “Mr. Bulteel—do you expect him?”

“Yes, I do, my lord. I told him that I was coming here, and why I was coming. I desired him to follow me in an hour, that he might draw up an agreement betwixt you and me, and witness it, so that there need be no more palaverings or comings and goings in this business. For I made sure you'd agree, my lord.”

“A little patience, Mr. Casey—a little patience! I have not definitively refused.”

“So much the better. I left Bulteel at the house in Hatton Garden, making out a list of all the deeds and documents that relate to your business, my lord; so that when he comes you will see exactly how you stand. And I also told him to have a good look over all my father's papers, to see whether there's anything else that concerns your lordship, besides the deeds that were lost and found again.”

“And therefore, Mr. Casey,” said Trentham, trembling nervously, “you expect that when your solicitor Mr. Bulteel arrives, I shall be prepared to give an answer?”

“Yes—that's what I expect,” responded Sylvester. “My mind is made up to have the affair settled at once, somehow or another. Don't think that I'm too hard upon you, my lord; because remember that if you've got a daughter that you're anxious about, there's on t'other side sixty thousand pounds that I ought to look precious sharp after. So give me the daughter; and I say in return, 'Here's quits as far as twenty thousand go, and there's pleasant and easy terms for paying off the remaining forty thousand.' That's the gist of the whole business. There it lies, in a nutshell; and blow me if anybody can say I'm dropping down too hard upon your lordship!”

“But if on the other hand, Mr. Casey, I should be unable to give you a positive answer—or if—if

I should decline—Indeed I see not very well how I can say *yes*, without consulting Azaline—and Lady Trentham—and Launcelot—”

“Stuff and nonsense, my lord! I'm not going to be humbugged and trifled with! A positive answer I'll have—*yes* or *no*—within the hour! If *yes*, Bulteel shall draw up the agreement: if *no*, he shall put in an execution this very evening; and hang me if I think that the horse-riding gal of the Circus will find you *that* money as she did the twenty thousand a fortnight or three weeks ago! But here's Bulteel.”

This ejaculation was elicited by a summons at the front door, which echoed through the house, and which Sylvester recognised to be the attorney's knock; for it was expressive of a sense of importance on the part of the individual himself. In a few moments a domestic made his appearance, announcing Mr. Bulteel.

The attorney bowed to the nobleman; and then turning to Sylvester, he said, “I wish to speak to you particularly.”

“Well, speak on!” cried the young man. “I suppose you've brought the list—”

“You desired me to examine your deceased father's papers,” said the lawyer. “I have done so, Mr. Casey—”

“And I dare say,” interjected Sylvester, “you are going to tell me that you have found some other documents which regard his lordship here? So if that's the case, out with it at once: there need be no secrets!”

“I certainly have found a document,” answered the solicitor, the expression of whose countenance was peculiar, and whose manner seemed to have something cold and constrained in it as he gave his responses to the young man.

“Well, and what the devil is the document?” demanded the latter impatiently. “If it's another bond or warrant-of-attorney of his lordship's, I'll throw it in with the rest—there'll only be something more to charge on the estate—that's all.”

“I was about to inform you,” rejoined Mr. Bulteel, “that the document which I have discovered has no reference to his lordship's affairs. It is quite of another description.”

“Of what description?” asked Sylvester. “Why don't you speak out, man?”

“You had better retire with me, Mr. Casey. It is a private matter—”

“Hang the private matters!” exclaimed Sylvester, putting himself into a passion, and also thinking that it was a fine thing to display a resolute will of his own, and be enabled to bully his professional adviser in the presence of a third person—more especially as the said professional adviser did not seem to be half civil and cringing enough on the present occasion.

“Mr. Casey,” said Bulteel—“for the last time I beg of you to retire with me.”

“I won't!” interjected Sylvester doggedly. “Go on. You've found a document, you say?”

“Yes—a will:” and the lawyer spoke with strong accentuation.

“A will?” cried Sylvester. “Well, I suppose you want me to open and read it?”

“It is already opened and read, Mr. Casey,” replied the attorney. “It was unsealed—in a secret drawer, the spring of which was discovered by accident—”

“Well,” interrupted Sylvester, “of course the governor has left me the whole or the best part of his property—sole executor perhaps—”

“Nothing of the sort, Mr. Casey,” answered Bulteel. “Your father has left you next to nothing;—and he has bequeathed the bulk of his property—indeed the coincidence is a most singular one—to that very identical Stephen Ashborne who the night before last—”

“What!” vociferated Sylvester, with dismayed looks; “it's a lie that you're telling—or else a forgery that has been committed!”

“Mr. Casey,” interrupted Bulteel, with a stern expression of countenance, “if it were not that I could make allowances, and perhaps even sympathise with you—”

“Hang your sympathy!” thundered the furious Sylvester. “I'll prosecute—I'll indict—I'll dispute the will! There can be no earthly pretence—”

“There is every pretence—every reason, and every excuse for your deceased father's conduct in this instance,” said Bulteel. “The will itself explains it; for Stephen Ashborne is your half-brother—your father's illegitimate son.”

Sylvester looked confounded for a few moments; but abruptly bursting forth again, he gave vent to some shocking imprecations,—adding, “It won't do! that cock won't fight!—It's all gammon! Even if it was true, a bastard isn't going to cut off a lawful begotten son like this!—Don't flatter yourself, my lord,” cried the young man, now turning towards Trentham, who had remained a silent but by no means disinterested spectator of the present scene,—“don't flatter yourself that it's all up with me and that you've got to deal with another. Dence a hit! I shall recover my own rights yet—and then, my lord, I'll keep you to terms. Azaline or ruin!—your daughter for me, or destruction for yourself!”

“Neither!” exclaimed the voice of one who abruptly entered the apartment at that moment.

“Ah!” cried Sylvester, turning pale, and recoiling from the unexpected presence of this individual.

“Stephen Ashborne himself!” ejaculated Bulteel.

CHAPTER LXXII.

THE WILL.

IN order to explain the sudden apparition of Stephen Ashborne at Trentham House at that particular crisis, we must interrupt the thread of our narrative for a brief space, which however the reader will find serviceably occupied by the explanations we are about to place on record.

When Sylvester Casey set out from Hatton Garden, on his expedition to Trentham House, for the purpose of bargaining for the fair hand of Azaline, he left Mr. Bulteel in the study, or office, to look over his deceased father's papers. Sylvester had not quitted the house many minutes, when Stephen Ashborne knocked at the door. He inquired for Mrs. and Miss Casey; and he was asked to walk in. He was conducted to a parlour, where he waited a little while until the door opened and Selina made her appearance.

We should observe that she had seen Ashborne for a few minutes on the preceding day, when an inquest upon the deceased was held at the house; and he had attended to give such evidence as was required from his lips. But on that occasion nothing more had taken place betwixt the young lady and him, beyond the expression of condolence and sympathy on his part, and from her own lips the assurance of gratitude for the attentions he had shown throughout the series of deplorable occurrences. They therefore were but little better than strangers to each other; and as the first violent ebullitions of Selina's grief had by this time subsided, she was enabled to contemplate with more attention the young man whose near relationship to her deceased sire she at that moment was so far from suspecting. She received him with that lady-like courtesy which she knew so well how to demonstrate: she bade him be seated—she apologised for having kept him waiting—and she likewise bade him excuse the non-appearance of her mother, who was too much afflicted to receive any one under existing circumstances.

"At the same time, Mr. Ashborne," added Selina, "my mother desires me to express her deepest gratitude for all that you did the night before last."

"Would to God, Miss Casey," exclaimed the young man, with fervour, "that I had only made a little more haste to enter the house! I might have prevented the crowning iniquity! But the ways of heaven are inscrutable—and it was doubtless decreed by providence that I should tarry and linger until it was too late!"

"Mr. Ashborne," said Selina, after a pause, during which the young lady seemed to be meditating painfully and uneasily, "I am glad that I have an opportunity of speaking alone to you for a few minutes. You must have thought that certain occurrences the other night were a very strange aspect; for I understand," she continued, with a blush suffusing her cheeks, "that you were in my chamber when I was brought back to consciousness—you now know to what I allude—I mean those documents which had been tossed out of my writing-desk——"

"Miss Casey," observed Osborne, "I should not certainly have ventured to intrude upon the sanctity of family secrets by the display of any impertinent curiosity on my part: but inasmuch as you have of your own accord broached the subject, I do not hesitate to admit that the scene to which you allude made a deep impression on my mind."

"I asked my mother to tell me all that took place in your presence: she told me to the best of her recollection—and therefore I saw that you heard and saw enough, Mr. Ashborne," pursued Selina, faltering and hesitating at every word, "to enable you to comprehend that there were certain deeds which I had abstracted—purloined—stolen, if you will——"

"Do not use harsh terms, Miss Casey!" interrupted Ashborne, with warmth. "Little as I know of you, I nevertheless already know you too well to believe that words of so stern an import can be properly applied to yourself! There must have been strong and powerful reasons which induced you to conceal those documents from your father."

"Yes—reasons the most powerful," responded the young lady, who was evidently labouring under much inward agitation. "But I need scarcely tell you, Mr. Ashborne, that it was not my purpose to deprive my father of his property altogether. No, no!—the amount was too serious and the crime would have been too great! I had certain aims to accomplish; and when those were achieved, I should have thrown myself at my father's feet and confessed everything. Yes—I should then have restored the papers and besought his pardon. That such was my intention, you may readily believe, Mr. Ashborne; for if it were otherwise, I should not have kept the documents in my possession—I should have destroyed them altogether!"

"The proof is indisputable," replied Stephen: "but even without it, your word would be sufficient to convince me."

"Ah, Mr. Ashborne," resumed the young lady, "you are generously considerate towards me; and I hope that I am not altogether unworthy of the kind construction which you are thus disposed to put upon the case, even before you are made acquainted with all the circumstances. And believe me, it was for no insignificant purpose that I abstracted those documents from my father's office! And, Oh! I know that there was a moment when he suspected me! Yes—he suspected me! for he adjured me by everything sacred to swear unto him that I was not the accomplice of Launcelot Osborne in that theft! And I did swear—because it was the truth! I had no accomplice—I acted by myself, wholly and solely. Thus, without perjury, I swore that Launcelot was not my accomplice—and I have every reason to hope that my father believed me!"

Stephen Ashborne listened with an interest that deepened into amazement; and as Selina ceased speaking, he said, "You are alluding, Miss Casey, to family matters which are but little known to me, for though it is true I did hear some rumour to the effect that you were to accompany the Hon. Launcelot Osborne to the altar——"

"Yes, yea—I was speaking as if I fancied that you already knew everything!" exclaimed Selina. "Confusion and agitation prevail in my mind! Forgive me, Mr. Ashborne, if my explanations are not more coherent and intelligible."

"Alas, Miss Casey," said the young man, "it were impossible that I could do otherwise than feel how great and manifold must have been your trials! But in reference to those documents—the value of which, as I judged from something that your brother said when he found them upon the table the night before last, is of the enormous amount of sixty thousand pounds——"

"Nominally, Mr. Ashborne—nominally," interjected Selina, with an almost hysterical nervousness of manner.

"I do not understand you," said Stephen, with another look of surprise.

"Oh! one must not speak ill of the dead—especially of one's father! But still—but still truth compels me to express my belief—nay, my conviction—that the unfortunate Lord Trentham was compelled to pay dearly for the sums that he borrowed and the accommodation that was granted him."

"Now, I understand you, Miss Casey. In plain terms, the sums that were originally lent by your

father, had swollen fearfully by usurious processes?"

"Yes—that is my meaning, Mr. Ashborne. And now you may understand how painful it is for me to speak thus of my father! But I may likewise observe that for this same reason I experienced all the less remorse and compunction in abstracting those deeds, when the best and dearest interests of a member of the Trentham family were at stake. I will now explain myself in a few words. My father sought to compel Launcelot Osborne to conduct me to the altar. Launcelot loved me not—he loved another"—and Selina's voice faltered for a moment. "Oh, Mr. Ashborne! my soul recoiled from the bare idea of becoming a bride under such circumstances! I had not sufficient ambition to force myself thus into a patrician family: but on the other hand, I may say without incurring the imputation of vanity, that I entertained too deep a sense of justice to demand so great a sacrifice on the part of that young man! And then too, my soul recoiled also from the idea that my father was making use of those documents—the fruit of usury—as the engine of coercion: and therefore I stole those papers, Mr. Ashborne! Yes, I abstracted them! I concealed them, in order to release Lord Trentham from the immediate pressure of my sire's tyranny, and to save Launcelot from the necessity of sacrificing himself to the dire necessities of a proud but ruined patrician family! Now you know all, Mr. Ashborne. Perhaps you will blame me—despise me—notwithstanding the generous assurances you ere now gave—"

"Blame and despise you? No, admirable young lady that you are!" cried Stephen: then fixing his eyes upon her in a manner which was full of a mysterious significancy, he added, "If I had the honour of being your relation, I should indeed feel proud of you! But now those documents have found their way into your brother's hands—"

"And the son," interjected Selina, with bitterness, "is already preparing, to a certain extent, to follow in the footsteps of the father!"

"You do not mean me to understand that your brother Sylvester thinks of forcing you into this alliance with Launcelot Osborne?"

"No—it is not this which is now afflicting me," rejoined Selina. "On the contrary, so far as that subject is concerned, I have every reason to be contented and satisfied; for scarcely an hour has elapsed since I had certain explanations with my brother—and he told me that he would not revive his departed sire's project of compelling Launcelot to conduct me to the altar. But Oh! while that same father still remains unburied, and affliction is in the house, and the thoughts of all who are connected with the dead should be riveted on solemn things,—Oh, that the selfishness and worldly-mindedness of my brother should thus display themselves!"

"In what manner, Miss Casey?" asked Ashborne. "The weapons which were forged by usury," resumed the young lady, "have passed from the hands of the father to the son; and though they will be differently used by the latter—"

"Perhaps your brother is in haste to enforce payment of the sums owing by Lord Trentham?"

"That is not all," interjected Selina. "Lord Trentham has a beauteous daughter; and to her

hand has Sylvester the boldness to aspire. Launcelot loves his sister Azaline dearly; and if fresh complications should now arise through this isosue presumption on Sylvester's part, there will be fresh sources of misery for each and all!"

"Good heavens! is it possible," exclaimed Ashborne indignantly, "that your brother can think of using his power over the Trentham family to such a purpose?"

"Alas, it is too true! My brother left me ere now with that intent: he vowed that either Azaline should become this very day his promised bride, or else that no mercy should be shown to the Trentham family."

"Ah, this is too bad," said Ashborne, gloomily. "The mantle of the father has descended only too suitably and appropriately upon the shoulders of the son. It amounts to a persecution! Lord Trentham may be a debtor—but he ought not to be treated as a criminal."

"Ah, Mr. Ashborne, what noble sentiments!" cried Selina. "Would to heaven that Sylvester possessed such a mind as your's! Yet pardon me this warmth," she continued, blushing deeply. "I do not feel as if I were speaking to a stranger—it seems to me as if it were an old friend who had a right to all my confidential revealings—"

"Treat me as such!" rejoined Ashborne. "Ah, if you could treat me as a brother, I should indeed be proud of such a sister! Let me at once assure you, Selina," he continued, now for the first time addressing her by her Christian name, "that I am adopting no covert means of conveying any ulterior meaning, nor of expressing any feeling beyond that which my words embody. For I am already married!"—and as he thus spoke, an indescribable expression of mingled anguish and bitterness swept over his handsome countenance.

Selina, however, saw it not: for she was blushing and casting down her eyes: she was thinking to herself at the time that these assurances of a mere fraternal feeling were indeed unnecessary from Ashborne's lips, inasmuch as her heart was already filled with the image of another—and she had registered a vow in heaven, to the effect that as the involuntary affections of her soul had been led to rivet themselves upon Launcelot Osborne, she would at least have the satisfaction of remaining faithful to his memory—and for his sake therefore would she continue for ever unwedded!

"Would to God," suddenly exclaimed Ashborne, "that the fraternal friendship which I offer you, Selina, had it in its power to prove itself in some signal manner!—would to God that I had the means of arresting the course of your brother, ere the career of tyrannous coercion, heartless selfishness, and arrogant presumption he fully entered upon!"

"Yes—if you possessed this power," responded Selina, "I am sure that you would exercise it—I am confident that you would! Pardon my boldness—but I cannot help telling you that there is so much frankness in your speech—so much magnanimity in your sentiments, that it is impossible to doubt the generosity of your heart! But, alas! we are both equally powerless to check my brother in this career on which he has entered. He is obstinate and self-willed; and, Oh! with the terrible weapons which he is now enabled to wield in menace against the unhappy family of Trentham—"

"By heaven," exclaimed Stephen Ashborne, in a burst of genial fervour, "if those bonds and deeds were mine, I would sooner thrust them every one into the fire than use them as the means of a base cowardly coercion, or suffer them to be thus used! Ah, if there were magicians now-a-days!—if it were possible to possess oneself of an enchanter's waud—"

But Stephen Ashborne stopped short; for the door opened, and Mr. Bulteel, the lawyer, made his appearance. There was something peculiar in the expression of his countenance: he hesitated whether to advance into the room—he looked at Selina as if equally at a loss whether he should speak in her presence; and then, again turning towards the young man, he said, "I have a communication for your ears, Mr. Ashborne—I mean a private one—And yet I do not know that it need be private, for it refers also to every member of this family."

"Refers to us, Mr. Bulteel?" cried Selina. "What do you mean?"

"Perhaps, in duty bound," resumed the lawyer, "I ought first of all to have spoken to your mother—or else to your brother—for whom indeed the tidings will come with the force of a blow—"

"Speak out, Mr. Bulteel!" said Ashborne. "What does all this signify? You have a paper in your hand?"

"Yes—it is a will. In one word, Miss Casey," continued the lawyer, thus addressing himself to Selina, "your brother Sylvester is disinherited—cut off indeed with only the barest pittance! And this gentleman," turning to Stephen Ashborne, "is the heir of the deceased's property—and—and—your half-brother, Miss Casey."

Thus suddenly was it that sources of wild amazement were opened up for Selina; and as she stood gazing in bewilderment, first upon the lawyer, then upon Stephen Ashborne, the latter took her hand and pressed it with fraternal warmth, saying, "Yes—it is true, Selina, that I am your half-brother;—and it was this knowledge that rendered me apparently bold and familiar in my language towards you ere now. Ob, you see it was not without a justification that I proffered you my friendship—that I offered you my fraternal love—and that I called you by your Christian name with all that delicate tenderness which a brother would display towards a sister!"

Stephen Ashborne pressed his lips upon Selina's fair brow, while she said murmuringly and in a half-broken voice, "All this is wonderful and amazing; but it could not be otherwise than with feelings of joy and delight that I acknowledge you as a brother! And if my late father should have had motives for the preference which he has shown you over Sylvester, it is not for me to question or dispute his judgment."

"Miss Casey," interrupted Mr. Bulteel, "all who are acquainted with you must be well aware of the amiability and generosity of your disposition. It is not therefore surprising to find you thus cordially welcoming your half-brother, nor to see you thus bending obediently to whatsoever may be the wishes and decrees of your late father. It were well now, perhaps, if you were to seek your mother—explain to her that a will has been found—yea, and you may add likewise

that a handsome income is settled upon herself."

"I will go," said Selina; "and I will prepare her, Stephen, to receive you."

The young lady thereupon quitted the room; and as soon as the door had closed behind her, Mr. Bulteel addressed Stephen Ashborne in the following terms:—

"This will was made only a few days ago, and I cannot tell what motive Mr. Casey may have had in not employing or consulting me in the matter at the time—unless the explanation of the mystery is to be found in the fact that he procured the intervention of a strange lawyer in order the more completely to guarantee the secrecy of the proceeding. He might have thought that I, being acquainted with the members of his family, might wilfully or inadvertently breathe a whisper on the point if I were employed in the transaction. However, here is the will, regularly drawn up and duly attested. It sets forth that the testator, having for various reasons felt dissatisfied with the conduct of his lawfully begotten son Sylvester, and entertaining the confident belief that the best and kindest method of dealing with that young man is to throw him more or less upon his own resources, thereby necessitating habits of industry and steadiness in the place of idleness and dissipation,—he, the testator, has accordingly left the said son Sylvester an annual income of fifty-two pounds arising from certain stocks herein specified. Furthermore the testator acknowledges you, William Ashborne, to be his son by the deceased Adelaide Clarke—he believes you to possess a good disposition, as well as thrifty and industrious habits: he is moreover desirous of atoning to the best of his ability for whatsoever neglect your deceased mother and yourself may have had reason to complain of at his hands. He therefore leaves you the bulk of his fortune. The will enters into certain specifications relative to the lost deeds and documents; but inasmuch as they are now found, I need not trouble you, Mr. Ashborne, with any details on that head. In conclusion, let me congratulate you upon being the heir to about eighty thousand pounds."

"I thank you, Mr. Bulteel," said the young man, who had listened with deep attention to the lawyer's explanations. "Of that eighty thousand pounds I presume that the Trentham securities, to the amount of sixty thousand, form a part?"

"Decidedly so," responded the attorney.

"How is Mrs. Casey provided for?" asked Stephen.

"Ten thousand pounds in the funds are settled upon her," rejoined Bulteel; "and at her death to devolve upon her daughter Selina."

"Then thank heaven," exclaimed Ashborne, "they are comfortably provided for!"

"Yes!" pursued Bulteel; "and entering further into details, I may explain that this house, the furniture, the plate, wines, and so forth, are all bequeathed to the widow. Here is the will; and if you will permit me, I can very soon take the proper steps to put you in possession of your fortune."

"Where are the Trentham securities?" inquired Ashborne.

"They are all in the deceased's study: I have just been looking over them. Indeed, when I come to think of it, it is rather fortunate that

Sylvester should have left them with me; for he is a somewhat slippery fellow."

"Can I take possession of them at once?" demanded Ashborne.

Bulteel reflected for a few moments; and then he said, hesitatingly, yet with a certain degree of significancy, "I do not exactly know—the will, you see, is not proved yet—the letters of administration are not taken out—Sylvester might do such a thing as enter a caveat against it—though I scarcely think he would be so foolish, inasmuch as there is not the slightest ground—"

"But what if I were to assert my rights at once," interrupted Ashborne, "go into the study, take possession of the documents, and depart with them?"

The expression of the lawyer's countenance deepened in significancy, as he partially shrugged his shoulders and said, "Well, Mr. Ashborne, if you choose to take such a step there is no one to prevent you. I am now going to see Mrs. Casey for a few minutes; and then I shall seize the immediate opportunity of breaking to Sylvester this change in his affairs. If in the meanwhile you choose to enter the study, lock up the papers, or take them away with you, I cannot help it."

Having thus spoken, Mr. Bulteel bowed and issued from the room. Stephen Ashborne paced to and fro for three or four minutes, wondering at all that had occurred, and asking himself whether it could be a dream;—then abruptly hastening from the apartment, he was speeding towards the study, when he encountered Selina upon the landing.

"Whither are you going, Stephen?" she asked.

"My mother will see you presently. Mr. Bulteel has just gone to speak to her, and explain the contents of the will."

"I will come back and see your mother, Selina," answered Ashborne, "when I shall have fulfilled a duty which has now become paramount. Surely you must understand me, Selina? Even if the days of magic be passed, those of providential marvel still remain; and from such sources may a wand potent as that of the enchanter be derived. Such is the case now! It was no idle boast which I so recently made in your presence! Those documents—"

"Is it possible, Stephen, that you will divest yourself of nearly all the wealth that has thus suddenly fallen into your hands?" and it was with mingled admiration and suspense that Selina gazed upon her half-brother.

"Yes—I will do *that*," he responded, "for your sake, Selina—for your sake! Noble-hearted girl that you are, all your generous wishes on behalf of the Trentham family shall be fulfilled!"

He wrung her hands; and then speeding to the study, took possession of all the bonds, securities, and other documents which related to the affairs of Lord Trentham. Securing the papers about his person, he quitted the house, took his seat in a cab, and gave the order to be driven to Berkeley Square. The vehicle rattled away; and Ashborne throwing himself back into the interior, folding his arms across his chest, and anfering his head to droop, gave way to his own reflections. How many important events had that day occurred! In the morning he had become a husband,—the husband of the ruined and dishonoured Pamela! In the afternoon he found himself the heir to a

fortune, and enabled to perform a generous deed upon which he was now bent! His soul had yearned to proclaim the fact that he was Selina's half-brother; and an accident had revealed the secret which he would not have dared enunciate from his own lips. He had aspired to the possession of a particular power at a moment when it seemed impossible that this aspiration could be realised even by the wildest freak of romance: but it nevertheless *was* realised—that power *was* now in his possession—it *was* the enchanter's wand that he was grasping—and he *was* on his way to wield it with effect! It all seemed to be dream-like—incredible—as Stephen Ashborne rapidly ran his mental glances over the quick succession of accidents which had thus characterised this memorable day.

The vehicle was rolling onward—the districts of Hatton Garden and Holborn were already left far behind—and the West End was reached. Still as the cab pursued its way, Stephen Ashborne continued wrapped in deep meditation,—until he was abruptly startled by a voice exclaiming, "Stop, atop! Are you engaged?"

"Don't you see I am?" responded the driver gruffly. "But what's the matter, yellow-plush?"

These words were addressed to a livery-aervant who had come rushing forth from a house with the excited demand which first startled Ashborne from his reverie. He looked up—he knew that livery—he knew also the house from which the lacquey had sped.

"What is the matter?" he hastily inquired.

"Ah, Mr. Ashborne!" cried the domestic; "for heaven's sake go for a doctor! or lend me the cab!"

"One word?" interjected Stephen. "What has happened?"

"Master's dead, sir—and poor Miss—Oh, I beg pardon, Mrs. Ashborne—"

"Go for the doctor!" exclaimed Stephen, springing out of the cab: and he rushed into the house.

There was no necessity for him to put another syllable of inquiry in respect to the actual condition of Pamela: for as he sprang into the hall, he beheld her inanimate form being borne by two or three female-aervants towards the staircase. He followed: no one offered to prevent him; for it was of course well known throughout the entire household that he had in the morning become Pamela's husband,—though why that strangely hurried marriage had occurred none could tell.

Pamela was borne to her chamber: she was laid upon a sofa—and Stephen hastened to assist the handmaidens in administering restoratives.

"Is it true," he now ventured to ask in a very low tone, "that Mr. Pousford is dead?"

"Yes, sir—it is only too true! Poor dear young missus went to the library—and then such a cry as rang through the house—And if you go there, sir, you'll see him sitting in his chair—unless the other servants have moved him by this time—"

"He had a disease of the heart," observed another of the handmaidens; "and from what the doctor said, as he told his valet, it was to be expected that this would happen sooner or later."

"Where is that doctor?" ejaculated Stephen

impatiently. "Pamela does not recover! Get other restoratives!—something stronger!"

"See, Mr. Ashborne! her lips move! Yes—and now her hosom heaves!"

"Ah! it is so! Life is returning!"

The physician now made his appearance; and Stephen Ashborne, drawing the principal handmaiden aside, said to her, "Tell your young mistress presently that I was here at this fearful crisis—that accidentally, or may I not rather say providentially, I was passing at the moment—Yes, *providentially!*—for surely it must have been intended by heaven for some wise purpose of its own. Tell her, therefore, that I was here—yes, and say that I ministered unto her; and you may likewise add that I will return presently—Say anything you can to console her for this loss of her father! Oh, the bereavement is terrible!"

Stephen Ashborne paused—raised his hand to his brow—reflected for a few moments—and then he proceeded as follows:—

"Tell your young mistress all this; and say likewise that I will come back presently—and if she think fit to see me I shall be happy: but if on the other hand she would rather shut herself up in the seclusion of her own desolate heart, she need only signify her wish to me, and not for an instant would I think of intruding upon her grief! But tell her—tell her—that as she is now alone in the world, I am suddenly inspired by a consciousness of my duties as a husband—In short, say everything which your own good sense may dictate as being likely to prove soothing to the afflicted young lady!"

The abigail promised that she would faithfully and strictly fulfil the instructions thus given her; and Stephen Ashborne took his departure. Fresh food was there for his thoughts—fresh aliment for his marvelling meditation! How many more thrilling, startling, and important incidents were to be crowded into the comparatively brief space of this memorable day!—and what would be Pamela's answer to the species of overture which he had just made her through the medium of the confidential lady's-maid?

While thus giving way to his reflections, the young man was borne to Berkeley Square; and he alighted from the cab at the door of Trentham House. He inquired for his lordship, and was informed that the nobleman was engaged.

"With Mr. Sylvester Casey perhaps?" said Stephen interrogatively.

"Yes, sir," was the response; "and likewise with Mr. Bulteel, a lawyer, who has just arrived."

"Ah, indeed! so much the better!" ejaculated Stephen. "The very gentleman whom I could most wish to meet in the presence of his lordship! Lead the way and announce me."

"What name, sir, if you please?"

"What name? Oh, it is of no consequence! The name is not known to his lordship! I can nevertheless assure you that my business is of the most important character—But why do you hesitate? why do you look so suspicious?"

"Because, sir, to tell the truth, Mr. Bulteel's a lawyer—and his name's already too well known within these walls. That of Casey moreover isn't very popular amongst us; and so, begging your pardon, sir—"

"My good fellow," interrupted Ashborne, "if you apprehend mischief on your master's account I can assure you it is without a cause. I come to help him, and not to injure him."

The lacquey's features brightened up; and he at once led the way to the apartment where Lord Trentham was so deeply interested in the startling announcements that were being made by Mr. Bulteel to Sylvester Casey.

We have now brought the narrative down to the point at which the preceding chapter broke off; and from that particular conjuncture we may resume it.

"Lord Trentham," said Stephen Ashborne, advancing towards the nobleman, "I come not hither to exult over what may be almost termed the downfall, or at least the discomfiture of this young man:—and he pointed to Sylvester. "On the contrary, I could compassionate him, were it not that he was about to have made use of his supposed possession of wealth for so avil a purpose."

"Oh, it's all very well talking," cried Sylvester, now assuming a tone of defiance; "but you and Bulteel are in league together—that's plain enough! However, I'll fight you—I don't pretend to be a lawyer, but I know there's such a thing as disputing a will—"

"Think not," interrupted Ashborne, "that there is any chance of success in the present instance! It was not Mr. Bulteel who drew the will—no acquaintances of mine witnessed it—"

"One word, Mr. Ashborne," interrupted the lawyer sternly. "This young fellow is determined to make me speak out! Well then, let him know, to his confusion, that his father has cut him off because of his lazy, idle, and dissipated habits—and also because he was reckless and imprudent enough to accept a bill for a thousand pounds on behalf of a scamp named Abel Kingston, and which bill was duly paid by Mr. Casey senior when in the hands of a discounter named Pluckley."

"And how do you know all this?" demanded Sylvester, whose air of confidence was rapidly disappearing.

"The will itself specifies the facts," answered Bulteel, "But tell me, Mr. Sylvester, did not your father once assure you that you would some day know more completely than you even did *then*, what he thought of you?"

"Why, by Jove, now I recollect—yas, to be sure! it was that very same night when me and the governor was driving home together from Pluckley's in the cab—"

"And now, therefore," rejoined Bulteel, "you see that your father uttered no vain threat. Can you recollect the date of the incident itself? I mean the occasion when he used those warning words?"

"How the dnce should I know?" exclaimed Sylvester petulantly. "But of course I do! It was on the night of the 31st of May; and may I be hanged if I think the governor could have been serious in cutting me off in this manner!"

"It was on the 1st of June, sir," answered Bulteel, impressively, "that your deceased father made the will which has this day been discovered."

Sylvester staggered back a pace or two, with the air of one who felt that he was completely beaten; and he looked for a few instants as if he were about to weep.



AZALINE, IN AN ORIENTAL COSTUME.

"Well, what has the governer done for me?" he at length asked, in a snivelling tone and with humbled mien.

He has left you fifty-two pounds a year," replied Bulteel, "together with numerous recommendations on behalf of a steady and industrious mode of life for the future."

Sylvester made a horrible grimace at this announcement; and then abruptly turning upon his heel, he quitted the apartment.

"There goes one," said the lawyer, "who never will come to any good!"

"Mr. Bulteel," said Ashborne, "I am glad that you happened to be here at this time; but your presence is now no longer necessary. I wish to speak to his lordship in private."

The attorney made his bow, and withdrew; and Trentham, accosting the young man, said, "Mr. Ashborne, when you first entered the room it was with an exclamation calculated to inspire me with every hope——"

"Which shall be fulfilled, my lord!"

At this instant the door was heard to open, and Azaline appeared upon the threshold. She thought that her father was alone:—but on perceiving that there was still some one with him, she spoke a few words in apology for the intrusion, and was about to retire—when Ashborne exclaimed, "If that be your lordship's daughter, let her enter! There is no need of any reserves or secrecy now."

Azaline accordingly advanced into the room; and Lord Trentham said, "Strange things have occurred, my child. This gentleman's name is Mr. Ashborne: he is heir, no matter under what circumstances, to the deceased Mr. Casey's property—and he is therefore my creditor."

"And inasmuch as I have not the honour of being acquainted with your lordship, nor with your lordship's family," said Ashborne, "and never should have coveted that honour, nor shall henceforth avail myself of it, it is through no love for you that I am adopting the present course. Indeed, my lord, as a man of the world, you must fully comprehend that one stranger cannot surrender up sixty thousand pounds to another, unless for very potent reasons. But those reasons exist—and now, my lord, behold the results!"

Thus speaking, Stephen Ashborne drew forth a number of documents and papers from all his pockets; and flinging them upon the table, he proceeded to tear them across separately and individually, the nobleman and his daughter looking on with mingled astonishment, delight, and admiration.

"Good heavens! is this possible?" at length spoke Trentham, gasping under the influence of his emotions.

"I can scarcely understand it!" said the bewildered Azaline.

"I will explain it all," resumed Ashborne. "I have already told you that it was not for your sakes I have done this. No—but it is for the sake of one whom I am now proud to call my sister—for one of the best and purest and noblest-minded of human beings—one whom, if she had possessed the power to save you, my lord—or you, Miss Osborne, from annoyance, persecution, or vulgar tyranny, would most cheerfully have done so! It is she therefore whom you are now to admire—to thank—aye, and to remember in your prayers! It was she who interceded and

persuaded—I only am the agent and exeenter of her generous purposes. My lord, you are no longer a debtor; your estates are free. Miss Osborne, you need not apprehend that your hand will now be sought by one on whom I feel convinced that you would rather die than bestow it! Finally, in one word learn that for all this you have to thank the generous-hearted Selina!"

"But you, admirable young man!" exclaimed Lord Trentham: and then he stepped short—for Stephen Ashborne, tarrying to say no more—and to hear no more—and to receive no thanks for what he had done, disappeared with ghost-like rapidity from the apartment.

We will leave Lord Trentham and Azaline to the wondering discussion of all that had just taken place, and to the pleasing duty of giving explanations to Lady Trentham, while we will follow in the footsteps of Stephen Ashborne. On leaving Trentham House, he returned, according to promise, to the mansion where Mr. Ponsford had been so suddenly and so awfully smitten by the arrow of the Angel of Death, and where Stephen expected to receive an answer to the species of overture he had conveyed to his wife through the medium of the abigail. He reached the house—he alighted from the cab—he knocked at the front door. He was at once struck by the sombre, gloomy, and ominous look of the domestic who answered the summons. Two or three other servants were in the hall as Ashborne entered it; and they also maintained a moody silence. Something new had evidently happened,—something awful and overwhelming—of that fearful nature which prevented voluntary disclosure and checked the officiousness which springs forward to reveal things of an ordinary character. A question must be put ere that sombre silence would be broken.

And Ashborne, full of a deep awe-felt mis-giving, did put that question. What had happened? He now soon learnt the worst. Pamela was no more! She had burst a blood-vessel; and in less than an hour she had ceased to exist. Death had advanced with fearfully rapid strides upon its prey, so young, so beautiful! But it was no wonder that dissolution should have been so speedy after that last fatal blow which had smitten her, in the death of her father!

"She was conscious until almost the last," said the weeping abigail to Stephen Ashborne, adown whose cheeks the tears were likewise trickling. "I delivered all your messages, sir—and the poor dear lady was much moved—Yes, she was deeply touched! She said she hoped you would come back before she died, that she might assure you of her forgiveness. I don't know what she meant, sir—but those were her words. Yes!—and then she expressed a fervent wish that you might experience happiness in the world—until at last, sir, with her dying breath she repeated the assurance of her forgiveness, and charged me to tell you that you were fully pardoned."

"God be thanked!" murmured Ashborne, raising his kerchief to his eyes. "But who will now see after the rites of sepulture for the two who have thus perished—father and daughter?"

"Who, sir?" cried the abigail, with some little degree of astonishment. "Why, who should d; so but you, sir?"

"I?—I?"—and Ashborne looked bewildered.

"Why, to be sure, sir! You are master here

now. The poor dear young lady was no doubt her father's heiress—and you, sir, as her husband, are now the heir.”

“Ah!”—and Ashborne was at the instant struck by the fact for the first time. “More riches! more riches!” he muttered to himself, as he turned to leave the room where this little colloquy took place. “More riches!—and I who reckon not for them!—I who have now naught to live for—but, Oh! so much to regret and to deplore, and to render life a burden unto me!”

A few minutes afterwards the unhappy, remorse-stricken young man was kneeling by the side of the couch whereon lay the dead Pamela. One of her white hands was pressed to his lips, and the tears were flowing profusely from his eyes.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

CHELSEA REACH.

A MEMORABLE day, indeed, was this whereof we are writing!—for our narrative has not yet done with the incidents that belonged to it, and we are about to shift the attention of the reader to other scenes.

It was in the afternoon that a tall handsome young man, with dark curling hair, and fine eyes to match—dressed in a sailor's costume, and with a complexion sufficiently tanned or sunburnt to denote an acquaintance with tropical climes, without however at all marring the manly beauty or general expression of that good-looking, interesting face—plunged hastily amidst the maze of streets which lie behind Astley's Theatre. The garb which that young man wore, was not that of the common seaman; but it was characteristic of the rank of an officer in the mercantile service. It was his best uniform that he had on;—the gold band round the cap and the anchor buttons on the jacket and waistcoat shone in the bright sunbeams. A joyous hopeful expression mingled with the natural frankness and open-hearted honesty of the handsome face; and as he sped along, his dark eyes glanced rapidly from one familiar object to another, so that any observer might have guessed he was returning home after a long absence at sea. We may add that his age was about nineteen: and we may as well avail ourselves of the present opportunity of stating that he had been a couple of years in the maritime profession, his rank now being that of third mate on board the finest ship belonging to one of our most eminent merchant-princes.

This young gentleman quickly entered a particular street, and soon came in sight of the special house that he sought. He knocked at the door; and he literally trembled with impatience until the summons was answered. During the minute that thus elapsed—and, Oh! that minute was a veritable age!—he wondered who would first appear—whether it would be the being whom he so fervently longed to embrace, or whether the faithful servant who he knew would be so rejoiced to welcome him. Again and again he glanced at the window to see if any one were peeping out; but no familiar face met his view. Yet there were the well-remembered draperies; and thus he had no doubt that she whom he

sought still dwelt there. Besides, the last letters he had received from her, and which were waiting for him at St. Helena, had not even so much as hinted at any prospect of change of abode; and thus the young man made sure of finding her there.

At length the door opened; and an old woman appeared within the passage. She was a stranger to the young man; and he was rushing impatiently past her, when she caught him by the arm, crying, “Heyday, young sir! what does this mean?”

“My sister? Imogen?” he cried: and he was bursting away from the old woman, when the exclamation which came from her lips made him stop short.

“She is not here!”—these were the words spoken by the crone.

“Not hers? You mean that she is not at home? But she lives here?”

“Not now, sir. I suppose you are her brother—I heard tell of a brother that she had at sea—”

“Where is my sister?” was the next query, also put with impatience.

“Down at Chelsea, Mr. Hartland,” was the response.

“Ah, then she has moved? Is she no longer connected with the theatre?”

“No, sir. She gave up her engagement about a fortnight ago—at the same time that she left this place and put me in to take care of it; 'cause why, you see, I was recommended to her by a friend of her's, a Miss Denton, which is also on the stage.”

“And you say that my sister now lives at Chelsea?” interrupted Walter Hartland: for he the young seaman was.

“Yes, sir. Prospect Villa—that's the name of the place—though I've never been there: but Miss Hartland told me that I was to direct any letters that might come for her to that address.”

“Oh!”—and the impulsive young sailor was about to rush off again, when a thought struck him; and curbing his impatience, he said, “And the little girl—Annie I mean—is she quite well?”

“Quite well, when she left this house with Miss Hartland. Ah,—and a sweet little creature' too is Annie!”

“And the domestic—the faithful servant Fanny—is she still with my sister?”

“I believe so, sir—leastways she went away with Miss Hartland—”

“And my sister herself is quite well?” exclaimed Walter, with some little degree of anxiety floating in his mind. “She did not quit the stage through ill-health?”

“Not that I'm aware of, sir,” replied the old woman.

Walter looked hard at her, in order to ascertain whether she might know more than she chose to tell: but nothing in the expression of her countenance, which was honest and simple, seemed to strengthen the suspicion. Walter hesitated therefore to put the next question that came to the tip of his tongue: but at length with a species of abruptness he added, “Do you know why Imogen has removed to Chelsea?”

“I raly don't, sir. I shouldn't like to say anything scandalous against Miss Hartland—”

“Heaven forbid!” ejaculated Walter, with a

strange sensation shooting quiveringly through him.

"No—not for the world, sir!—and therefore if people do talk it's no business of mine, and I never give myself to gossiping. I know none of the neighbours—for I'm a stranger in this quarter, as one may say—"

"My good woman," interrupted Walter—and his voice was tremulous as he thus spoke; "I see that you have heard something about my eister—a scandal and a falsehood, no doubt; but still I beg you to tell me what it is. Don't be afraid to speak out! I shall not be angry. It is not your fault if people deal in tittle-tattle and idle gossip."

"Well, Mr. Hartland, since you speak so fair as this, I ought to tell you that two or three times when I've been in at the chandler's at the corner of the street, I've heard whispers going on, and I fancy they was meant to draw me out if so be I knew anything; but I took no notice of 'em—I made believe not to hear 'em—"

"Tell me what was said, my good woman—tell me what was said!"—and Walter's voice was low and hoarse.

"Why, sir, nobody seemed to know anything for certain; but there was something said about a handsome young gentleman who had been seen calling on Miss Hartland two or three times in the evening; and then too the gossips said that a beautiful girl like her didn't leave the stage all of a sudden for nothing—and then there was nods and winks and shakes of the head and so on."

"Perdition!" muttered Walter in a deep undertone: and then he ground his handsome teeth together. "But no!" he suddenly exclaimed, speaking aloud: "it is utterly impossible that Imogen could have done anything wrong! Here, my good woman!"—and he thrust a piece of gold into her hand. He was then about to hurry forth from the house, when again recollecting something, he asked, "Whereabouts is Prospect Villa?—for Chelsea is a large place."

"Near the Cheyne Walk," was the reply, accompanied with a profusion of thanks for the liberal donation which the crone had just received.

Away sped the young seaman from the house; and several of the neighbours stepped out to greet him as he passed: but curt and rapid were his acknowledgments of the same—and he quickly disappeared from their view. Making the best of his way to the stairs at Westminster Bridge, he inquired when one of the river steamers would be likely to touch at that point?

"There's none of 'em comes to this side of the bridge," replied an elderly boatman. "They touches on t'other side. But stop a moment, sir!" he exclaimed as Walter was on the point of darting away for the purpose of crossing the bridge and taking the steamer on the opposite side of the river. "Where does your honour want to go to?"

"To Chelsea," was the hastily given answer.

"Well, sir, there's the steamer just passing under the bridge from the pier on t'other side; and so you're too late. It'll be half an hour afore there's another."

"Half an hour?" ejaculated Walter. "Why, I thought the Chelsea boats ran every ten minutes or quarter of an hour?"

"How long has your honour been away at sea?" inquired the boatman.

"A couple of years," was the response frankly but quickly given.

"Ah, well, sir, them steamers have changed their times of running while you was away:—and the boatman's countenance displayed a cool hardihood as he told the ready lie. "Look, here, your honour! there's a nice boat—there's a fresh breeze from the east—we'll hoist sail—and if I don't run you up to the Reach afore any steamer could take you there, then don't pay me nothin' at all, but kick me into the bargain."

"That I will certainly do!" exclaimed Walter, but it was with a good-natured smile, as he sprang into the boat.

The owner thereof gave a aly gritu of satisfaction and triumph as he followed the customer whom he had thus inveigled—the boat was thrust from the steps—the fellow quickly pulled it into the middle of the stream—the sail was then hoisted—and the little bark certainly aped on at a good rate, though not in a manner calculated to justify its owner's boast, or save him from the consequences of his temerity if Walter were inclined to hold him to a hard bargain.

"Why, you villain, you!" presently cried the young man, but still with the frank hearty good-humoured look and laugh of a sailor; "here's another steamer bearing down upon us—and not half the time has elapsed that you mentioned since the other one must have touched at Westminster Bridge!"

"Well, I'm blowed, your honour," said the boatman, with a well assumed expression of surprise and disgust, "if ever I trust the time-tables of them lying Companies again. They're always a chopping and changing about. It's competition as does it. One Company puts on extra boats; then another does the same. But never do you mind, sir! We'll be at Chelsea in plenty of time for whatsoever business you've got in hand. That there steamboat touches at every place on both sides—while we're cutting straight ahead, with the breeze freshening as we get higher up."

Walter Hartland made no comment upon these observations: he saw that he had been deceived by the boatman—but he took the cheat with characteristic good-nature; for notwithstanding his impatience to behold his sister, his was not a temper that could be ruffled by the fact of a few minutes' delay, which was indeed the outside to be expected from the mode of conveyance he had adopted. Remaining silent, he gave way to his reflections. There was a certain uneasiness in his mind which he could not conquer, notwithstanding all the efforts he made for the purpose. That name of Prospect Villa frightened him! It surely must be a place of abode too expensive for his sister's means?—and yet might it not be possible that she had found some female friend whose guest she had become—some benevolent lady into whose companionship she had been taken? Yet the gossiping story of the handsome young gentleman visiting his sister in the evening, haunted his mind; and he could not exclude the harrowing reflection that the stage was notorious for its temptations, and that few indeed were the young females who passed stainless through its ordeal. And then, in case the very worst should have happened—in case he should discover that Imogen had indeed fallen from the path of virtue—he began to make excuses for her in advance: or at

least he strove to do so. He said to himself, "She may have been pressed by poverty—her earnings may have been insufficient—she may have contracted debts—she may have trembled at the idea of her very bed being sold from under her—and thus she may have succumbed to the tempter! Or she may have loved deeply and devotedly—Ah!" and the thought that now struck him with lightning rapidity, made his heart leap with exultation and his countenance lighten up with animation.

What was this thought?

"She may be married—privately married! I have heard that women connected with the stage often retain their own names, and continue to pass themselves off as single, though in reality they are honestly wedded wives. Heaven grant that this may be so!"

But as the galvanic enthusiasm of the thought subsided, doubt and uncertainty returned to the young man's mind: they quickly deepened into misgiving once more—and a cloud descended over his handsome features. Thus he remained wrapped up in a reverie which gradually grew more and more sombre, until he was suddenly startled up from it by a loud ejaculation which burst from the lips of the boatman.

We will explain what was the occasion of the cry. The little bark was just entering upon Chelsea Reach, when an accident occurred to another boat at some little distance. In that boat a lady and gentleman were seated, and they had a man with them. The latter, while endeavouring to put up a mast—or "step it," as it is technically termed—accidentally fell across the gunwale in such an awkward manner that the boat was instantaneously upset, the catastrophe being aided by the sudden springing-up of the lady from her seat at the first terrified glance at what was happening. Thus in the twinkling of an eye all three persons were in the water—lady, gentleman, and boatman; and this was the cause of the exclamation which, bursting from the lips of the owner of the boat wherein Walter Hartland was seated, so abruptly aroused him from his gloomy train of thought.

The accident took place in the middle of Chelsea Reach, where the river is broad and the current rapid. Walter Hartland's boat was at least a couple of hundred yards off in the one direction, while at about a similar interval in the other direction a steam-vessel was pursuing its way. The moment the accident was observed on board the steamer, it stayed its course and began to put about with a praiseworthy alacrity on the part of the captain. In the middle of the broad stream floated the unfortunate boat, keel upwards; and the three human beings who had occupied it were seen struggling in the water. A rending scream burst from the lips of the lady—and then down she went.

"Help, help!—not *me*—but *her*!" were the words which in wild anguish and in agonising appeal rang from the tongue of the young gentleman who had been upset with her; for young he was—as was likewise that fair object of his all-absorbing interest.

"Here she is!" exclaimed Walter Hartland: and he unhesitatingly plunged into the river.

He strook out gallantly and swiftly; and a few instants brought him to the spot where he

thought he had seen the young lady come up again. But, no!—it was only her straw hat which was floating on the water!

"Help, help!" was the vociferation that now burst from the lips of the boatman who had been upset—and fearfully indicative of perilous distress was that cry: but scarcely was it uttered, when down went the unfortunate wretch as if he had been suddenly shot—and he sank to rise no more, —unless it were as a swollen livid corpse, a few days afterwards, lower down the river.

"Save her! save her!" was the exclamation with which the young gentleman greeted the cry of "Here she is!" which had thrilled with such joyous hopefulness from the lips of Walter Hartland: and then a cry of anguish was sent forth by the former as the latter held up only the hat which he had succeeded in reaching.

But now there was another exultant shout from Walter's lips; and at the same time he was striking out with all his force, swimming towards a point where a garment appeared upon the surface of the river. The young gentleman beheld the same object, and desperately strove to swim towards it: but being evidently exhausted, he went down with almost as much suddenness as his boatman had done a few instants before. More successful—because more accustomed to the circumstances and perils of the waters—Walter Hartland reached the lady. She sank as he approached her—down he dived after her—she came up again at a little distance—and then the ejaculation of "Good heavens!" burst in mingled horror and amazement from Walter's lips as he caught a complete view of the face of the fair one whom he was endeavouring to save. And then more energetic, if possible, became these endeavours on his part—and they were crowned with complete success!

Meanwhile the steamer, having put about, made its way towards the scene of the catastrophe; and the young gentleman, who reappeared above the water for the third time, was rescued, though with some difficulty. A few instants more, and it would have been too late!

This young gentleman was clad in a boating costume, consisting of the invariable guernsey and loose trousers: he was very handsome—and it was easy to perceive, though he was in a state of complete unconsciousness, that he was a person of condition and good-breeding. When he opened his eyes, he was lying in the cabin surrounded by the captain and half a dozen of the passengers, who were administering restoratives, and who were all taking a lively interest in the result.

"Where is she?" he asked the very first moment his ideas began to grow collected. "Good God! is it possible—"

"You've nothing to fear, sir," the captain hastened to interject: "the lady is safe!"

An expression indicative of indescribable relief appeared upon the countenance of the young gentleman: he joined his hands, and evidently poured forth his gratitude through the medium of inward silent prayer.

"But where is she?" he asked, now looking anxiously around him.

"She was taken into the boat that was scudding up the stream, and to which the young gentleman who saved her belonged. They then made for the Swan Pier—"

"How know you that she lives?" was the eager and affrighted question that the young gentleman now put.

"Make yourself easy on that head, sir," responded the captain. "We had our misgivings at first—we thought the boat was shooting in so fast that the lady might be taken to a doctor's—but we saw her sit up—"

"Thank God!" ejaculated the young gentleman. "How long did I remain senseless?"

"For a matter of five or six minutes, or so, sir."

"And therefore the boat has by this time reached the pier—and she is on shore?"

"Oh, yes—it's all right enough!—that's quite clear! Don't make yourself anxious."

"No, no—since you assure me that she is safe! And now, if you will have the kindness to land me also—"

"That shall be done in a very few moments. Where would you like to be landed, sir?"

"Oh, at the Swan Pier, also:"—and the young gentleman made an impatient sign for the captain to lead the way up the cabin stairs.

"I hope you have not far to go, sir? I have got a change of clothes on board—and if you would condescend to accept of their use—"

"Thank you; but my own residence is but a very short distance from the pier."

"So much the better, sir:"—and the captain sprang upon the deck, to give the orders for putting in to the point where the rescued one wished to be landed.

Meanwhile this individual expressed his thanks to those passengers who had demonstrated so great an interest in his behalf; and it was with a liberal hand that he rewarded the captain and the men belonging to the steamer. He was evidently full of impatience to reach the pier; and the instant the steamer ran alongside, he leapt upon it. Many persons were collected there, the rumour of the accident having quickly spread throughout the neighbourhood.

"Where is the lady?" was the question at once put by the young gentleman.

"Gone home, I suppose, sir," replied one of the people there congregated. "I saw the brave young sailor who rescued her, put her into a cab—"

"And she was uninjured—unhurt? though doubtless suffering—"

"She certainly looked faint and ill, sir; but she knew that you had been poked up—"

"Ah, then, she is relieved from suspense? But concerning the poor fellow who was with me in the boat?"

"Ah, it's all over, sir, with him," observed another of the bystanders.

"I feared so!" said the young gentleman. "Poor fellow! But tell me, has he a wife and children whom he has now left a widow and fatherless?—for if so, it shall be my care to keep them from want."

He was however assured by some one who was standing by, and who knew the deceased boatman, that the unfortunate wretch had left none behind him who would suffer from his loss; and this intelligence was naturally gratifying to the young gentleman. He now hurried from the pier; and leaping into a cab, ordered it to drive to Prospect Villa—for this young gentleman who so narrowly escaped with his life under the circumstances

which we have been describing, was none other than the Hon. Launcelot Osborne.

In a few minutes he reached the Villa:—and a picturesque little residence it was, standing apart from the other buildings in Cheyne Walk, its front looking upon the river, and its back upon a garden neatly laid out. On alighting from the cab, Launcelot's hurriedly put query was, "How is Imogen? where is she?"

Fanny, who had opened the front door, was filled with affright on beholding her young master dripping wet and with wild excited looks. The question which he put, dismayed her; and she was smitten with the stupor of silence.

"Tell me, Fanny—tell me! where is Imogen? I know she is safe—"

"Safe, sir? God grant it! But she is not here!"

"Not here? Why, she was put into a cab! Ah, then she may have been taken to the doctor's after all! Run and see, Fanny! Go quick!—while I change my clothes! Fear nothing!—she is safe, I tell you! She was rescued!"

But still Launcelot could not help thinking it somewhat strange that the object of his devoted love had not returned forthwith to the Villa. This she might have done and have sent at once for medical attendance while she was changing her apparel. As he thus reflected therefore, Launcelot feared she might have been hurt after all, even to the extent of sustaining a fractured limb or a dislocated arm by the force with which she was possibly dragged up into the boat. He performed his toilet with feverish rapidity; and by the time he had finished it, Fanny came back breathless with haste, anxiety, and suspense. She had been to half a dozen medical men in the neighbourhood; and to the house of none had Imogen been conveyed.

Away sped Launcelot back to the pier: he instituted fresh inquiries—but he could obtain no additional particulars—merely such details as served to corroborate the former statement, that Imogen had been placed in a cab by the handsome and gallant young gentleman in the naval uniform who had rescued her from drowning. No one could tell which the cab had driven: no one seemed to have overheard the directions, whatsoever they were, which the officer had given to the driver. Launcelot stood bewildered: he knew not what to think or how to act. There were misgivings in his mind—but he could scarcely tell of what nature they were: he was too excited and anxious to be enabled to exercise the patience necessary for analyzing and defining them. Suddenly he bethought himself that it would at least be prudent to ascertain, if possible, who the young sailor was and where he lived, so that in case of need he might know where to address himself for such information as it would be requisite to obtain if Imogen should remain much longer absent. Launcelot accordingly descended upon the dummy or barge, to look for the boat which had brought the young stranger to Chelsea. But it was not to be seen; and on inquiry, Launcelot learnt that it had sailed away soon after having landed its freight; and the boatman himself being unknown to the people belonging to the Chelsea Pier, there seemed to be no further chance of following up any satisfactory clue in this quarter.

Again did Launcelot hurry home to the Villa, with the feverish hope that he should find Imogen there: but no! she was still absent—and poor Fanny was overwhelmed with grief. This distress was quickly infectious with regard to poor little Annie, who began to cry bitterly when she gathered from what was being said that Imogen was lost. As for Launcelot, he was now well-nigh reduced to despair. That Imogen could have purposely fled with the young stranger in the naval uniform, was not for a moment to be thought of: he knew her much too well—he could pledge his own existence upon her fidelity! On the other hand, that the young stranger himself could have violently effected her abduction, was scarcely more probable: for how could this be done in a crowded neighbourhood and in the broad daylight? Launcelot therefore reverted to the idea that Imogen must have been injured despite the assurance which he had received to the contrary when first landing from the steamer on the pier;—and he hastened to call at the dwelling of every professional man and at the shop of every chemist in the entire district. Still his inquiries were unavailing; and as each successive negative was given, he felt that his brain was becoming more and more fevered, until he dreaded lest his terrible excitement should terminate in madness. For, Oh! what could he do if his Imogen were lost to him for ever? He now felt that he loved her more devotedly than he had even fancied before the strange occurrences of this day, strong though he had known his passion to be for her. To be brief, after having prosecuted his inquiries without the slightest success, he returned to Prospect Villa. Three hours had now elapsed since the accident upon the Thames, and still no sign of Imogen. Launcelot could scarcely believe it!—he seemed to be the sport of some horrible dream: he inquired of himself whether he were awake or in the midst of a nightmare? He was constantly rushing to the window—the slightest sound took him to the front door: but still no sign of Imogen!

All this time the idea had never occurred to him that by any possibility the young stranger in the naval uniform might be her own brother. Of this brother she had never spoken to him but once—and that was on the occasion when she had told him her history and the circumstances under which the hand of calamity had fallen heavily upon her family, forcing herself upon the stage and sending her brother to sea. Launcelot only just knew, therefore, the one fact that she had a brother at sea. But that this brother should have suddenly turned up at such a crisis, did not for an instant strike him. There was, consequently, no species of conjecture whereby he might solve the strange and terrible mystery that now appeared to envelope the fate of his Imogen.

Four hours elapsed—and Launcelot was on the point of sallying forth again to renew his inquiries, when a cab drove up to the front of the villa, and out sprang a young gentleman in a naval uniform. A cry of mingled hope and apprehension burst from the lips of Launcelot, as he precipitated himself down the steps of the front door; and in a state of almost breathless suspense, he demanded, "Where is Imogen? what have you done with her? what has happened to her? Speak! speak!—for God's sake, speak!"

But the young officer remained silent; and now, as Launcelot contemplated his countenance, it struck him that there was an expression of profound mournfulness in it—aye, and not merely mournfulness, but likewise some deeper feeling the precise nature of which Osborne could not understand.

"Speak! speak! for heaven's sake speak!" he cried. "Why this silence?"

"Let me accompany you into the house, Mr. Osborne," said the officer, whose tone was as peculiar as his looks.

Launcelot led the way in a state of the most feverish suspense; and the instant the parlour was reached, he turned round upon the young man, who followed him,—crying in a voice that might even be described as full of a plaintive appeal, "Tell me, where is Imogen? I adjure you to tell me!"

"Mr. Osborne, I have a most painful duty to perform," was the solemnly given answer. "Methought that you might have understood by my manner—by my silence—yes, and even by my looks, that I was the bearer of no agreeable intelligence. Prepare yourself to hear the worst."

"What! Imogen injured—hurt—mauled? No, no!—do not say it!"—and Launcelot was almost frantic. "They could not have deceived me!—they assured me that she was unhurt! Yet, Oh, my God! I had my misgivings and my suspicions!—I went everywhere to make inquiries!—and now those fears are confirmed! But, no, no!—again I say it cannot be!"

"Alas," was the response, "the tidings which I have to impart, are evidently worse than you could have anticipated——"

"You will not—No, no!—you will not tell me that she is—is——" and Launcelot gasped ere he could bring himself to give utterance to the word "dead!"

"I mean that she is no more:"—and it would be impossible to describe the solemn impressiveness with which this answer was given.

"What!" exclaimed Launcelot, wildly: "Imogen dead? No, no!—do not tell me this! Imogen dead! No—it is not true! Who are you that come to deceive me—to trifle with me?"

"Who am I, Mr. Osborne? Perhaps under other circumstances I should tell you in fiercer words and with sterner looks, that I am Imogen's brother."

"Ah!"—and then as Launcelot fixed his eyes again upon the countenance of the young officer, he discerned something in the features which reminded him of the beautiful profile of Imogen. "And you are her brother? Yes—I see that you are!—you must be! And now, alas! I can doubt you no longer!—I must not hesitate to believe you when you say that Imogen has ceased to exist!"

Launcelot sank upon a chair—shaded his eyes with one hand—remained profoundly silent for upwards of a minute—and then sobbed violently. Walter Hartland looked on coldly and without compassion: at least whatsoever he might have felt inwardly, was not in the slightest degree expressed upon his countenance.

"Is this true? can it be possible?" Launcelot began asking himself when his sobbing had subsided: "or is it all a dream? Imogen gone from me!—the bright—the beautiful—the affectionate one whom I loved so well!"

"Mr. Osborne," said Walter, "the grief which you display for my sister's loss, makes me almost inclined to respect you for the love you bore her, notwithstanding that this love was so fatal to her honour."

"As there is a heaven above us," exclaimed Launcelot vehemently, "I offered to espouse her—to make her my wife—but it was she who refused!"

"It is now useless, Mr. Osborne, to discuss the past," replied Walter, with mournful severity of tone and look. "That she refused you is indeed true—for you had seduced her first——"

"Seduced her? Oh, what an expression when bearing reference to the strong love that I cherished for her!—that love which was so tenderly reciprocated! And if it led us into error, it did not render *me* false to my honourable intentions!—but, I repeat, it was your sister who refused to become my wife!"

"Yes—because she felt first of all, that having been your mistress she could not become your wife; and secondly she had seen your parents, and she knew that they would never consent to your union. She loved you too much to suffer you to mar your own prospects or ruin your position in the world by becoming the husband of an equestrian performer; and she was also too proud to force herself into a family that would have despised and disowned her."

"Oh, if she has told you all this, Mr. Hartland," exclaimed Launcelot, "she must have said other things concerning me!—she must have charged you with some message—some last assurance of love and affection?"

"Yes, Mr. Osborne: Imogen charged me to convey her last wishes unto you. She said that loving you as she did, she was almost glad for your sake that ye were to be parted by the hand of Death; for that she knew how impossible it was for your family interests as well as your own personal advantages to be served and forwarded so long as such a connexion endured. And therefore, terrible though it were for her to know that she had already looked her last on you, yet in another sense she was rejoiced; for her love towards you, Mr. Osborne, was a self-martyrdom!"

"Alas, poor Imogen!" and Launcelot was now weeping copiously.

"My sister bade you mourn not for her, but to think of those who have other claims upon you," pursued Walter Hartland. "Yes—she enjoined me to bid you remember that you have a father and mother whose wishes and whose interests you are bound to consider; and that your family fortunes are only to be rebuilt by means of some exalted marriage—such a marriage in fine as your rank and position warrant you in aspiring unto."

"Good heavens! did Imogen speak thus?" murmured Launcelot in a broken voice.

"She spoke thus—and it was with sense, and reason, and justice also that she spoke!"

"But Imogen herself had every claim upon me!" cried Launcelot,—“the claim of love—the claim of one who had surrendered up a fortune for the services of my family! Do you know that Imogen had twenty thousand pounds—It was but yesterday she explained to me how she had obtained the amount——"

"I know everything to which you allude," said Walter; "and there can be no doubt that my

poor sister was one of the most generous-hearted of women!"

"Oh, the best! the best!" murmured Launcelot fervently. "And I repeat, she had every claim upon me! Oh, that she had lived!"—but here his voice was choked with his deep convulsive sobbings.

"The shock she had sustained by the accident was too great for her," resumed Walter: "the system received a blow which quickly proved fatal. She broke a blood-vessel——"

"Oh—but the best medical advice——"

"She had it, Mr. Osborne. Think you that I would have neglected her? No, no! Painful as it was for me to learn, when setting foot again upon my native land, that my sister had fallen from the path of virtue and had become the mistress of a young patrician,—yet Oh! when Death laid his cold hand upon her, and she was breathing her last words in my ears, it was not *then*, at such a moment, that I could display harshness or severity towards her! No!—heaven forbid!"

"Oh, thank you—thank you, for that assurance!" murmured Launcelot: and grasping Walter's hand, he said, "We are not enemies?"

"We are not enemies, Mr. Osborne; because, after all you have said, it would be impossible for me to deny that you stand towards my deceased sister in a very different light from that of the ordinary seducer. And therefore I repeat that we are not enemies, Mr. Osborne. But it were useless for me to say that we will be friends, because our pathways lie in different directions in the world, and it is little probable that when we separate in a few minutes—as we are about to do—we shall ever meet again. But I hear you no ill-will."

"I will accompany you, Mr. Hartland!" answered Launcelot. "Where are the remains of Imogen? where did she die? where is that beautiful form? where reposes the head that has lain upon this bosom of mine? where has death closed the eyes of that countenance which I loved so much in life and would fain behold for the last time in death?"

"Mr. Osborne," said Walter, firmly and severely, "you will not accompany me to the place where Imogen lies. It were useless——"

"What!" interrupted Launcelot, with passionate vehemence: "not be permitted to press my lips for the last time to Imogen's brow?—not be suffered to kneel by her corpse and pray God to have mercy upon the soul which has fled from the most beautiful tenement that ever the eternal spirit inhabited upon earth!"

"Understand me, Mr. Osborne," responded Walter: "I comprehend the feelings which dictate the wish on your part—but I cannot consent to gratify it. I bore Imogen to the house of highly respectable friends of mine,—friends amongst whom there are ladies as pure, virtuous, and good as your own sister; and they need not know that Imogen was the mistress of a scion of the aristocracy at the time of her death."

"Let me go as a friend! represent me as a relation!—no matter what, only suffer me to go!"—and Launcelot's accents were full of the most earnest and pathetic appeal.

"No, Mr. Osborne—no, it cannot be permitted. I adjure you to respect the character of my sister in her death—you who did not altogether respect it in her lifetime! Suffer me as her brother—her only



surviving relative—to conduct the last sad obsequies with so much privacy—I might even say *secrecy*—that Calumoy which respects not even the dead, may not know upon whose grave, grassy and flower-bedecked, it sits in some village churchyard,—ignorant of who sleeps below, and therefore unable to defame her!”

“Good heavens!” murmured Launcelot, who seemed as if his heart were breaking; “is this to be the end of poor Imogen?—is it thus that in her death she is to be secluded? shall no name be inscribed upon her tomb?”

“Yes—the name of IMOGEN on a stone at the head of the grave,” rejoined Walter; “but not a syllable of detail to tell the world who *this* Imogen was! Some day you shall learn where she is thus secluded from life; and if your heart still entertain the slightest yearning towards her, you may be permitted to go and drop a tear over her grave!”

No. 50.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

There was a pause, during which Launcelot strove hard to resign himself to the course marked out by the brother of the lost Imogen. But, Oh! how difficult to yield up the hope of looking for the last time upon the countenance of the beloved and perished one! Accordingly, Launcelot made one more appeal to Walter Hartland; but the latter speedily checked him, saying with a cold severity that repelled all further intercession, “Suffer *me*, Mr. Osborne, to become the guardian of my sister’s name in her death, since *you* respected it so little in her life-time!”

Launcelot bent down his looks, distressed and humiliated, but with a seal upon his lips.

“And now, Mr. Osborne,” resumed Walter, “I have only to fulfil one of the last instructions which I received from my poor sister—and then I shall bid you farewell. I promised to take charge of little Annie.”

“Leave the child with me!” exclaimed Launcelot

vehemently; "and I will rear her for Imogen's sake! Imogen loved the child fondly; and, Oh! it will be a solace and a pleasure to me to have henceforth about me something that Imogen loved!"

"This request, Mr. Osborne, I must also refuse. My word was solemnly given to my sister," continued Walter, "to take charge of Annie; and my pledge must be fulfilled. Oh! believe me, she would not on her death-bed have permitted you to be embarrassed with a charge which could not fail to militate materially against all your future prospects—even as it had given a scope to scandalous tongues and created false prejudices in reference to my poor sister herself! Let me depart, therefore, with Annie and the faithful domestic; and do you, Mr. Osborne, hasten to return into that sphere to which you properly belong and which you were formed to adorn."

Launcelot made no answer: he again threw himself upon the chair whence he had ere now risen; and covering his face with his hands, he became absorbed in the depth of his unutterable woe. Walter Hartland glided noiselessly from the room—and Launcelot perceived it not: but when the unhappy young gentleman awoke from his reverie and looked about him, he found himself alone. In less than a minute afterwards he ascertained that Fanny and the little girl were gone, with the brother of the lost Imogen!

CHAPTER LXXIV.

ZADOUSKI'S POCKET-BOOK.

THREE weeks had now elapsed since the murder of Ivan Zadouski, and the disposal of his mutilated corpse in the carpet-bag. No clue had in the meanwhile been discovered toward the unravelling of the fearful mystery; so that Mr. and Mrs. Grills were now enjoying a sense of the completest security, and hence Henri Ponchard hesitated not occasionally to call at their house to ascertain whether anything fresh had transpired.

One evening—about three weeks after the murder, as we have already said—the Frenchman made his appearance at the house of infamy in that low vile neighbourhood; and the instant his summons at the front door was answered by Mrs. Grills in person, she gave vent to an ejaculation which was unmistakably significant of the fact that she had something of importance to communicate.

"What is it, my good woman?" asked Ponchard, with his accustomed coolness as he preceded Mrs. Grills into the parlour.

"A discovery, sir! a discovery!—though I don't know what you may make of it."

"A discovery of what? not of the business in which we were engaged?—or else you would not look quite so smiling and satisfied over the matter?"

"No—there's nothink to be afeerd on, that I know of," pursued Mrs. Grills: "and indeed I don't know whether the discovery is of any use at all——"

"Make haste, woman!" interrupted Ponchard, now speaking somewhat impatiently.

"You know I told you of the tall gentleman I

met on the bridge, with the light brown hair—the auburn whiskers—the light moustachios, with the points all curled——"

"Very well! what of this personage?" demanded Henri Ponchard.

"I saw him again to day," rejoined Mrs. Grills. "I had a little business to transact in the neighbourhood of Regent Street—just to look after a young milliner-gal that one of my customers has taken a fancy to—when who should I see coming along on horseback, followed by a groom at a short distance, but my tall distinguished-looking friend of Waterloo Bridge! You may be sure, sir, I very soon popped out of the way, for if he had happened to see me, he might by chance have recognised my face again——"

"Well, well," said Ponchard; "to what is all this to lead? I suppose the fact is, you've discovered who the gentleman was?"

"Yes—that's just it," said Mrs. Grills: "for as I dodged round the corner of a street I heard one gentleman tell another who he was. You'd never guess if you was to go on thinking and thinking from now 'till doomsday!—so I won't keep you any longer in suspense; but I'll just tell you at once that the tall handsome man which met me on the bridge, was none other than the Russian Grand Duke!"

"What?" and Henri Ponchard literally hounded upon his seat. "The Russian Grand Duke? Good heavens! Yes, yes! I comprehend it all! To be sure! he may have had an appointment with the Pole!—this is now evident enough!"

"Yes—he said so at the time," observed Mrs. Grills, who was now smitten with wonder at the effect which her revelation had produced upon Ponchard.

"Extraordinary coincidences!" ejaculated this individual. "But, Ah! it is indeed something which may possibly be turned to advantage!"—and with these words he was rushing forth from the apartment, when Mrs. Grills detained him.

"Just one word, sir! one word!" she cried.

"There's nothink to fear—is there?"

"Nothing, nothing!" he hastily responded.

"No!—nothing to fear!"

"One word more, sir! What about Hester? Anythink new in that quarter! Have you seen her again?"

"No! It was with difficulty I obtained that one interview with her the other day at Charlton Villa: for she is ill—her newly discovered parent would hardly leave her——"

"Perhaps she may die," interjected Mrs. Grills brutally; "and that'll be so much the better; for she's the only person that could tell anythink that might prove at all inconvenient to us."

Ponchard flung upon the woman a look of the deepest disgust; but instantaneously altering the expression of his countenance, lest he should offend her, he said, "Fear nothing on the part of poor Hester. She will not suffer a word to escape her lips that will tend to do me an injury. Of this I am well assured! It is not likely that I shall see her again very soon—even if we ever meet any more; for, I repeat, she is hastening towards the tomb——"

"Well," interjected Mrs. Grills, "if so be you're satisfied about the gal, I'm sure I am——though Grills did say that if——"

But Henri Ponchard waited to hear no more; and he rushed from the house. He lost no time in returning to his own lodgings; and there he took from the bottom of a trunk, which he kept carefully locked, an old pocket-book tied round with a piece of string. This he secured about his person; and having made some little improvement in his toilet—for which purpose the contents of the trunk furnished the means—he hastened off towards the West End.

It was about half-past nine o'clock in the evening when Henri Ponchard thus beat his way to the patrician quarter of Grosvenor Square; and on reaching the mansion of Count Olonetz, he at once boldly inquired for the Grand Duke.

"Your name, if you please?" said the domestic to whom he addressed himself. "I will take it to his Imperial Highness, and see whether an audience can be granted—though perhaps at this hour it were better that you should explain your business in writing."

"Not so, if you please," answered Ponchard. "His Imperial Highness will grant me an interview, I am confident, if you will have the goodness to say that my business is of more than ordinary importance and relates to an appointment which has never been kept."

"But your name, sir, if you please?" persisted the domestic.

"You will see how needless it is for me to give my name, when once you shall have delivered my message to his Imperial Highness."

The lacquey withdrew; and in a very few moments he returned, bidding Ponchard follow him. The Frenchman was conducted up the magnificent staircase, to an apartment where he found himself in the presence of a tall, distinguished-looking personage, precisely answering the description given by Mrs. Grills of the Russian imperial prince. The domestic instantaneously withdrew; and the Grand Duke—who had thrown a glance of rapid scrutiny at the Frenchman on his entrance—exclaimed with an air of mingled excitement and disappointment, "You are not he whom I expected to behold!"

"No, my lord," answered Ponchard, in a calm collected manner. "I am not Ivan Zadouski."

"Then what meant you by the message which you sent, relative to the appointment that had never been kept?" demanded the Prince impatiently.

"I mean your Imperial Highness to understand that I am here in the place of that same Ivan Zadouski."

"For what purpose?" asked the Grand Duke, looking strangely, suspiciously, and also with an air of acute suspense at the Frenchman. "Speak quickly!—for I must tell you that I have had terrible misgivings—I have read certain horrible accounts in the public journals—"

Ponchard pretended to look astonished, as he said, "I do not understand your Imperial Highness. I have called to place in your hands certain papers which your Highness is doubtless anxious to possess—"

"Answer me!" interrupted the Grand Duke. "Do you come from Ivan Zadouski? Does he still live? or has he been made away with? and is this the reason that the appointment was never kept? Who was the woman I met upon the bridge?"

"My lord," said Henri Ponchard, "I do not understand you. Suffice it for me to state that circumstances prevented Ivan Zadouski from keeping the appointment that night—"

"But the next night, and several consecutive nights?" cried the Duke. "I was there—"

"Well, my lord, the same circumstances prevented Ivan Zadouski from meeting your Imperial Highness. This is all that I am enabled to state upon the point; and perhaps your Highness will be more satisfied if I proceed at once to business by placing this packet of papers in your august hand."

Thus saying, Ponchard produced a pocket-book, which the Prince snatched somewhat abruptly from him; and then hastening to seat himself at the table, he began to glance over the papers which the pocket-book contained. The Frenchman watched him with a calm but intense scrutiny; and he could judge from the change in the illustrious individual's countenance, the varying effects which those letters were producing upon him. At length the Grand Duke—evidently struggling hard to master his emotions—deliberately replaced the documents in the pocket-book, tied the string around it, and then slowly turning his looks upon the Frenchman, said, "Of course you know the contents of these papers?"

"I am acquainted with their contents, may it please your Highness," was Ponchard's reply. "But I am discreet—and I never betray a secret for the keeping of which I am well paid."

"I understand you, sir," rejoined the Grand Duke, his lip turning pale and quivering as he spoke. "You know that these papers contain the damning evidence of a husband's dishonour and a wife's guilt:—you rightly surmise therefore that, though these sad details are far from being altogether a secret, yet that I, as that injured husband, were loath for them to obtain a world-wide notoriety. Yes, yes!—for my-dear child's sake! Well, sir, you shall be bribed—you shall be well rewarded!"

Thus speaking, the Russian Prince drew forth his purse; and thence he counted down a number of bank-notes, a glance at which showed Ponchard that they were of considerable value. He gathered them together, bowed to the Grand Duke, and was about to quit the apartment, when the Prince caught him abruptly and violently by the wrist, saying in a low deep voice full of concentrated passion, "Tell me what you know, and the secret shall be safe! Tell me that Ivan Zadouski has ceased to exist—tell me that those were his remains which were so strangely disposed of the other night—and the discovery of which filled the whole metropolis with horror! Tell me, I repeat, that Ivan Zadouski is no more, and I shall thank you—yes, shall thank you; for I shall know that retribution has overtaken the paramour of my guilty wife!"

Henri Ponchard reflected for a few moments with an inscrutable expression of countenance; and then, as if making up his mind what response to give, he said, "I see that we may trust each other, my lord. Well then, it is as your Highness suspects:—Ivan Zadouski has paid the penalty of whatsoever crimes he may have at any time committed!"

"Ah!" said the Grand Duke, an expression of gloating ferocity coming over his countenance for

an instant: "it is thus—is it? And now answer me! What has Count Mandeville to do with the transaction? how came he to be mixed up with Ivan Zadouski?"

"Count Mandeville?" exclaimed Ponchard, with an air of the most unfeigned surprise.

"Yes—Count Mandeville," rejoined the Grand Duke. "I know little or nothing about him beyond suspecting him to be a spy of Count Olo-netz—"

"A spy?" echoed Ponsford, as a light began to break in upon him: "a spy of the Russian Ambassador?"

"I have every reason to think so," rejoined the Grand Duke. "Nay more!—I have even heard it whispered that he serves the French Ambassador in a like capacity—though I have no means of vouching for this latter fact."

"A man who would be a spy in one instance," said Ponchard gloomily, "will act as a spy in another. But wherefore did your Imperial Highness ere now associate that man's name with Ivan Zadouski?"

"Because it was he who made for me the appointment with Zadouski on Waterloo Bridge."

"Indeed?"—and again Ponchard looked suspicious. "On my soul, my lord, I was ignorant that Mandeville had meddled in this affair; for it was not he who had any concern in Ivan Zadouski's death. Ask me no more, my lord. Doubtless, as it is I who have brought you the pocket-book and papers belonging to the deceased, your Highness will entertain the conviction that it was by my hand he met his death. It will be therefore useless to give your Highness an assurance to the contrary—"

"I agree with you, sir," said the Grand Duke, "that it were useless for us to discuss the subject any farther:—and with these words he suffered Ponchard to take his departure.

The Frenchman, on leaving the mansion of the Russian Embassy, bent his way towards a coffee-house in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square, which was chiefly frequented by foreign refugees, and where he hoped to meet with Karl Petronoff. Nor was he disappointed; for the individual just named was found enveloped in a cloud of tobacco-smoke, in the midst of which he was playing at dominoes with a comrade. Ponchard waited somewhat impatiently until the game was concluded; and then beckoning Petronoff to follow him, he led the way out of the coffee-house.

"What is it?" asked Petronoff, without displaying any considerable degree of excitement or anxiety. "Is that business discovered?"

"No—not yet—though it may be—aye, and betrayed and exposed likewise!" responded the Frenchman. "I have just made a most important discovery—"

"Of what nature?" demanded Petronoff.

"Ivan Zadouski was no spy!" pursued Ponchard. "Blinded by circumstances, as indeed we all were at the time—you struck down the wrong man!"

"By heavens, Ponchard!" replied Petronoff, "you have told me the only thing that could possibly excite within me a sentiment of remorse for the deed that I committed. Ah! if Zadouski were really no spy and no traitor, I could weep—I could beat my breast and tear my hair—"

"All of which will be unavailing," interjected

Ponchard, "and would not recall to life the unfortunate victim of this fatal mistake!"

"True!—true, my friend!" murmured Karl Petronoff, deeply moved. "True! But who *was* the traitor?—for there must have been one amongst us!"

"Who was he? Mandeville himself!"

It was a tremendous start which Karl Petronoff gave, as he ejaculated, "Oh! purblind that we were not to have seen it, or at least suspected it! But there must be revenge, Ponchard!"

"Aye—and our own safety must be consulted," said the Frenchman. "Look you! Mandeville is certain to discover sooner or later, even if he does not already know it, that Ivan Zadouski has disappeared: he will put two and two together—he will compare dates—and following up the clue, he will go to the police-office and examine the garments that were found in the carpet-bag. Then he will be enabled to unveil everything—and he will hold all our lives in his power! Well, then, for us to be in the power of such a villain as that—"

"Enough, Ponchard—enough!" interrupted Petronoff, whose countenance, as the lamp-light fell upon it, wore an expression of fierce and savage resolution: "my mind was already made up even before you had presented these arguments to my consideration!"

But let us leave the two foreigners to the discussion of whatever plan might now be suggesting itself for the execution of their vindictive design, and let us return to the Russian Grand Duke, whom we left in possession of the papers which had produced such a powerful effect upon him.

So soon as Ponchard had taken his departure, the Imperial Prince reflected in deep moodiness for a few minutes: then he consulted his watch—and muttering to himself, "Ten o'clock—it is not yet too late!"—he seemed to decide all in a moment how he was to act. Descending a private staircase, he hastened to the stables at the back of the premises, ordered a horse to be saddled, and dispensing with any attendance, rode away at a rapid pace. In less than three-quarters of an hour he reached Hendon Court; and fastening the bridle to the gates, proceeded up the avenue towards the front-door. The footman, who answered the summons, immediately recognised the foreigner who had called upwards of three weeks previously, who had given no name, and who had so long an interview with Mildred upon the occasion.

"I wish to see that lady," began the Prince, "whom I saw here once before—"

"Be pleased to walk in, sir," said the footman, little suspecting the rank of the visitor.

The Grand Duke was accordingly ushered into the breakfast-parlour—the very same room where he had previously met Mildred; and in the course of two or three minutes she made her appearance. She was elegantly dressed as on the former occasion to which we have referred: her toilet was chosen with an evident view to the setting off her charms to all their most imposing and voluptuous advantages,—so that it actually seemed as if she had been awaiting this visit and was prepared for it, though more than three weeks had elapsed since the former interview which we have described, and though in the meantime she had heard naught from the Imperial Grand Duke.

It was a quick searching glance, full of suspense and anxiety, which Mildred flung upon the visitor—for her *husband* he could not be called, though in her heart for three weeks past the hope had been fluttering that such he would indeed again become unto her. His countenance was severe and sombre; but in the absence of any expression denoting excitement, there was nothing sufficiently marked or decisive to destroy altogether that hope which she had been cherishing.

"Mildred," said the Grand Duke, in a cold level tone, "why do I find you decked out thus—almost the same as when we met so accidentally the other night? Is it that there's company in the house? Yet I hear not the sounds of music nor of gaiety——"

"There is no company in the house," answered Mildred. "My mother is an invalid, and sees no society at present. But if you ask me wherefore I wear a costume fitting for this occasion, the explanation can be speedily given. It is because when you were last here, you gave me to understand that I might possibly see you again; and therefore I have been expecting you—and as you said that I should not be compromised in any way methought that you would come after the shades of evening closed in;—and would you have had me unprepared to receive you?"

"You thought that I should return, Mildred," said the latter, still severe and cold in his looks and his accents; "and did you not tremble at the idea of again finding yourself in my presence?"

"Are we to recapitulate and argue over and over again all that was said the other evening?"—and Mildred spoke with a touching tremulousness in her voice and with a soft deprecating entreaty in her handsome eyes.

"Do you persist, Mildred," asked the Prince, "in the declaration of your innocence?"

"I do! I do!" she exclaimed, with that venturesome hardihood which was determined to risk everything in playing for so important a stake:—besides, she asked herself what could he have possibly discovered since they last met?

"You speak as if you think that my mind is easy to be beguiled," resumed the Grand Duke, "and as if I was still labouring under the effect of all you said to me when last we met in this room. But you are wrong. Things have come to my knowledge——"

"If I have been calumniated," cried Mildred vehemently, "give me an opportunity of exculpating myself! Ah, I understand it all! That false, deceitful creature Ethel Trevor has been speaking to you against me!"

"Not so," replied the Grand Duke: then fixing his eyes sternly upon Mildred, he asked, "But how did you know that Ethel Trevor was now living with our—our daughter?—for that you do possess this knowledge, I judge from the way in which you have mentioned Mrs. Trevor's name?"

"How did I know it?"—and Mildred looked confused.

"Yes—how did you know it?" repeated the Grand Duke. "When I was here the other night, you told me that Ethel had got another place somewhere—you declared that you knew not where——"

"Nor did I then!" ejaculated Mildred. "I swear that I did not!"

"Ethel left the following morning," pursued

the Grand Duke; "and I am confident she did not tell you whither she was going. No! she did not even mention the circumstance to Lady Langport! She assured me that she did not; and she is a young lady of truthfulness and sincerity. How, then, did you know that she was coming to be the friend and companion of Roxana?"

"Do you assure me that she has not spoken against me?" asked Mildred.

"Not one word! not one syllable! I swear it!" exclaimed the Grand Duke. "Tell me, then—unless you would have me think that you have been acting the part of a spy on Ethel Trevor's movements or my proceedings——"

"No, no! I have not done so!" interjected Mildred. "I have scarcely left Hendon Court for more than an hour or two at a time since you were here last: I have been so anxiously awaiting your return! And now that you are here, it is only to fill my soul with fresh unhappiness!"

"Because I have received fresh testimony against you!" said the Duke impressively.

"Calumny! falsehood! Oh, good God!" cried Mildred, clasping her hands with an air of wildest grief; "am I always to be the victim of misrepresentation and of circumstantial evidence—the victim I may say of the cruellest tyranny!"

"Not so," interrupted the Grand Duke sternly.

"Alas! it was a bitter, bitter moment for me, Mildred, when the hope which since our last interview I had cherished, that you might after all be innocent, was suddenly destroyed!—aye, and destroyed, too, by such evidence that no sophistry on your part can refute!"

"Then it must be that villain Mandeville!" exclaimed Mildred, her eyes flashing forth vindictive fires. "I always dreaded this!—At least—I mean—I knew that he was a miscreant capable of pursuing me with implacability! Do not believe him! I will unmask him! I will expose him! He is an adventurer—an impostor! He is not a Frenchman—neither is he a Count! He is an Englishman! I believe, too, of an infamous character——"

"What!" exclaimed the Grand Duke, with unfeigned surprise: "Mandeville that same Englishman who betrayed you into the hands of the Russian Consul at Bombay?"

"The same! the same!" cried Mildred, quivering with passion. "And now he has dared calumniate me——"

"Mildred," interrupted the Grand Duke sternly, "when I demanded of you at our former interview in this room, what had become of that Englishman, you declared that you did not know; and yet you must have even *then* been aware that he was living in this country as Count Mandeville! But, Oh, Mildred! it was your guilty conscience which prompted that false and deceptive answer! for you dared not tell me where I might find that Englishman!—you dreaded lest it might be my intention to seek him out and question him!"

"No!" cried Mildred, again putting a bold face upon the matter; "you are not altogether correct in your view of the case! It was not the truth that I dreaded from the lips of the self-styled Mandeville—but it was his aptitude for malignant falsehood!"

"Enough, enough, Mildred!" cried the Grand

Duke, with a sudden air of disgust which showed that he thought the present scene had gone sufficiently far. "If I have condescended thus to question you—to reason and to argue with you—it has only been for the purpose of ascertaining to what extent the vile hypocrisy and detestable speciousness of your character could reach! Hear me!—interrupt me not! It was neither from the lips of Ethel Trevor nor the adventurer Maundeville, that I have heard aught against you. But the damning evidence of your guilt,—the irresistible proof that Ivan Zadouski was your paramour when he fled with you from Siberia—aye, and before!—these proofs, I say, Mildred, have fallen accidentally into my hand!—they are here!—your own letters—those billets, full of love and tenderness, stealthily written to the handsome aide-de-camp, when you were a prisoner in the palace of Tobolsk! You dare not deny your own writing!"—and with these words, the Grand Duke, tearing open the pocket-book, flung the documents with fierce indignation upon the table.

Mildred was annihilated. This was a blow which she had little expected: it was the very last species of evidence that she could have dreamt of being brought against her. The first wild haggard look of consternation and dismay which she flung at the papers, showed her indeed but too plainly that they were the amatory billets which she had penned years ago at Tobolsk to the *then* handsome aide-de-camp Ivan Zadouski. Why he had kept them—whether as the memorials of a love sincerely felt, or as the proofs of an amour which had been wonderfully gratifying to his pride, or with the hope that the correspondence might some day serve as a means of extortion—we cannot now undertake to say. Suffice it for the purposes of our tale, and to the utter confusion of the wretched Mildred, the documents had been preserved—and they were there brought before her, as the damning evidence of her guilt!

"Now, vile woman," said the Grand Duke, in a voice implacably severe, "everything is at an end betwixt you and me! So our relative positions ought indeed to have remained: and but for your wily hypocrisy and speciousness they would have continued, had not accident thrown us together the other day. And now I leave you, never again to be saddened by even a single thought concerning your welfare—but on the contrary, utterly indifferent to your fate, whatever it may be! Beware of your future conduct: beware, I tell you!—for by heaven, I feel something more than indifferent towards you! There is a vindictive demon rising up in my soul—and—and—wretch that thou art! I dare trust myself with thee no longer!"

Having thus spoken—all the latter sentences having been furiously vociferated forth—the Grand Duke rushed from the apartment, flung himself out of the house, closing the front door violently behind him: and springing into his saddle, rode at a fast gallop back into London.

CHAPTER LXXV.

TRAGEDY.

A FEW minutes after this interview, Mildred repaired to her mother's bedchamber, to which her ladyship had already retired, and where she was seated in an arm-chair until it might please her daughter to come and assist in the usual night-toilet. Lady Langport had been startled by the violent closing of the front door; and she had sat in nervous doubt as to what had possibly been the cause until Mildred made her appearance.

"What was that din?" inquired her ladyship; "who left the house so abruptly and so rudely? But good heavens, Mildred! how pale you are! how wild and frightened are your looks? What has happened, my dear child? what has happened? Speak, speak, I conjure you!"

"Enough has happened, mother, I can tell you," was the answer given almost with a savage impatience. "It is now quite a chance whether I shall be left at peace or dragged off to Siberia again."

"Mildred! do not tell me this"—and Lady Langport gasped for breath. "Who has been here?"

"Who? The Grand Duke—my husband, if I dare call him so. But no, no!" added Mildred, with a sort of hysterical laugh: "that hope is all annihilated!"

"You do not mean to tell me," said Lady Langport, in consternation, "that the Grand Duke has been to Hendon Court?"

"He has just left it—it was he who banged the front door so violently: it was he whose horse you might have heard galloping away so madly!"

"Heaven have mercy upon us!" said the poor lady, as if in dying tones. "What could he want here?"

"It is not the first time that he has been here," said Mildred, who spoke in a harsh, irritable, brutal tone, as if fully prepared to visit upon her unfortunate mother the sense of her own goaded and excited feelings.

"Not the first time?" exclaimed Lady Langport, with renewed amazement.

"No: he was here the other night, upwards of three weeks ago—you remember that foreigner I told you that I had met with while shopping in London——"

"And that was the Grand Duke?" said Lady Langport. "Oh, Mildred! deal candidly with me at last!—tell me everything, I beseech you! How have you again incurred the anger of the Russian Prince?"

"There is little enough to tell—and yet it is sufficiently serious, I can assure you," rejoined Mildred, still in that curt, harsh, semi-brutal strain which seemed to throw the fault of her own misdeeds upon another. "The Duke came on the first occasion to see you—to ask you about Ethel Trevor, I think——"

"About Ethel Trevor?" repeated Lady Langport.

"Yes. That deceitful hussey Ethel has wormed herself into the good graces of the Grand Duke—she is there, at the Russian Embassy—she is the companion and friend of my own daughter Roxana——"

"How long have you known this?" asked her mother in amazement.

"Oh, ever since she left Hendon Court. Indeed, I knew it in the morning of the same day on which she left."

"And yet you never told me?" cried her mother reproachfully; "and I who was so anxious to know whither she was going, and yet through motives of delicacy abstained from asking!"

"What was the use of my telling you?" said Mildred, in a sullen obdurate tone; "you would only have preached about the means that I adopted to find out where she was going, when I saw that she was so excessively close on the point and was so steadfastly bent on making a mystery of the matter."

"Well—and what means did you adopt?" asked Lady Langport.

Mildred laughed in a heartless, callous manner, like one who was throwing off a mask, and chuckling shamelessly and unabashed in her misdeeds.

"Why I opened a letter which came for Ethel that morning; and there I read that the arrangement entered into on the preceding day between herself and Count Olonetz, had received the approbation of his Imperial Highness the Grand Duke, and that she might go as soon as she thought fit and take up her abode with the Princess Roxana. Yes—that was what the letter said. I sealed it again cunningly enough, so that I don't think Ethel ever suspected it had been tampered with. The minx! what trouble I gave myself to be as polite and civil as possible to her all that morning!—how I coaxed and cajoled her in the breakfast-parlour, for fear lest she might go and prejudice the Grand Duke against me!"

"Has she done so?" asked Lady Langport.

"The Duke says not—and I don't know that it much matters whether she has or not; for other things have turned up—"

"What do you mean, my dear child?" inquired her ladyship, with the intensest anxiety.

"Oh, how you are bothering me, mother! But never mind," added Mildred, with another chuckling laugh; "I may as well tell you all about it. The truth is, when the Duke was here the other night, I almost succeeded in making him believe in my innocence—I mean with regard to Ivan Zadouski and the Englishman, Mandeville as he now calls himself. And here, for the last three weeks or more, I have been indulging in all sorts of dreams—I have seen all difficulties cleared away—a re-marriage—myself a Grand Duchess—acknowledged by the family—shining like a brilliant meteor in the world—dazzling the eyes of all in England—blazing at St. Petersburg—"

"And what has destroyed all these brilliant dreams, my poor child?" demanded Lady Langport.

"What has destroyed them? Why, the most infernal accident—the cursedest piece of ill-luck—"

"Good heavens, Mildred!" cried Lady Langport, choked at her daughter's language: "do not swear in this dreadful manner!"

"Swear?" echoed Mildred scornfully. "It is enough to make an angel swear!"—and she literally ground her brilliant teeth with rage. "Who could have thought of Zadouski's keeping all my

letters? or that he would be villain enough to give them up to the Grand Duke, as he must have done? That is the mischief that has been committed!—that is how all my dreams of ambition have been blighted!"

"Oh, that you should ever have entertained such dreams, my poor child!" murmured Lady Langport in a voice which quivered with emotion. "Why could you not settle yourself peaceably down in the home which your mother had been so glad to offer you?—why were you not warned by past experiences?"

"That's right, mother! do begin preaching in your usual strain! Instead of talking such stuff and nonsense as this, let us consider how we are to act."

"How we are to act?" repeated her ladyship, in mingled alarm and surprise. "Have you not told me everything? is there anything left behind? have you fresh calamities to disclose?"

"I scarcely know what to tell you, or what to think," replied Mildred. "I am bewildered and almost terrified to death. Consternation and misgiving sit like a nightmare upon my soul! The Grand Duke left me with menaces—his ire was fierce against me—and, Oh! if in his rage he should either do me a mischief of his own accord, or else betray to that cold-blooded villain Olonetz the fact that we have met, Siberia may again become my doom!"

"Siberia!"—and Lady Langport shuddered from head to foot.

"The bare thought is enough to drive me mad!" resumed Mildred. "I must not broy myself with any wild or insane hope—I must not fancy myself to be in security when I am not! But I must act as if danger were already at my heels."

"What do you propose to do?" asked her mother, down whose cheeks the tears were trickling.

"Do? What should I do but get from England as quick as I can—go to America—the only place where I may reckon on being in safety!"

"Good heavens, my poor girl!" cried Lady Langport; "are we thus to be separated?"

"No—we will not be separated, depend upon that!" rejoined Mildred. "We will go away together. How can I live without you—I mean in a pecuniary sense. You must realize to-morrow everything you possibly can—sell out of the funds—borrow upon Hendon Court, until a sale can be effected—"

"Mildred, it is impossible," interrupted Lady Langport, astonished and afflicted. "Dearly, dearly as I love you—much as I would do to serve you—I cannot possibly undertake a voyage across the Atlantic."

"Oh, but you must! Now I tell you what it is, mother, the moment is come when it is necessary there should be a thorough understanding between us. I don't mean to leave you behind me, to take another companion or toady into your service—some deep designing minx, like Ethel Trevor for instance, who would have induced you to cut off your own daughter without a shilling—"

"Never!" ejaculated Lady Langport. "Ethel was incapable of such conduct!"

"Oh, I know her better than you do: I soon saw through her. But no matter—it doesn't suit my policy to leave you alone to the tender mercy

of such designing jades as these, who will insinuate themselves into your good graces only for the sake of taking advantage of your weakness and making you renounce your own flesh and blood. Therefore you must come with me."

"What! to America?" almost shrieked forth Lady Langport. "I cannot!—it would kill me! I am weak and feeble—I have been agitated and ill of late——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried Mildred, contemptuously. "You who pass yourself off as only forty or so before the world, and call yourself my elder sister!"

"Mildred! Mildred! this is dreadful!—this is most unkind! You are killing me!"

"Mother, I hate these scenes. Tell me once for all, whether you will go with me to America or not—and I shall know how to act."

"Mildred, do not speak thus harshly and angrily," implored the unfortunate old lady. "I would do everything for you, my child—but I cannot perform impossibilities. Let me go to-morrow and fling myself upon my knees before Count Olonetz—beseech his mercy on your behalf——"

"Yes," interrupted Mildred sneeringly, "and tell him that the Grand Duke has been down to see me at Hendon Court. It would be enough to get us both seized upon—I mean you and me—and packed off to Siberia!"

"We will appeal to the English Government, Mildred—we will place ourselves under the protection of our Queen, her Ministers, her Parliament, her magistrates——"

Mildred laughed scornfully.

"What cares a Russian Ambassador for all these," she asked, "when he has his own particular policy to carry out? Do you not know how insidiously, treacherously, covertly, and stealthily, Russian schemes are prosecuted? Ah, if you had only half my experience!"

"Alas, my poor child," faltered the weeping mother, "I fear that the picture is only too accurate as you draw it. But what can be done? Take all the money I can raise in a moment—fly you to America—trust to me for frequent and liberal remittances——"

"It will not do, mother," interrupted Mildred. "I know that you like me well enough, and that you are sincere in what you propose, but you are too weak-minded to be trusted. Some designing person, like Ethel Trevor, would get hold of you, and by rendering herself necessary to you——"

"No, no, Mildred! I never could forget you, my beloved daughter!"

"I am not going to trust to any chances, nor run any risks," responded Mildred, in a tone of curt decisiveness. "I have told you what my plan is—and you must follow it. To-morrow, immediately after breakfast, we will go into the City, raise all the money we can, and then away to Liverpool. If these Russians mean us any harm, they would not try to execute their plans until to-morrow night, and we should therefore get an ample start of them. So now let us consider the business as good as settled!"

"Mildred, my dear child—Mildred, my beloved daughter, I would not deceive you. I must not therefore let you cling to a hope that cannot be fulfilled. Once for all, then, understand me well: I cannot leave England—I could not undertake

this voyage—it would kill me! I am much weaker than you think. Oh, Mildred," added the wretched woman, bursting into tears, "you who know what my real age is, and how frightfully emaciated I am—you surely ought not to wonder when I tell you of my physical weakness, my sense of debility, the feeling that I have of the rapid breaking up of my constitution——"

"All this is nonsense, mother!" interrupted the heartless daughter. "Put the matter in its right light—say at once that in your inordinate vanity you cling with such desperate tenacity to the preservation of your secret, that you dare not undertake a voyage across the Atlantic, for fear that during the transit, and amidst the inconveniences of ship-board, you should not be enabled to attend to all those little niceties of the toilet which now serve so effectually to disguise you. This is the real truth of the matter—you know it is—and you had much better tell it at once."

"Mildred, Mildred! Is it possible that such words as these can come from the lips of my own daughter?" and the wretched woman literally wrung her hands in despair.

"Enough of this nonsense, mother! Will you go to America—yes or no?"

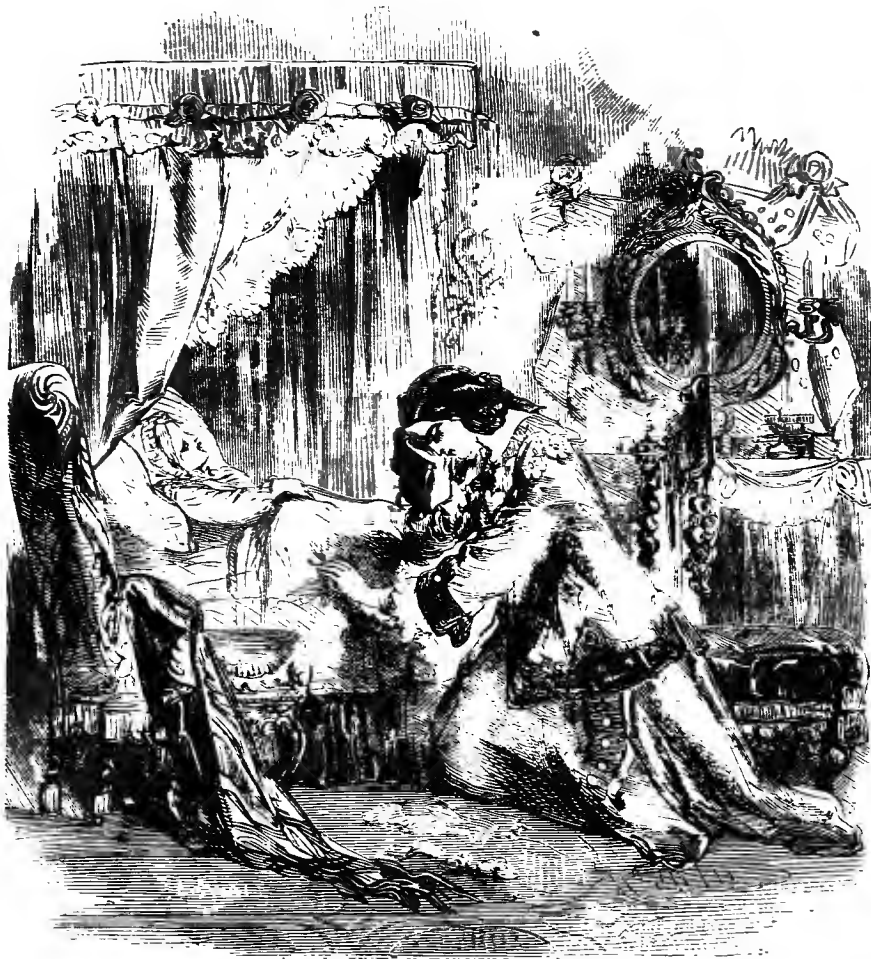
"No—I cannot. I beseech you, Mildred, to have mercy upon me! For heaven's sake do not be cruel and harsh towards me!"—and again Lady Langport's hands were clasped together imploringly and beseechingly.

"We will see," brutally responded the daughter, "whether we cannot put an end to this nonsense. Just shift for yourself to-night, you conceited old hag!—make your own toilet—and when I come in in the morning, see whether you can dispense with my services! We are necessary to each other! I have already acknowledged that you are necessary to me—and I will now prove that I am necessary to you!"

Having thus spoken, Mildred abruptly quitted the room, locking the door behind her, and taking away the key. Lady Langport had listened with the stupor of consternation and dismay to that last terrible speech which her daughter had addressed to her; and as the door was closed violently, and the key was turned in the lock, the miserable woman sank down with a hollow groan upon the carpet.

Be it remembered that Mildred occupied the chamber which was wont to be Ethel's during the brief stay of the latter at Hendon Court. It communicated with Lady Langport's dressing-room; but the door was locked, and Mildred was determined not to open it until the morning. Her own night-toilet was speedily performed; and when she had sought her couch, she listened to hear whether her mother would seek the dressing-room. Half an hour elapsed,—half an hour of complete silence; and then, at the expiration of this interval, Mildred heard an inner door open; and she said to herself, "Ah, the old hag is coming into the dressing-room after all!"

Yes, sure enough, her mother was in the dressing-room; and Mildred could even hear her moaning and sobbing as she disappalled herself without the accustomed aid: but the heartless daughter rose not from her couch—opened not the door—flew not to assist her unhappy parent—but muttered to herself, with a low inward laugh, "It will be a good lesson for her! I shall



carry my point—and to-morrow she will be as submissive and docile as she was obstinate and perverse to-night."

Sleep soon after stole upon Mildred's eyes; while her mother was still performing her own unassisted toilet, amidst moans and sobs, in the adjoining chamber.

Mildred awoke at about seven o'clock in the morning, and first performed her own toilet before she thought of entering her mother's suite of apartments. Then—saying to herself, "We shall now see what sort of a humour the old hag is in!" she unlocked the door of communication with the dressing-room. There she beheld all the various articles of her mother's false and artificial toilet—garments here and garments there—corset upon corset—all the wrappings, in fine, which, without aid, she had unrolled as it were from her mummy-form!

"It is one thing to get out of these disguises,
No. 51.—THE YOUNG DUCHESS.

but another to get into them," thought Mildred to herself, still chuckling at the idea that her mother would now, on the occasion of the morning toilet, acknowledge her complete dependence upon her daughter.

Mildred passed from the dressing-chamber into the bath-room; but scarcely had she crossed the threshold, when a cry escaped her lips. For there, lying across the side of the bath, which stood in the middle of the chamber, was the emaciated form of her mother—white and motionless—looking like a skeleton with the mere skin upon its bones!—there it was!—lying, too, in a position which seemed to repel the idea that life could still be a dweller in that wretched atomy! It was a moment of dread uncertainty, for Mildred was now veritably alarmed. Another instant, and all suspense was over. Her mother was dead!

The head of the unfortunate woman was im-

mersed in the bath, but there was no reason to suppose that she had committed suicide and had purposely held her head dipped in the water until life was extinct. On the contrary, there was every proof that she had met her death by an accident,—tripping over the carpet while traversing the bath-room, falling across the bath itself, and striking her head against the opposite side, so that being stunned by the blow, she fell with her head into the water, and was thus suffocated. That such indeed was the mode of her death, was subsequently established to the satisfaction of a Coroner's Jury.

Mildred gave an immediate alarm. The female servants sped to the chamber; and the nature of the tragedy was quickly made known to them. We will pass over the horror and amazement which were experienced when the veritable condition of their mistress was discovered by the domestics, and when they found that instead of being a fine, buxom, handsomely-formed woman of between thirty and forty, she was a miserable emaciated hag of sixty!

Mildred speedily recovered from the first effects of the shock which she had sustained, to think of her own safety. She began to examine the contents of her deceased mother's writing-desk and drawers: she took forth all such papers as seemed to regard the property which she now meant to claim as her inheritance. Provided with this documentary evidence, she hastened off into the City, which she reached by eleven o'clock in the forenoon. She sought a stockbroker, and explained to him her business. Her mother had just died—she was the heiress—she wanted to raise money immediately, for certain special purposes. Well, nothing could be more easy, so soon as she could establish her identity! The coachman and footman who had accompanied the carriage, would as a matter of course be competent for this purpose. They were at once appealed to; but, behold! they declared Mildred to be the *sister*, and not the *daughter* of the deceased Lady Langport!

Mildred had forgotten to tell them the real truth and tutor them what to say if questioned!

The stockbroker was suspicious; vainly did Mildred explain to him how matters stood: he declined to have anything to do with the business. She went to another, and then another; but as she could not identify herself in a suitable and proper manner, there was nothing to be done. At length she went to consult an attorney, to whom she was recommended; and he explained how a search must in the first instance be made for a will—and how if none were found, letters of administration must be taken out—and how it would be requisite for her to prove that she was really the daughter, and not the sister, of the deceased Lady Langport.

It was almost in a state of despair that Mildred returned to Hendon Court. She now beheld in her path a thousand difficulties of which she had not at first dreamt; and she saw that it would be the work of some considerable time to get the business settled even when those difficulties should be overcome. Meanwhile what might happen?—should she be left at peace by those whom she regarded as her Russian enemies? As she thought of Siberia—that awful region of glacial winter—her very blood appeared to freeze in her veins. She felt as if she were being punished for the

heartless cruelty she had shown towards her mother. Ah! now that she had leisure to reflect upon that mother's death, could she avoid experiencing a certain horrid sensation as if she were guilty of matricide? Had not that poor mother, in a word, come to so sad an end in consequence of the cold-blooded neglect to which the daughter had abandoned her on the occasion? She shut herself in the drawing-room and gave way to her unpleasant reflections. Presently she was made aware that the Coroner and jurymen had arrived to view the corpse; and it became absolutely necessary for Mildred to attend in the presence of the inquisition which was held in the dining-room, to give evidence concerning the manner in which she had discovered the death of Lady Langport in the morning. That ceremony was however soon over: for the Coroner, through motives of delicacy towards the deceased's daughter—as Mildred now represented herself to be—would not detain her longer than was necessary. A suitable verdict was returned—the jury departed—and Hendon Court was once more silent again.

The hours passed: one of the female servants inquired if Mildred had given any instructions relative to the funeral?—but Mildred answered half vaguely, half impatiently, to the effect that she had as yet found no leisure for the purpose, but she would see to the matter on the morrow. She then retired to her own chamber: but she could not sleep. Horrible thoughts oppressed her; and as night always brings its most appalling terrors to the guilty conscience, so did the hours of darkness now more than ever impress Mildred that she had proved the murderer of her mother. It was a night of fearful mental tortures which she thus passed; and when she rose in the morning she recoiled in horror and affright from the reflection of her own countenance in the mirror.

Endeavouring to escape from her wretched reflections by plunging into the bustle of business, Mildred ordered the carriage to be got in readiness, that she might go into London to give the requisite orders for the funeral, and likewise to renew her attempts to raise an immediate sum of money. But groom—coachman—footman, all refused to obey her orders. They wore sullen yet determined looks; and when she questioned them, they gave her pretty plainly to understand that they considered that there was something sinister in her position, first passing herself off as the sister and then claiming to be the daughter of the deceased. Her ineffectual endeavours to raise money on the preceding day, together with other circumstances, had been fully discussed in the servants' hall; and Mildred found herself looked upon as something very much in the light of an impostress. The domestics were moreover shocked at the discovery which had been made in reference to their deceased mistress: they also fancied that there was something strange in the mode of her death, and that the Coroner's Jury had been too quick in recording a verdict which so completely exonerated Mildred from all blame. In a word, the servants, with only one or two exceptions, looked suspiciously upon Mildred; and when she flew into a rage with them, they unhesitatingly proclaimed their desire to quit with the least possible delay a house where such sinister circum-

stances had taken place. Fortunately Mildred could command at the moment enough ready money to settle their wages; and they departed. The only servants who remained, were a housemaid and the old gardener, who entertained a somewhat better opinion of Mildred than the rest, or who at all events were too good-hearted to leave her utterly alone in the midst of her existing embarrassments.

Mildred was now downright ill; and for the first time in her life she felt that she had no energy for anything. She could not muster up the courage to go into London: she therefore sent for an undertaker and likewise for the lawyer who had been recommended to her. The business of the undertaker was soon disposed of: the lawyer passed two or three hours in conferring with Mildred upon the circumstances of her position, and examining the papers of the deceased Lady Langport. No will was discovered: the lawyer again stated that letters of administration must be taken out, and that Mildred would have to prove herself the daughter of the deceased. But how was this to be done? Not for worlds would she refer to Count Olonetz—for fear, lest by intruding herself upon his notice, she should only precipitate the vengeance which every instant she dreaded would come upon her from that quarter. Bewildered and uncertain how to act, she dismissed the attorney with an excuse to the effect that she would consider the matter and communicate with him on the morrow.

Soon after his departure, the housemaid threw herself in Mildred's way, and dropped dark hints to the effect that mischief was brewing, and that if there were really anything to apprehend, she had better fly ere it was too late. Mildred besought the young woman to speak out; and after much persuasion and cross-questioning, she elicited the following facts,—that the discharged servants had been talking in the neighbourhood, that unpleasant rumours were spreading in reference to Lady Langport's death, and that some busy persons, dissatisfied with the verdict of the Coroner's Jury, intended to apply to a magistrate with the view to have the matter more deeply investigated.

"But what does this mean?" asked Mildred, trembling with nervous terror and with concentrated rage.

Again there was considerable hesitation and reluctance on the part of the girl; but at length she said, "Well, ma'am, there's no use in disguising the truth—but they do say that a warrant is to be applied for."

Notwithstanding Mildred's innocence of any actual violence against her mother in reference to the latter's death, she nevertheless saw that it was quite possible to render the case most suspicious against her; and she was overwhelmed with affliction. Such was her state of mind, when at about six o'clock in the evening, as she happened to be glancing forth from one of the drawing-room windows, she beheld a domestic in the livery of Count Olonetz ride past on horseback. The spectacle produced upon her the same effect as did the print of a human foot in the sand on Robinson Crusoe—it filled her with a mortal terror. The man rode by—but slowly, and evidently looking about him. In a very few minutes he was seen retracing his way; and then

Mildred, precipitating herself down the stairs, conjured the housemaid to say in answer to any inquiries which might be made, that she had left Hendon Court and gone no one knew whither. The girl promised to comply with this request, though she could not understand the meaning of it; and Mildred proceeded to lock herself in her own chamber. She heard the ringing of the front door bell—she knew there was a parley; and then, after awhile, the Russian domestic rode away. It was however some time before Mildred would open the door of her chamber, and not until she was positively assured by the housemaid that the coast was clear.

"What did he say? what did he want?" asked Mildred anxiously.

"He spoke very indifferent English, ma'am: he asked if this was Hendon Court—and he said he wanted to speak to you particularly. I told him you were gone—he looked surprised—"

"Did he seem incredulous?" demanded Mildred quickly.

"Why, yes, ma'am: but he inquired when you went—I told him a few falsehoods—and he reluctantly took his departure."

"Thank you, thank you!" exclaimed Mildred, with the fervid accents of real gratitude: "you know not what a service you have rendered me! Go, and deny me now to every one, no matter whom! I must reflect well, yet speedily, how I am to act!"

Mildred was again alone in her chamber; and she said to herself, "The plot is thickening!—the worst is about to take place—and Russian vengeance will again doom me to Siberia!"

She shuddered: she felt that her brain was reeling—it seemed to her as if she must go mad. She longed to fly from the house; and yet it appeared as if some irresistible spell kept her lingering there. If she went away, she must resign all hope of establishing her claims to her deceased mother's property: but on the other hand, if she remained, she felt assured that it would only be to fall again into the hands of the merciless Russians, or else into the grasp of English police-officers.

Another hour passed: then there was another ring at the front door bell—and in a perfect agony of suspense Mildred awaited the result. Presently the housemaid knocked at the chamber door; and as the wretched Mildred opened it, it was with a mortal dread lest the girl should be proving treacherous and her enemies should rush in upon her!

"Who was that visitor?" she demanded with feverish haste.

"There were two this time," was the response.

"Two? Who were they?"

"Also Russians. They said they came from the Embassy in Grosvenor Square—they insisted upon seeing you—I told them the same tale that I had told to the former—"

"And did they believe it? What said they?"

"They shook their heads—they declared that they knew better—that they must see you—that it was useless for you to try and deceive them—"

"Oh, I am lost! I am lost!" murmured the wretched Mildred: but conquering her emotions, she demanded, "Are they gone?"

"Yes, ma'am: and they bade me tell you that

they shall return at nine o'clock to-morrow morning, as their business with you is of the utmost importance. Indeed, they declared that it was entirely for your good——"

"Oh, a snare! a snare!" ejaculated Mildred: and then she abruptly dismissed the housemaid from the chamber.

When again alone, she gave renewed vent to her lamentations—it was impossible she could escape from her harrowing and terturing reflections! The Russians were determined to have her!—this was too evident! Even now flight was impossible!—for doubtless the house was watched! And if not the Russians, then there was the certainty of a warrant being issued by a magistrate:—and might she not become the victim of circumstantial evidence? Might she not even be sent to the scaffold as the murderer of her mother? Such were the ideas which haunted and agonised her. Darkness set in: she lighted a taper in the chamber; she flung her looks shudderingly around—for it seemed to her fevered imagination as if dim ghostly shapes were gliding along the walls. She took her head as it were in her two hands—she pressed these hands to her throbbing brows—and with a sudden effort of a will that in past times was wont to be strong enough, she said, "I will be calm! I will be calm!"

Then she strove to reflect deliberately upon her position, and envisage all its circumstances with fortitude and resolution.

"What if I have been giving way to mere panic terrors? what if these myrmidons of the Russian Embassy were mere spies, or else the bearers of some messages—and not the agents of treachery or of evil? what if this alarm relative to the warrant and magisterial intervention be all idle gossip? Why, then I may yet combat successfully against other obstacles. Oh, if my mother had but made a will!—or if there were enough ready money in the house to enable me to flee into some place of certain security, until all threatening clouds, if any, should have blown over, and time should have been gained to assert and realize my rights as Lady Langport's daughter! But no, no!—have I not searched everywhere?"

She paused in her musings: she reflected. An idea had suddenly struck her. Her countenance brightened up; and starting from her seat, she ejaculated, "Good heavens! can it be possible that I should have overlooked it? To be sure! that room which I have never yet seen open, and which I have always forgotten to ask why it is kept shut! And I remember likewise that key—that key!"

There was now a hurry in Mildred's actions as there was in her thoughts; and hastening to unlock the inner door of her bed-chamber, she passed into the dressing-room which has been so often mentioned—that dressing-room where the deceased Lady Langport was wont to perform her horrible toilet. There, in the walnut-wood bureau, hung the key; and of this Mildred took possession. Oh, that she could have forgotten it before!—Oh, that she could have all this time overlooked the room that was thus locked up! It was unaccountable, she thought to herself:—and yet it had so happened.

Retracing her way, Mildred took the taper in her hand, and quitting her chamber, threaded the

passage at the extremity of which was the room that she sought. The key turned in the lock: but just as she was pushing open the door, a draught from the inside extinguished her candle. The beams of the starlight however penetrated feebly into the chamber; and Mildred advanced a pace or two, to obtain such a glimpse of it as she might be able to catch previous to retracing her steps to light the taper again. There was a dark object in the middle of the room: it was within her reach—she advanced—she stretched out a hand—and at that instant the moon flung its rays full through the window into the apartment. Good heavens! it was a coffin which Mildred beheld there!—a coffin upon its tressels!—and with the sudden terror and surprise which this discovery produced, she received such a shock that she fell forward—the coffin was upast—and Mildred rolled upon the floor.

She knew not how she got away from that place: there was an interval of horrible confusion in her thoughts—almost constituting a blank—until she found herself again in her own chamber. She had just lighted the taper—she had flung herself into an arm-chair, and was meaning, "My God! what next? what next?"

Oh, that house of horrors! It was too much for even *her* strong mind to endure! Her brain reeled—her reason appeared to be abandoning her. She could no longer argue with herself against the probabilities of Russian vengeance and magisterial warrants: she felt herself a lost, a doomed woman; while supernatural terrors added their overwhelming influences to the other sources of apprehension which we have named. Nor was remorse absent from that pandemonium of horrible feelings and sensations in which she was now writhing.

No couch was pressed by Mildred that night: no sleep visited her eyelids. It was indeed a night of horrors that she passed! At length the morning dawned: she began to take courage somewhat: she was advancing to the casement to draw aside the curtains and completely to admit the cheerfulness of the orient beams into her chamber, when she chanced to catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Oh, what a start! Oh, what a cry!—a start of bewildering amazement—a cry of wildest terror! And no wonder!—for during the agonising hours of the past night—hours of harrowing remorse, excruciating terrors, bitter regrets, and mortal apprehensions—Mildred's hair had turned white!

This was too much. She was stricken a blow which reduced her to utter despair. Vanity with her was a fearful calamity. She thought of her mother:—was she destined to become like her? was this the first abrupt and rapid step towards a complete change in her entire system,—a rapid transition of her voluptuous loveliness into the most leathsome ugliness? Intolerable idea!—thought not to be endured! There was now a real madness in Mildred's brain. What new idea strikes her? what is there amidst the numerous and mysterious articles belonging to her deceased mother's toilet-table that Mildred now so eagerly seeks? Ah, does she know that one special cosmetic, containing a corrosive sublimate, was the deadliest poison?

The hours passed away: it was verging towards

nine o'clock in the morning—and one of the Russian emissaries who had called on the preceding evening, again made his appearance. When the housemaid opened the front door, the man without alighting from his horse, presented her a note, saying, "Give this to your mistress—or forward it to her if she be really gone. It is important."

Then, without waiting for a syllable of response, he rode away. The housemaid hastened up to Mildred's chamber: she knocked at the door—but received no answer. She turned the handle—the door was unlocked—she entered, expecting to find Mildred sleeping: but Oh! what a spectacle met her view! For there, lying back in a large easy chair, was the lifeless form of Mildred:—the dark velvet of the cushion threw out into ghastly relief the hair that had turned white in a single night; and at her feet lay the empty phial which at once afforded a fearful indication of the manner of her death!

When the letter which had been left with the housemaid, came to be read before another jury which so soon assembled there beneath that fated roof, its contents were found to be as follow:—

"June 22nd, 1847.

"Receive my sincere condolences, Mildred, on the death of your mother, the sad intelligence of which has accidentally reached my ears. His Imperial Highness the Grand Duke tells me that you know where I am; and he therefore permits me to write these few lines. Nay, more—he wishes it; for he enjoins me to convey unto you his hope, his counsel, and his prayer that you will henceforth lead a quiet and peaceful life, which may atone for your past errors. And I, Mildred, was anxious to write to you, because methinks it probable that your poor mother may not have revealed to you a certain secret which she one day made known to me. In a few words it will be explained. The key in the walnut-wood bureau opens the door at the end of the passage; and in the chamber which has been shut up, you will find the coffin wherein the remains of your deceased parent are to be deposited! If you know this already, there is no harm done in the fact of my penning these few lines: but if, on the other hand, you were ignorant of the communication, you will experience a melancholy satisfaction in knowing what your mother's wishes were, so that you may be enabled to fulfil them. I shall charge the bearer of this letter to deliver it only into your hand, so that I may be sure it will reach you in safety.

"ETHEL."

To this letter the following postscript had been added:—

"June 23rd, 7 o'clock in the morning.

"I cannot think, Mildred, that you have really left Hendon Court so suddenly and abruptly. There must be some mistake. Yet my messenger brought back this note yesterday evening; and two persons whom Count Olonetz sent to communicate with you, likewise failed in their object. His Excellency has now desired me to explain the motive for which he sent those persons. Your attorney called upon his lordship yesterday, represented the embarrassment you were in, and hinted at the reluctance and terror which you experienced in reference to an application to this Em-

bassy. His Excellency therefore sent to give the assurance that you had really nothing to apprehend; but that, on the contrary, he respects your grief on account of the loss of your mother, he sympathises with you, and he will render you every assistance in establishing your identity as the *daughter* instead of the *sister* of the deceased. Of the two persons whom his Excellency sent to Hendon Court yesterday evening, one was his private secretary, who was charged with the confidential communication for your ears: the other was an assistant-clerk who would have remained to take down any instructions you might have to give. But since it appears that the visits of these people inspire you with terror—(for again I cannot believe that you have *really* left Hendon Court)—I write this postscript at the request of Count Olonetz; and his lordship bids me reiterate the assurance that under existing circumstances he will endeavour to befriend you, and by enabling you to obtain the inheritance which is justly your's, place you permanently above want, and afford you an opportunity of leading an amended life.

"ETHEL."

Thus the reader will comprehend that Mildred had indeed yielded to unfounded panic terrors in respect to the visit of the Russians to Hendon Court, and that no harm was really intended her. Her attorney had, without her knowledge, taken a decisive step and performed a well-meant part which would have led to immediate good results. As for the tale of threatened magisterial intervention and the issue of a warrant, it was veritably the idlest of gossip. But in every respect Mildred's uneasy conscience had conjured up the direst alarms and the most tremendous terrors, by which she was so encompassed and hemmed in that there was no escape from them, and the result was that she perished a miserable suicide.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

UNCLE AND NEPHEW.

It was between eight and nine o'clock in the evening, that a middle-aged man, dressed with the greatest nicety and precision, alighted at the door of the Clarendon Hotel in Bond Street. He inquired of a waiter if Count de Mandeville were in his apartments: the waiter summoned Edmund Vaughan, the Count's valet; and this individual at once recognised Mr. Phipps, the head clerk of Mr. Warren the stockbroker, at whose office his master was occasionally accustomed to call.

"Ah, Mr. Phipps, is it you, sir? exclaimed Edmund, with a half-familiar air; for this aristocratic valet always measured out his own politeness according to the social positions of the individuals with whom he was dealing at the time. "The Count is not very well—he took a rather early dinner in his own apartments, instead of dining out, as he might have done, at some grand entertainment—I forget where—"

"If your master is alone, Edmund," said Mr. Phipps, "he will doubtless see me. I have got a little business of importance to transact with the Count."

This was sufficient; and Edmund Vaughan accordingly led the way to a handsomely-furnished sitting-apartment where Mandeville, in an elegantly flowered French silk dressing-gown, loosely gathered at the waist by a golden cord, to the end of which immense tassels depended, was lounging in an easy chair near a table on which appeared a bottle of claret and an elegant dessert.

Mr. Phipps made a low ceremonious bow as Edmund threw open the door and announced him: but the instant that door closed again and the valet had retired, a remarkable change came over the entire demeanour of Mr. Phipps. His aspect lost all its habitual cringing servility; and with a look and air of the most perfect familiarity, ease, and self-possession, he said, "Well, Matt, my boy, you don't look so *very ill* after all!"

"Hush with your Matt!" answered the Count, in a tone of angry expostulation. "What the devil—"

"Come, come—no petulance or ill-temper!" said Phipps, quietly seating himself at the table. "You don't think I would do you a mischief, Matt—I beg pardon—I suppose I must call you *Count*," he added, smiling. "We are rowing in the same boat, as it were; and it is not very likely I should do anything to blow the whole affair to the winds."

"But what have you come here for now?" demanded Mandeville. "Has Warren sent you for any purpose? is there anything wrong?"

"There are just two or three things that I should like to talk to you about," answered Phipps; "and as I am obliged to be upon my p's and q's and treat you as my Lord the Count, when you come to the office in the City, we can't of course have any confidential discourse there. Besides, I wanted to see how you looked in all your grandeur at the Clarendon. So for these various reasons I just put on my best clothes and dropped in to have half an hour's chat with you. Is this claret? Well, it's a wine I'm rather fond of. I daresay I don't get it quite as good as you drink it here at the Clarendon?"

Thus speaking, Mr. Phipps deliberately helped himself to a bumper; and while he quaffed it with evident gusto, he surveyed the apartment—the chandelier, the mirrors, the rich hangings, the elegant furniture, and the dessert upon the table—all with a visible satisfaction. Mandeville could not help smiling; and refilling his own glass, he presently said, "Well, and what are these things you wanted to speak to me about?"

"Why, my dear nephew—"

"Hush, hush, man! no uncle nor nephew here!" interrupted Mandeville. "The very walls have ears! But speak low—*very low*, mind—and then you may say anything."

"I suppose I had better call you Hippolyte," said Phipps, with a significant grin. "But, no! that will be too familiar by far; and, after all, I must admit that I like you much better as Count Hippolyte Mandeville of the present day than as plain Matthew Calvert of other times."

"Have you been drinking?" asked Mandeville, looking very hard at Phipps; "or are you in a mood of unusual jocularity?"

"Only the latter, my dear nephew, I can assure you. The truth is, Matt, I feel happy in seeing you in such good feather; for it inspires me with confidence in the success of all our plans

and projects. But still you seem to get on slow in winning some heiress, or working your way so completely into the good graces of the Duchessa of Ardleigh as to be enabled to exercise complete control over her purse."

"Slow indeed?" ejaculated Mandeville. "Why, I've only been a couple of months in London; and look at the sensation I've made and the position I have achieved for myself! As for an heiress, I believe that before another month has passed, I shall be enabled to propose with confidence to a young lady whose dowry is a hundred thousand pounds, and who will have ten thousand a-year at her father's death—I mean Lady Sarah Lloyd."

"And why not propose at once?" asked Phipps.

"Because I have only known her three weeks, and the courtship would be too short. She is however madly in love with me; and there is no possible chance of failure. When the time comes for me to pop the question, I know what the response will be. As for her old father, he is in his dotage and will yield his assent."

"Well then," observed Mr. Phipps, "here you have a young girl ready to throw herself into your arms, and an old fool of a father prepared to say *yes* whenever you ask the question; and yet you are going to delay it for a whole month!"

"Yes—it would be precipitating matters most injudiciously to propose earlier: the young lady's feelings would be outraged—the father would suspect something sinister—and the whole project would be ruined. Besides, there is another thing—"

"And what is that?" asked Phipps, refilling his glass with the claret that was so much to his taste.

"Why," replied Mandeville, "my position will become far more substantial and solid in the course of two or three weeks, and I shall take a standing which will render all reference to any other quarter entirely out of the question. Not that I think that such reference would be desired in any case: but still it is better to be upon one's guard."

"And what is to happen, most prudent and cautious nephew of mine," demanded Phipps, "that is to have the effect of establishing your fortune on so solid a foundation?"

The Count gave a complacent smile, sipped his wine, and said, "You will confess, when I tell you, that I manage matters in a masterly manner. The fact is, I have rendered some little service to the French Ambassador—aye, and I may add to the French Government,—in recompense for which I am shortly to receive the *ordon* of the Legion of Honour. We must have a paragraph in all the newspapers; and with such a public recognition of my name, title, and social standing, on the part of his August Majesty Louis Philippe, who would dare to echo the word *adventurer*, even if some malevolent lip were to whisper it upon the zephyr's breath?"

"You are becoming quite poetical, Matt," observed Mr. Phipps. "But now will you be kind enough to tell me how you are off for ready money?"

"I have ample for my present wants. I am in good credit, thanks to the reports which Warren spread about me."

"But have you got any money to spare?" asked

Phipps. "That is the point to which I have been desiring to come."

"Money to spare?" ejaculated Mandeville.

"Do you mean that you want any?"

"Yes—that is the precise position of affairs, so far as I am concerned," was the response.

Mandeville made a movement expressive of vexation; and then he said, "I thought it was a well understood thing betwixt you and me, at the very outset, that you would make no demand whatsoever until I should have realized the grand scheme of marrying an heiress. Was I not to be left to the full benefit and enjoyment of my own resources, whatsoever they might be, without being in any way hampered by claims, wants, or necessities on your part?"

"Such was certainly the agreement, my dear nephew," answered Phipps; "and most willingly would I adhere thereto, were it not that certain little wants and requirements of my own have arisen——"

"Then I suppose," interjected Mandeville, with an air of angry impatience, "you have been speculating again in shares, or in the funds?"

"Well, something of the sort," said Phipps; "and not to lengthen the story unnecessarily, unless I have about three thousand pounds in the course of to-morrow, I shall feel myself very awkwardly placed."

"Three thousand pounds?" ejaculated Mandeville.

"Yes—neither more nor less," rejoined Phipps.

"Impossible! I cannot furnish you the money to-morrow! You must wait two or three weeks—my own plans would be hampered and interfered with—the success of my schemes might be jeopardized——"

"I am afraid, Matt," said Phipps, "that they will be jeopardized even still more completely if the money is not found."

"Explain yourself," said Mandeville, with an air of alarm. "There is more behind!—you have not told me all! I see you are beating about the bush. Come, uncle—come!" and this was the first time he thus addressed Phipps as a relative during the interview; "do be candid! If you have committed any folly, tell me what it is!"

"I had such faith in your tact and skill, Matt," resumed Phipps, "that I made sure you would have married an heiress and stepped into a splendid fortune by this time: or else I thought to myself that you could not fail to be on such terms with the Duchess of Arleigh that you might have had anything for the asking, even to the extent of thousands——"

"Well, and so I might," exclaimed Mandeville, "if it had not been for those accursed occurrences at Thornbury three weeks ago! Ever since the murder of Mrs. Quinlan and the death of the Dowager, the young Duchess has maintained the strictest seclusion—she has shut herself up and will see no one: and how could I possibly force myself into her presence? Such conduct would have been to compromise her most seriously on the one hand—and to ruin myself in her estimation on the other, because she would have at once come to the conclusion that I did not really love her, but was merely a selfish heartless adventurer, like that Sir Abel Kingstone——"

"I was just going to mention the name," said

Phipps, "to remind you of the immense services you have rendered the young Duchess."

"As if it was necessary to remind me of them!" ejaculated Mandeville.

"But look you, uncle—I beg that you will permit me to pursue my own game in the way that I have sketched it out. I know that I shall succeed—and then you shall want for nothing. But in the meanwhile you must not harass nor perplex me—you must not trouble me with your affairs—much less must you make any demands upon my purse——"

"But I tell you, Matt," interjected Phipps, "that your name is compromised along with my own, to the extent of three thousand pounds!"

"What the dence do you mean?" demanded Mandeville, sharply, and almost fiercely.

"Don't fly into a rage. You yourself said ere now that the very walls had ears——"

"Well, well," cried Mandeville, though in a subdued tone: "what startling revelation or confession is all this to lead to? I see that you have been doing something the avowal of which you are loath to make:—but this is a mere waste of time—it is trifling also!"

"True, my dear nephew. And therefore," continued Phipps, "without further preface I will confess that in a certain respect we stand in pretty much the same predicament as we did precisely fifteen years ago."

"My God!"—and it was with a moan that Mandeville rose from his seat,—first staggering as if smitten a blow the instant he was upon his legs—and then turning abruptly towards Phipps, whom he grasped violently by the wrist, saying in a low hoarse tone, "Miserable man! do you mean to tell me that another forgery has been committed? Fifteen years ago!—Ah! you did well to remind me of that period!—fifteen years ago, when I was a clerk together with yourself in Warren's office, you gambled *then*—you led me into trouble—aye, even my very neck was jeopardized in respect to the hangman's halter!"

"But you will confess, Matt," said Phipps, "that there was not much to corrupt in you at that period: you were already a pretty good hand at spending money faster than you got it—and you were well versed in all the various ways of debauchery and dissipation. Why," added Phipps, with a low chuckling laugh, "after you had seduced old Warren's daughter, it was not a much deeper iniquity to imitate the handwriting of her father!"

"But who suggested the crime?" asked Mandeville, again speaking in a low hoarse voice. "It was you! *You*, taking advantage of my necessities, showed me how I might meet them and triumph over my difficulties! Well, it was natural that when the deed was done I should consent to receive my half of the profits. And then, when discovery came, did I not take all upon my shoulders? did I not listen to you when you fell down upon your knees before me and pleaded on behalf of your wife whom you had recently married and the young child that was just born unto you?"

"All this is true, Matt," said Phipps: "you acted nobly in the case. But after all, what would have been the use of your acting otherwise? You were discovered: I was not even suspected. It would have been useless to drag me into the difficulty. So you see, Matt, you

were not exactly a scapegoat—nor did you make any such wonderful sacrifices on my behalf. In plain terms, you could not have saved yourself by inculpating me. And you must not forget that by keeping silence in reference to my share in the business, you left me at large to work for you—which I did day and night,—interceding here and entreating there—so that the result was, instead of being sent to the scaffold, your sentence was commuted—”

“Enough of all this!” interjected Mandeville, impatiently: and he began to pace to and fro in the apartment with agitated steps.

“No, no—it is not enough of it!” said Phipps, “since you seem to reproach me on account of that transaction. At the end of fifteen years you come back to England, and you find me in my old place—clerk in that stock-broking office; and ready and willing to assist you. How could you have managed without me? how could you have passed yourself off as a wealthy foreigner and maintained your position, unless some respectable, or seeming respectable person, like Warren, had whispered all kinds of tales to guarantee the various representations which you were giving of yourself? Well, and was it not, I repeat, through me that you were enabled to obtain that insight into Warren’s affairs which rendered him your slave, ready to say anything you might choose to dictate? Of what use would it have been that you could tell the tale how Dr. Mordaunt killed his sister while endeavouring to produce abortion—or that you could tell how Sir Moses Bellamy had been in Newgate—or how Smithers, the schoolmaster, had once followed the same vocation at the hulks—or that Michael Casey had formerly borne the name of Pringle when in New South Wales,—of what use, I ask, would have been these various pieces of knowledge which you obtained, years ago, when you yourself were in Newgate, and at the hulks, and in Australia,—of what use could they have been, unless I, by my knowledge of Warren’s private affairs, his difficulties, and his embarrassments, had been enabled to suggest the very means by which all your own special knowledge was to be rendered available? Ah! Warren little suspected that I knew his affairs so intimately and so deeply!—And now, talking of all these things, Matt,” said Phipps, thus interrupting himself as it were, “puts me in mind that there is one point upon which I should really very much like to be enlightened. I have frequently wished to ask the question—”

“What is it?” demanded Mandeville, now suddenly stopping short in the midst of his agitated walk, during which he seemed to be utterly heedless of the long tirade that was flowing from the lips of his uncle.

“Why,” rejoined the latter, “in respect to all those persons who were troubling Warren at the time, you were enabled to tell him sufficient concerning Mordaunt and Bellamy, Casey and Smithers, to strike them each such a blow as paralysed them and rendered them powerless. But how did you manage in respect to Seymour, the great contractor, against whose private character and antecedents neither you nor I knew anything?”

“Pshaw!” ejaculated Mandeville, impatiently: “how can you devote your attention to such

comparative trifles, when all your thoughts should be given to more serious matters?”

“It is a point on which I experience an ardent curiosity,” rejoined Phipps; “for there must have been some admirable stroke of policy on your part—”

“Well, well,” said Mandeville, flattered by the compliment that was just paid him, and somewhat appeased in respect to the rage which had previously taken possession of him, “it was a fine stroke—one of the best I ever played—and by heaven! uncle, it may be taken as a fair illustration of that genius which has got me on and which shall yet make me a brilliant fortune! Ah, I may indeed feel proud when I think of all I have done! I, the obscure, humbly born, indifferently educated Matthew Calvert—acquiring everything polite, genteel, and intellectual—learning Continental languages as if I were a native of the very countries themselves—catching all the refinement of behaviour and elegance of manner which characterise the French—endowing my conversation, so to speak, with brilliancy of wit and funds of anecdote—”

“Granting all this to be the case,” said Phipps, “you will admit that you are singing your own praises to no very humble tune; and you also forget that you have had opportunities of travel and associations, of which you could not very well help profiting. No sooner escaped from transportation in New South Wales, than you fell in with the divorced Russian Grand Duchess: then you were employed by the Russian diplomatists themselves, and were thus brought in contact with the most polished of nobles and gentlemen,—then travelling through Europe—”

“True, true,” ejaculated Mandeville: “but do you pretend that any one else would have profited by such circumstances as I have done? Nothing of the kind! It was tact—it was intelligence—it was a certain aptitude for everything intellectual, genteel, and polished—it was the inborn taste of the refined gentleman—”

“Well, we will not dispute upon the point,” said Phipps, smiling at his nephew’s arrant conceit. “Ah, by the bye! we have wandered greatly from our former topic! You were about to explain how you contrived in respect to Seymour the contractor—”

“To be sure! I will tell you,” rejoined Mandeville. “I have little faith in human virtue: I believe therefore that there is a dark spot in the heart of every one—a stain upon every conscience. Yea—every man has at one period of his life done something that he would not like to have dragged into light. Was it not therefore fair to suppose that Seymour—a man of the world—having pushed on his way through difficulties, and fought the great battle of life before he amassed a fortune—was it not fair, I ask, to suppose that such a man was sure to come within the range of my theory? I did not therefore consider it was a hazardous stroke, but that it was a sure one which I was playing, when I said to Warren, ‘If Seymour threatens you, tell him boldly there is a secret in his life which has come to your knowledge, and the proofs of which are not wanting!’”

“Ah, it was thus that you played the game?” said Phipps.

“Yes,” replied Mandeville; “and my firm



conviction is that if you pounce upon any man at random and say to him, 'There is a dark secret in your life which is known to me!' you would at once conjure up the blush of shame and guilt to his lips."

"I think it is very likely," said Phipps, musing over this detestable piece of philosophy which had just reached his ears. "Yet all people can't be had. No,—I know that I myself have my weak moments sometimes, when I would rather do good than evil."

"You indeed?"—and Mandeville laughed tauntingly and scornfully.

"Well, it is of no consequence," said Phipps: and then he muttered in an undertone, "Perhaps you would not be best pleased, Nephew Matt, if I quoted a proof of the statement I have just made. You little think that, in one of those weak moments I warned poor Ethel Trevor against you. It was when I met her in the Kilburn or Hendon

omnibus—I recollect! Poor creature! I thought she had suffered enough, being robbed as she was by Warren. Well, well—it's a queer world!—but I know that even a villain may have his good points!"

"What the deuce are you muttering about to yourself?" demanded Mandeville, who had resumed his agitated walk, from which he however again stopped suddenly short. "But rather tell me at once, miserable man, what is the full extent of this new crime which you have perpetrated—this fresh mischief which you have done?"

"Have you not understood me yet, Mat?" inquired the uncle. "And yet I have told you some half-dozen times. It is a bill of exchange for three thousand pounds, drawn by you, Hippolyte Count de Mandeville—upon your bankers in Paris, and accepted by them—"

"The bankers in Paris?" echoed the Count. "Then we are lost! Of what use will it be to

find the money? The bill will be sent to them for payment—they will deny their acceptance, even though millions were paid into their hands to meet the bill!"

"Softly, softly, my dear nephew," interrupted Mr. Phipps: "I am not accustomed to do things in quite such a bungling style as this. No, no!—the bill will not go to the London agents of the Paris bankers for payment, nor yet to the Paris bankers either—provided you get me the three thousand pounds by to-morrow afternoon at four o'clock. Remember, however, that's imperative!"

"Now," said Mandeville, sternly confronting his precious uncle, "will you have the goodness to tell me at once, and in as few words as possible, exactly how the business stands—for by all you have just told me you have mystified me more than ever."

"Listen, Mat—and you shall have a specimen of what real conciseness is. I wanted three thousand pounds and I went to a certain Mr. Dobson, money-lender, to whom I made known my requirement. 'What's the security?' he asked.—'The bill of Count Mandeville, concerning whom you may inquire of my employer Mr. Warren.'—'Why does not Warren lend you the money?' asked Dobson.—'Because,' I replied, 'Mandeville does not wish him to know anything about it.'—'Then, in plain terms,' says Dobson, 'you are raising this money for Mandeville himself?'—'Just so,' I replied. 'The pension he receives from the King of France will be due at an early date, and his French bankers will accept the bill for his accommodation.'—'Ah, I understand,' said Dobson: 'he does not want the bill to get into the market. Very well: he can have the money; and the bill shall remain in my portfolio until the day before it is due, when I expect you to come and take it up; otherwise I shall of course pay it into my bankers that they may present it for payment in the ordinary manner.'—This is how the matter stands," added Phipps.

"Enough," said Mandeville with a stern brevity in his speech, and with anger in his looks. "It is not your fault if you have not compromised me beyond redemption!"

"You should not have boasted, Mat, what a clever fellow you are, and what wonderful things you can do in the shortest possible space of time—how you could carry everything before you, seduce duchesses, marry heiresses, and accomplish as much in a few weeks as would take any other person as many months for the mere initiatory proceedings!"

"Well, well," interjected Mandeville petulantly—for he knew that there was much truth in his uncle's observations; "there is enough of it! Come to me at three o'clock to-morrow, and you shall have the money."

"That is what I call speaking reasonably and fairly—and also proving that you are the rapid, dashing, sharp, determined dog you've chosen to represent yourself."

With these words Mr. Phipps took his departure, leaving his nephew to ponder the difficulties there might be in the way of raising the three thousand pounds in time to prevent a terrific explosion. But Mandeville—as we shall continue to call the adventurer, in order to prevent confusion in our narrative, although the reader is now aware that he was none other than Matthew Cal-

vert, the *quondam* delinquent clerk in the service of the late Mr. Warren, and the story of whose death had been propagated by his uncle Mr. Phipps,—Mandeville, we say, had already revolved in his own mind the sources whence the required sum might be obtained. He had faith in his star; and indeed the immense confidence he possessed in his own abilities had proved the main source of all the recent successes of his adventurous life. The task which he had in hand did not therefore prevent him from sleeping soundly that night—though he was deeply enraged against his uncle for having done a deed which might have compromised them both beyond all reparation.

Mandeville rose early on the ensuing morning, entered his carriage, and drove to the French Ambassador's. He had it in his power to demand a pecuniary reward for the service recently rendered in the matter of the breaking up of the conspiracy; and if he had hitherto abstained from seeking such recompense, it was because he wished to stand all the better with the Ambassador, to seem to be more independent than he really was in his monetary affairs, and thus diminish those scruples which might have existed on the part of the French Government in respect to the bestowal upon him of the Legion of Honour. But now, pressed by necessity, he determined upon asking for a pecuniary recompense, in addition to the titular one; and during the short ride to the French Embassy, he made up a tale to account for this sudden want on his part. But behold! his hope was doomed to disappointment in this quarter; the French Ambassador had left late on the preceding evening for Paris, to which capital he had been suddenly summoned.

Mandeville bit his lip for a moment, and drove to the Russian Embassy. He knew that while on the one hand the Imperial Prince had never met Ivan Zadonski on the bridge, on the other hand Count Olonetz had likewise failed in capturing that individual: but Mandeville had by no means suspected the real truth—namely, that Zadouski had been murdered. He therefore attributed the absence of the Pole from the appointment which had been made on Waterloo Bridge, to the fact that he suspected some treachery and had deemed it more prudent to keep aloof. Mandeville therefore now resolved to tell some tale which might obtain for him the three thousand pounds he required; and with this view he drove to the Russian Embassy. He first inquired for the Grand Duke, whom he thought it would be far more easy to dupe and deceive than Count Olonetz; but his Imperial Highness had gone out a few minutes previously. Mandeville then inquired for Count Olonetz; but he was informed that his Excellency had just gone down to the Foreign Office, where it was probable that he would be detained for some hours, inasmuch as it was expected that the Embassy would leave the British metropolis in a day or two, after having been detained at least three weeks longer than had been originally anticipated. Again Mandeville bit his lip for a moment: but then, as he recollected that he had still one resource left, he inquired of the hall-porter, "Is that English lady still residing here? I mean Mrs. Trevor."

"Yes, sir," was the response. "And poor lady! she is at this moment in great trouble!"

"Trouble? Indeed!—how so?"

"Her little boy was last night seized with convulsions; and the poor child lies at the point of death."

"Ah!" said Mandeville with an assumed air of compassion. "I am sorry to hear such intelligence."

He then drove back to the Clarendon Hotel; but within half an hour he was in his phaeton, accompanied by Edmund Vaughan, on his way into Buckinghamshire.

For a long time not a word was spoken—until at last Mandeville, thinking that he noticed something strange on the part of his valet, said, "Why do you keep looking round in that manner, Edmund?"

"I look round, sir!"

"Yes, to be sure! You cannot possibly be afraid of highwaymen in broad daylight, between eleven and twelve in the forenoon—on this well-frequented road——"

"No, sir—I am not afraid of highwaymen," rejoined the valet. "But the truth is, sir, it struck me that when you first went out this morning, I saw an ill-looking fellow of a foreigner with a beard, lounging about the front of the hotel; and then just as the phaeton drove round to the door after you had dismissed your carriage, sir, it struck me that I saw the same man again—but he almost instantly disappeared."

"Do you suppose he was watching me, therefore?"

"I don't know, sir. I didn't like the man's look—there was a misgiving in my mind—one can't help these feelings at times——"

"A foreigner—watching me?" murmured Mandeville between his lips. "Describe this person—what is his appearance?"

"Bearded, sir, as I have already said——"

"Could it be Zadouski?—Do you mean a beard of glossy blackness, with but a few grey hairs?"

"No, sir: the person I mean, as well as I could obtain a glimpse of him, had a beard more indicative of age. But, after all, I daresay, sir, it was a mere fancy on my part—and he was not watching you at all: but I thought I would mention it."

"Then why have you glanced behind so frequently?" asked Mandeville.

"Again I may have been foolish, sir, in my misgivings," responded Edmund; "but three or four times I thought that I heard a horse following, and the idea had grown up in my mind that it was going at the same pace as ourselves—just for all the world as if keeping at a certain distance."

"Do you hear the sounds now?" asked Mandeville.

"No, sir. And again I say it may have been nothing more than fancy after all."

"Most likely!—or at all events nothing significant:"—but though Mandeville thus spoke with his accustomed tone and air of confidence, he did not feel altogether so reassured in the secret depths of his own mind, that there was naught to care for in the incident. "It cannot be Zadouski!" he thought to himself: "it is not Pouchard—for he wears scarcely any beard at all, and no whiskers. Ah! it may be Karl Patronoff! But if so, why should he watch me? Can it be that the part I played with the French Amba-

sador has been discovered? And yet this is scarcely possible! Indeed, it seems to be altogether impossible!"

But although Mandeville endeavoured thus to reassure himself, he could not banish a latent misgiving and lurking sense of danger from his mind. He kept listening: but the sounds of horaa's feet coming from behind, reached not his ears: and we should observe that he was careful to compose his countenance in a way that might prevent his valet from suspecting there was really anything that he dreaded.

"By the bye, Edmund," said Mandeville, abruptly breaking a silence which had again prevailed for some time, "have you ever seen anything of that man—what is his name? Ah! Luke Parkins!"

"Oh," cried Edmund, with a smile; "the valet of that precious baronet Sir Abel Kingston, whom we packed off so nicely three or four weeks ago? Ah, how well he was got up for that occasion! Never shall I forget the infirm-looking old gentleman, with whiskers and moustache shaved off, and his cheeks coloured so as to seem all wrinkled——"

"Well, well," interjected Mandeville impatiently; "we do not want to recall the particulars of that transaction."

"No—certainly not, sir. I beg pardon—but still it is something that I cannot help smiling at when I think of it!—it was done so neatly! And Miss Denton too, who played her part so well!—Ah! Luke Parkins little thought when he helped his master to escape out of Newgate, and got him to Pluckley's house in the Haymarket, what was to happen so soon, and how the baronet was to be spirited away!"

"Have you seen Luke Parkins since the transaction?" inquired Mandeville. "This was the question I just now put."

"Beg pardon, sir," said the valet; "I'm afraid I took a liberty in chattering too much. Well, I have seen Luke Parkins—it was yesterday—and I thought he looked uncommon down in the mouth. I'm sorry for it."

"No doubt!" said Mandeville, impressively: "he must have been a very faithful fellow to his master; and fidelity of this sort cannot be too well rewarded," continued Mandeville, emphasising his words and bending a significant look on his own valet. "You know that I can appreciate fidelity on the part of a dependant. But tell me—did Parkins speak of his master?"

"But very little, sir; he hardly mentioned his name. Methought he had a kind of bewildered look——"

"Poor fellow!—the sudden disappearance of his master must indeed have proved unaccountable to him! I hope he is not suffering through poverty?"

"Not a bit of it, sir!" answered Vaughan. "Besides, he told me he thought of taking a butler's situation that was offered him."

"Of course you did not say a word calculated to excite a suspicion in his mind that you knew full well what he had done for his master?"

"Good heavens, no, sir!—not a word!" ejaculated Edmund. "I hope you know me to be too cautious. Ah, sir, it was a clever game which Luke and his master must have played at the time!"

"And yet a simple one enough," answered Mandeville; "for all the details of the case are self-evident. Sir Abel partook of some drug which threw him into a trance—then Luke Parkins was ready at hand, and it all depended upon the fact with which he conducted the remainder of the business, to ensure a complete success. To tell the tale of how the Baronet had been troubled with a heart-disease—to make the low fellows of an Old Bailey jury beastly drunk—to take advantage of the readiness of the hurried and bustling prison-surgeon to snatch at the very first idea that might save trouble—then to get possession of the seeming corpse, on pretence of giving it that decent burial which none else would afford,—all this," added Mandeville, "was a comparatively easy part to be played when he who played it was a man of tact, intrepidity, and keen wit."

Here the conversation was interrupted by the appearance of Beaconsfield, where, in a very few minutes, the phaeton drove up to the front of the principal inn. There Mandeville was known; and he was instantaneously received with every attention.

Without informing Edward Vaughan of his present destination, but merely remarking that he should be back in an hour or two, he set off on foot for Thornbury Park. He had scarcely proceeded half an hour, and had just reached the outskirts of the park, when he beheld a lady walking slowly along the lane, a little way ahead; and quickly recognising the superb figure on which his eyes thus rested, he was instantaneously by her side.

"Mary, dearest Mary!" he exclaimed, his entire countenance expressing mingled joy and tenderness. "Oh, what bliss to meet you again!"

"Hippolyte, is it you?"—and it struck the Count that there was a certain coldness or reserve in the manner of the young Duchess.

"What! are you astonished that I should seek you after a separation of more than three weeks? But perhaps you are annoyed that I did not come hither sooner, despite the billet which you wrote in answer to mine?"

"Yes, yes," interjected the Duchess; "I wrote to you, Hippolyte, to beg that you would not seek me—at least not for the present,—that you would leave me to my seclusion and my sorrow—"

"True! you wrote thus, Mary," rejoined Mandeville; "and have I not obeyed you? But I could curb my impatience no longer: I longed to fly to you—to gaze upon you once again—to tell you how much I love you—to learn from your sweet lips that I am still loved in return—"

"Hush, Hippolyte! hush!" interjected the Duchess: "this may not be!"—and she spoke with a modest dignity and firmness, but yet with an air of sincerest friendship. "Nay, do not interrupt me!—but listen! You are endowed with a brilliant intelligence—with generous feelings likewise—yes, with the noblest of sentiments,—and you will therefore understand me when I declare that recent events have produced the strongest impression on my mind. It appears to me as if heaven itself interposed, by its own awfully significant means, to rescue me from proving faithless to my husband! It was thus with the first towards whom I displayed a weakness of feeling—I mean Sir Abel Kingeton!—it was so

in respect to yourself!—and—and—in these two instances *only* have I ever thought of infidelity towards the Duke of Ardsleigh! I know that I have been guilty in thought, though not in fact,—criminal in intent, though not in deed; and I must therefore ever look upon myself as one who has been weak, erring, reprehensible, if not actually culpable. But *that*, thank God! I have never seen! And you, Hippolyte—you who declare that you love me—will respect me all the more when I entreat—nay, stipulate and command, that henceforth there shall be naught but friendship between you and me!"

"What, Mary!" exclaimed Mandeville, who had listened to this speech with a surprise bordering on consternation; "you tell me this after all that has taken place between us? And for whom is it that you propose to retain this prudish chastity of yours? The husband who has betrayed you!—the man who has loved his mistress far better than he loved you, his wife!"

"Speak not harshly nor severely, Hippolyte," interrupted the Duchess. "On my husband's mind also have recent events produced their effect!"

"Ah, try him! put him to the test!" exclaimed Mandeville, with contemptuous irony. "I will tell you how! Say to him that you know where his Ethel is—reveal to him that she is at the Russian Embassy in Grosvenor Square. Oh! and add, if you will, that she now weeps over her child—*his* child—who is at the point of death!"

At this instant a scream burst from the lips of the young Duchess; but it was not evoked by the intelligence she had just heard:—it was produced by the sudden glimpse which she caught of a bearded face with a sinister expression, peeping forth from amidst the adjacent trees. And not only was the expression of this countenance fierce and threatening—aye, even frightful with its ferocious glaring eyes—but another object had also simultaneously caught the look of the young Duchess: namely, a pistol. But scarcely had that shriek pealed from her lips—indeed while it was still vibrating in the air—the pistol exploded, and a yell of pain thrilled from the tongue of Mandeville.

Then another cry rang through the air: it was from the lips of the young Duchess—and with the sudden feeling of revived affection for Mandeville, she threw herself into his arms. At the very same instant the pistol, which was a revolver, was discharged again; and a third wild cry from the tongue of the Duchess indicated a mortal agony. Mandeville fell with a heavy groan; and the Duchess sank down upon him. Then there was a rustling amidst the adjacent trees: and Karl Petronoff—for he indeed was the assassin—sprang upon a horse which was tied at a little distance, and plunging into the diverging lanes, galloped away from the scene of his double crime.

Almost immediately afterwards another horseman, coming from the opposite direction, rode up to the spot; and a cry of horror burst from his tongue at the spectacle which met his eyes—for this was the young Duke of Ardsleigh himself. Springing from his steed, he caught his wife in his arms; and she murmured faintly, yet audibly, "Herbert, I have never proved faithless to you! I am about to die—I swear that I am speaking the truth!"

"I believe you, Mary! But if it were otherwise, I should blame you not! Oh, you are wounded! and he too!—it is Mandeville! By heaven, he is dead!"

"Dead? Oh, what a fate!"—and the young Duchess moaned deeply. "The assassin was there—amidst the trees! No, start not!—he is gone!"

"Oh, for aid! What am I to do?" cried the young Duke, flinging his afflicted and bewildered looks around.

"You can do nothing. Listen to me, Herbert!"—and the young Duchess spoke in a voice so deep and solemn that her husband's attention was instantaneously riveted upon the wish that her words had expressed, though he listened with a profoundly painful interest. "There! support me thus, Herbert! I am dying! Oh, do not start in that horrified manner!—it is as I tell you! I feel it here!"—and she pointed to her bosom.

"Good heavens!" moaned the young Duke, as he saw that the blood was welling forth from a wound in the immediate vicinage of the heart. "Is it possible, Mary? Oh, live!—live for me! I will be unto you otherwise than I have been! Oh, I swear it, Mary!—for now, at last, I feel how dear you are unto me!"

"Oh, Herbert!" said the Duchess, with a smile of extraordinary sweetness, "there is one still dearer unto you—one with whom you may now be happy!"

"Talk not thus, Mary! you wound me to the very quick!—it is a sacrilege of the heart's sanctuary to deem me capable of thinking of another while thou art thus wounded!"

"Dying," added the Duchess faintly.

"No, no!—it must not be!" cried her husband, almost frantically. "Oh, is there no help? does no one hear me? Mary, I am strong—I will carry you in my arms to the house!"

"Remove me, Herbert, and I shall die instantaneously! Oh, suffer me to remain thus until the last!" was Mary's softly-breathed request. "Yes, thus! Ay—and again press your lips to mine!—one more kiss! And now I shall die happy!—and you shall live to be happy, Herbert! But, Ah! your boy—your little Alfred! Haste, haste!—leave me to die alone!—speed to your Ethel!—she weeps by the side of her son!"

"O God! what is this that you say?" exclaimed the Duke, startled throughout his entire being.

"Alas, it is so, Herbert! Go—remain not here!—speed, speed to London! Ah—the film of death—"

"Mary, Mary! what more have you to say?" and the young Duke strained his wife with a mingled tenderness and convulsiveness in his arms.

"Oh, that my last words," she feebly and faintly murmured, "should give you back *her* who was lost!—and God grant that you and Ethel may be happy! Seek—seek her, Herbert—at—at—the Russian Embassy—and—and—hesitate not to espouse her—hesitate not!"

And thus speaking, the once brilliant Duchess of Ardleigh expired in the arms of her husband.

Shift we now the scene. It was some hours later on that eventful day; it was between seven and eight o'clock in the evening; and by the side of a couch in a chamber at the Russian Embassy

knelt Ethel,—Ethel still beautiful as ever, but pale and afflicted—the tears raining in torrents from her soft hazel eyes—sobs convulsing her bosom! For there, upon that couch, lay her child—her beloved little Alfred! The only joy of her heart was now wrested from her! Yes—for the child was dead! It appeared to be an amount of calamity too stupendous to be real, and a woe too terrible to endure.

"God help me!" moaned the afflicted creature. "God help me!—for now is my bereavement complete! Oh, my lost child! Oh, my perished dear one! Now indeed is this world a blank!—and there is none—and there is none to comfort me!"

"Yes—one, dearest Ethel!"—and at the same time that a loved and familiar voice thus broke softly and tenderly upon her ear, a form glided as gently towards her and knelt by her side. "Yes, *one*,—Ethel!—I, your husband! Oh, start not!—these are no mocking words that I speak!—but believe me when I call thee my wife—my duchess—my well-beloved—from whom I shall separate no more!"

And as the young Duke in a few words explained the horrible tragedy which had that day occurred at Thornbury, Ethel sank into his arms; and then the bereaved father and mother knelt and prayed and wept together by the side of the couch whereon lay the corpse of their little son!

CHAPTER LXVIIII.

CONCLUSION.

MANDEVILLE was not dead; but he had fainted from the effect of the wound which he had received. For six weeks he battled for life through intervals of fever and trance-like stupor; and during that period he was perfectly unconscious of all that was passing around him. When he regained his senses, it was to receive no very agreeable intelligence—which was however charitably broken to him by degrees. A complete explosion had taken place. The bill had been presented for payment—the Paris bankers had pronounced their acceptance a forgery—Phipps had been arrested—and further inquiries had developed the fact that Mandeville was an impostor, that his proper name was Matthew Calvert, and that some years back he had escaped from transportation in Anstralia. The consequence was that the precious uncle and nephew appeared at the Old Bailey during the same Sessions,—the former prosecuted for forgery, the latter as a returned transport; and both were sentenced to banishment for the remainder of their lives. We should observe that Phipps, fancying that he had some cause of grievance against Warren, revealed the desperate condition of this individual's affairs, which at once sent him headlong into the *Gazette*. But inasmuch as Mr. Warren had done the thing wholesale, and had plundered people of hundreds of thousands, instead of being a mere petty, peddling insolvent on a small scale, he was compassionated by the Commissioner, complimented by the assignees, and sympathized with by the great Dons of the City generally; so that he passed the Court with flying colours. When we

last heard of him, he was—or appeared to be—in finer feather than ever, with a larger yacht, a handsomer house, more horses, and more mistresses, than he had even possessed prior to his bankruptcy.

The reader will perhaps be prepared to learn that Hester Sergeant was not long destined to remain a creature of this life. In the course of a few weeks after her restoration to her mother, she expired in the arms of the parent whom she thus knew for so short a time. The effect was to damage still more completely than before the intellect of Lady Amesbury, who was however thereby saved from too keen an appreciation of the loss of the daughter whom she had hoped to save to become unto her a source of solace and comfort.

Edward Walpole became the happy husband of the beautiful Azaline; and in the faithful execution of the imaginative projects conceived by the latter, and which appeared at the time to be so deeply tinged with romance, they have for the most part inhabited an orient clime since their nuptials. They possess a charming villa upon the banks of the Bosphorus; and Azaline's brilliant and beautiful form is set off to the fullest advantage by the characteristic feminine costume of the country which she and her husband have, so to speak, adopted as their own.

We may now in a few rapid words dispose of almost as many characters, by stating that Tim Gaffney died of the injuries sustained on the night of the burglary in Hutton Garden, and that his friend Jack Peppercorn was transported for the same offence—that Ponchard and Petronoff fell together, fighting side by side in the French Revolution of 1848—and that Sir Abel Kingston perished of a sun-stroke while dragging his wearied limbs as a member of the Condemned Regiment over the arid wastes of Sahara.

Sylvester Casey, receiving an allowance of three hundred a-year, which was settled upon him through the generosity of Stephen Ashborne, committed a last folly by suffering himself to be inveigled into a marriage with Alice Denton, who keeps him in such excellent order as to verify the old proverb of "the grey mare being the better horse." He is compelled to put up with her extravagancies and her infidelities; for how can a person possibly find fault when he dares not say that his soul is his own? As for Stephen Ashborne, he lives in almost complete seclusion at The Firs in Dorsetshire: but manifold indeed are his charities, and noble is the use which he makes of the large fortune he inherited through his wife, the perished and lamented Pamela.

Edmund and Lavinia married soon after the tragical occurrences at Thornbury; and the reader may be prepared to learn that such shrewd and worldly-minded people have not failed to double and treble the savings which they acquired by various means when they were respectively in service.

It was not until nearly a twelvemonth after the death of Mary Duchess of Arldleigh, by the bullet of the assassin Petronoff, that the heauteous Ethel succeeded unto her place. It was through her own delicacy of feeling that this delay took place; but at the expiration thereof she accompanied her beloved Herbert to the altar, and became Duchess of Arldleigh in her turn. A blooming progeny is

rising around them; and when Ethel gazes upon these the offspring of a legitimate wedded love, she cannot repress the thought, though she sighs as she gives way to it, that it was perhaps after all a merciful dispensation of Providence which took her little Alfred in his infancy, instead of leaving him to grow up to the knowledge and the shame of his illegitimacy. We may add that the Princess Roxana—who has married one of her cousins, a Prince of the Imperial House of Romanoff—frequently corresponds with the Duchess of Arldleigh; and it is always in the style of "dearest Ethel," and "dearest Roxana" that their correspondence is carried on.

We have now to conclude our narrative with an episode of a somewhat startling description. All the generous services rendered by Selina Casey to the House of Trentham, were duly and effectively represented by Azaline to her brother Launcelot. At first he listened only with a sense of gratitude; then feelings of the most admiring friendship arose in his mind—until he began to conceive that there was virtually a paramount duty which he was sacredly and solemnly bound to perform. But let it not be thought that the image of Imogen was banished from his recollection. Far from it! He cherished it as that of the only being he could ever love; and it was therefore in a species of self-martyrising sense, at the altar of duty, that after the lapse of some months he offered his hand to Selina. At first she refused him; but he addressed her with so much frankness and candour—he showed himself so desirous to recompense all her many virtues by taking on himself the task of ensuring her happiness—that she yielded. Ah, the hesitation was not long—the struggle was not great: for did she not love him?

Then there was a year,—yes, *one* brief year of almost celestial bliss for the amiable and beautiful Selina: but at the end of that period she died, in giving birth to an infant who perished at the same time. Then there were some months of gloomy moody seclusion for Launcelot, who felt that in the death of Selina he had lost a true and sincere friend. Though he had not loved her in the fullest sense of the term, yet he had esteemed, admired, and respected her; and when she went down into the grave, it seemed to him as if there were no longer aught on earth to make him wish to live. At length so morbid became the condition of his mind,—that mind which was always romantic and endowed with the most refined sublimation of intellectuality—that his relatives became alarmed; and the medical advisers recommended prompt change of scene, accompanied by activity of pursuits. Launcelot, too sensible to be obstinate,—too intelligent to prove deaf to salutary advice—*at once yielded.*

Some few months afterwards, in the middle of the summer of 1849, an English traveller, with a knapsack at his back, was passing through one of the most delightful districts of Switzerland. He was not above four and twenty years of age—of remarkably handsome countenance, with brown hair, and fine blue eyes. There was an unmistakable air of distinction and refinement about him which plainly indicated that if he were performing a pedestrian tour, and was apparelled accordingly, it was a matter of choice and not of compulsion. Presently he entered a little village

where at the moment a somewhat interesting scene was taking place. A beautiful female—whose age might be between two or three and twenty, and who was apparelled in a fantastic garb, but one which exquisitely became her—was dancing; while a fascinating little girl, with a profusion of soft flaxen curls, and whose age might be about seven, was playing the tambourine. Though it was a poor village, yet such was the interest which the performer and her little companion excited, that coins rained in upon the tambourine when the latter presented it to the spectators. The dance concluded; and the dancer herself retired to a seat within the court-yard of a picturesque inn, where she and the girl rested themselves, while the waitress of the hostelry hastened to procure some refreshments that were ordered.

This was the moment at which the English pedestrian traveller entered the court-yard of the inn, wearied with a walk of several hours, and glad that he had reached the place where he purposed to repose himself. But good heavens! why does he stop short? wherefore is the very cry of amazement which rises up to his lips, suspended thereon? What does he behold? That costume! that splendid form!—and that child with the profusion of flaxen hair! is it possible? or is it a dream? Is the dead alive? is the lost found? what mystery is now to be explained? Ah, she raises her eyes!—those eyes of a beautiful blue!—and then forth from her lips peals a mingled cry of joy and wonder—and the English traveller doubts no longer as to the reality of what is passing.

“Launcelot!”

“Imogen! dearest Imogen!”

These were the ejaculations that now rang forth; and the next moment those who uttered them were clasped in each other's arms.

Oh, what a meeting!—what joy! what happiness for both! Imogen knew that Launcelot had married Selina: she knew also of Selina's death; and there was consequently little to be explained on his side. But on her's, how much was there to tell! Yes—how much to reveal since they had last seen each other at Chelsea precisely two years back! Then Imogen explained to Launcelot how her brother Walter had found out that she was living with a young gentleman—how he had implored her to quit a mode of life which was so discreditable to her—how he had at first threatened to take summary vengeance upon Launcelot as the seducer of his sister—but how she (Imogen) had explained everything exactly as it occurred, not even forgetting her own vow which she had sworn never to marry Launcelot without the consent of his parents. Thereupon her brother had

said to her, “They will *never* consent, Imogen; and besides, from all you have told me, it is clearly to the interest of this young gentleman that he should marry Miss Casey, if he desire to save his family from ruin. By remaining with him as his mistress, you ruin his interests and destroy your own reputation at one and the same time. This must end! He will never marry Selina while you live!—he will ever be seeking after you till he finds you! Be you dead unto him; and by this sacrifice on your part you will save him and redeem yourself!”

It was thus Imogen's brother had spoken; and she—the generous-hearted, the magnanimous, and the self-sacrificing—had yielded to his representations. They had at once gone abroad; and they lived for a while upon the money which Walter had brought home with him from sea. When this failed they found themselves in Switzerland, without resources in a land of strangers. Then first of all Walter became a boatman on a neighbouring lake, and Imogen took in needlework; Fanny—the faithful Fanny, who still remained with them, performed the domestic duties of the little household. But there had lately been a lack of travellers in that district—Walter's custom had fallen off—and poverty was staring them in the face, when Imogen determined to put on her long-discarded theatrical costume, and accompanied by little Annie, try her fortune amongst the peasants of the Alpine villages. That very day was her first venture—and it was also her last!

Her last, yes!—because Launcelot was now restored to her—and Walter Hartland readily assented to the brilliant match which was so ingeniously and sincerely proposed by the young patrician. Launcelot wrote to his parents, declaring that his happiness depended upon their concurrence with the step which he was so desirous to take; and they had recently been too deeply under apprehension concerning their son's health, alike physical and mental, to refuse their consent. Thus all Imogen's magnanimous love was rewarded at last; and she became the happy wife of Launcelot. She is now Lady Trentham, her husband having recently succeeded to the family title through the death of his father. Walter Hartland is a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy, which service he entered, by his own choice, soon after his sister's marriage: and the interest of his brother-in-law will not be wanting to push him onward in the career he has chosen. Little Annie passes as the niece of Lady Trentham,—by whom, as well as by Launcelot, she is as much loved, however, as if she were one of the bright and beautiful progeny which have blest their union.

