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GRASP YOUR NETTLE.

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A NOVEL

By E. LYNN LINTON,

AUTHOR OF THE "LAKE COUNTRY," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

"Tender-handed stroke a nettle,
And it stings you for your pains;
Grasp it like a man of mettle,
And it soft as silk remains."—AARON HILL.

LONDON:

SMITH, ELDER AND CO., 65, CORNHILL.

1865.

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GRASP YOUR NETTLE.

CHAPTER I.

PUBLICLY refused the holier rites of religion by reason of her public sin; her parents forced to leave the place which her shame haunted as a wicked ghost; shunned by all her former friends, and openly insulted by many; her very name and right of honourable matronhood denied; her children's condition made a matter of doubt and discussion; her husband's good fame destroyed—her husband or her betrayer?—Aura had surely come now to her worst! The only thing remaining to complete her downfall was that all this

should be confirmed, and from possibility become certainty.

But bad as it all was, and though she was full of fear and anguish—left too for the time to bear the storm alone (and yet one is never really alone while one is loved; it is the withdrawal of the love, not the person, that widows), she felt herself able to rise superior to all outside pressure, while it was still only doubt with hope to buttress up the weaker side. While it was a contest between the world and her love she had no fear of failing; it was only when she foresaw the time when it would be a contest between her conscience and her love that she quailed. However, she could determine nothing for the future. Strong in her love she quietly bided her time and waited; bearing her cross patiently, but bearing it herself—neither asking others to take it from her, nor seeking to slip from under it: which is what so many do, even those of us who look strong, and get credit for vigorous portage.

On the afternoon of the Monday following that cruel trial and insult at the church, Aura was

sitting in the drawing-room alone. The children had gone out for their afternoon ramble in the meadows behind the house—she dared not trust them in the roads now, unless she was with them—and the house was empty, sad, and silent. Unlike the lovers' quiet which their temporary absence gave both father and mother when Jasper was at home, it was now the emptiness of the tomb, the stillness of desolation and desertion. Aura had never in her life felt so lonely or unprotected as at this moment; and though she laughed at her own nervousness, and tried to reason herself out of her fears, there they were; and vague fears are as little to be controlled by the intellect as are the instincts—perhaps being instincts themselves.

While she was sitting there, trying in vain to occupy herself—but everything had grown wearisome to her since Jasper went away, and to-day the world was as if stone-dead; music, work, painting, books, nothing had flavour in it, or was more than absolute nonsense and confusion—she heard the door-bell ring, and the servant's voice speaking to some one whose voice she did

not hear in return. Then the drawing-room door opened, but only a little way, and the man said nervously—"The lady wants to see you, ma'am," as if uncertain what he ought to have done—whether to have admitted her broadly, or to have shut her out altogether.

He called her *the* lady, too, as if there was only one lady in Clive Vale of any special interest here at Croft.

"What lady?" said Aura looking up, for a moment a deadly fear passing over her.

She had no need to ask again, for at his elbow stood Madame Louise peering curiously into the room. While the man stood thus irresolute, and while Aura looked, the little woman slipped dexterously past and came trippingly forward, making a profound curtsy when fully in the room.

Aura rose haughtily, and stood, fronting her.

"Pardon, madame," said Louise speaking with her strongest foreign accent—she had various degrees for various occasions—"will you grant me the grace of a few moments' entretien with you? As my application has failed to produce

me a reply from M. Carthew or yourself, I have come personally to see you and him and my children ! ”

“ My husband is from home, ” said Aura coldly.

“ Plait-il ? ” said Madame Louise, as if she had not heard, or had not understood.

“ My husband is from home, ” repeated Aura.

“ Oh ! ” said Madame Louise carelessly, “ M. Carthew is absent ? ”

Aura did not reply. She knew quite well what the emendation implied ; and Madame Louise intended that she should know.

“ Madame ! ” then said the little woman, in a tone of remonstrance.

Aura bent her head to intimate attention.

“ Voilà your home ! ” she continued, spreading out her hands with a kind of pettish distress ; “ and see where I am ! Madame ! is it fair ? is it just ? is it lawful ? Answer me only that—is it just ? ”

“ I do not understand your complaint, Madame de Chantreau, ” returned Aura coldly. “ I can-

not understand how the arrangements of my household should in any way affect you."

"Vraiment?" said Madame Louise incredulously. "Has one then no cause for complaining when one sees what belongs to oneself transferred to another?"

"Certainly if true;" returned Aura with emphasis.

Madame Louise looked up sharply.

"Madame a du courage!" she said ironically.

And again Aura did not answer. Above all things she wished to avoid any vulgar bandying of personalities with this woman, whether the real wife returned to life or only an impostor playing a bold game with fear and possibility for the stake-holders.

"Madame a du courage, and pas trop de générosité," repeated Louise.

"What would you have me do?" asked Aura, raising her eyes steadily.

"What should have recommended itself to all women's heart," cried the visitor with vehemence; "instantly, now this moment, make me a partici-

pant in the many favours of fortune, which du reste, you have no right to enjoy as the lawful proprietor. If I leave you the greater part, at least give me the smaller. That is what I would have you do madame, and not leave me to starve—me, with my claims !”

“Substantiate your claims and you shall have full justice,” said Aura, speaking slowly and distinctly. “Meet my husband face to face ; prove to him that you are his wife, and the mother of his children ; and believe me, I shall not stand in the way of any just settlement—of any desired return ! Until then I must regard you as an impostor, Madame de Chantreau, and treat you as one.”

“Meet him face to face when he flies to avoid me !” exclaimed Louise, and her voice after Aura’s deeper and richer tones sounded poor and thin, though still so singularly distinct and precise. “I have come here to-day to see him, and behold ! he has gone.”

“And you knew that you should not find him when you came,” replied Aura disdainfully.

“Madame is not fearful of assertions,” said Louise. “How should I know what Mr. Carthew was doing, or where he had gone? He has used himself, he, to sudden disappearance!”

“Have the patience to wait a few days then, or it may be weeks, in Clive Vale until his return, and you shall have every opportunity afforded you of seeing him,” said Aura.

“Days! weeks! and who is to pay for my poor little crust, madame? It is fine for you grand aristocrats to speak as if money was *comme la boue de la rue*; when one is poor one finds it only in the sky.”

“Your brother, Mr. Dysart, has money,” Aura returned quietly. “Can he not be your banker until you have proved your legal rights to be supported by my husband?”

“Madame, *je ne comprends pas les mauvaises plaisanteries*,” said Madame Louise with her stony stare.

It was Aura’s turn now to smile incredulously.

“I think you do,” she said; “and I think also that you have miscalculated your strength and my

weakness. I know too much to be frightened of you, Madame de Chantreau—if it is your pleasure to be called by this name, to which you have no more right——”

“Than madame to that of Trelawney!” interrupted the little woman with a graceful bow.

The blow was sharp, and Aura felt it; but she was too proud to show it.

“Seeing then, that you can do nothing with me,” she continued, not noticing the remark, “perhaps you will wisely leave my house now, and wait until Mr. Trelawney’s return for any application you may have to make.”

“I shall certainly do no such thing,” cried Madame Louise angrily, forgetting her accent for a moment; “I have many things to arrange before I can leave you in peace, madam;” and as she spoke she seated herself. “Madame has not been assez polie to invite me to repose myself,” she said, all the Parisienne again; “but I will excuse the formality, and continue on my business. Madame, I demand to see my children, and here I take root until I have done so.”

“That I absolutely refuse to allow,” said Aura with determination.

“What! you refuse me this sacred right?” Louise cried in a tone of agitation. “You are assez barbare to shut me out from this holy love, this sacred function?”

“Until you have proved that they are your children, they are mine and under my charge. As things are I know of no mother for them but myself, and I do not recognize your right or your claim!” said Aura steadily.

Madame Louise gave a plaintive little cry and began to weep; and her tears shook Aura, herself a mother, and almost made her lose her self-command.

“You are a mother, madame, and can do this wicked thing!” cried Louise, lifting up her dark face, not much disordered considering the apparent violence of her agitation.

“I must obey my husband’s commands even at the cost of seeming cruelty,” replied Aura; but her voice was softened and her heart a little failing.

What if she is their true mother, after all? she kept thinking. No vice, no crime, no offence against the laws of society could break that strongest tie of nature; and ought she, only a stepmother at the best however loving, to stand between a mother and her children, and refuse her loving access to them? And then again, she thought; what if it is all a plot? shall I voluntarily subject these innocent young things to the contamination of such a woman, and do wrong from the very fear of doing wrong? But it was difficult for her to be stern at this moment; and Madame Louise watched, from between her fingers and her worked cambric handkerchief, the whole struggle pass as intelligibly as spoken words over the noble, sensitive face before her. Perhaps she saw more than she understood both of nobleness and emotion; but she knew so much that Aura was shaken when she wept and spoke of her children; so she wept afresh and sobbed yet more piteously.

“Mes enfants; mes enfants!” she cried; “they have taken them from me!—my children, my treasures!”

But this time her tears failed in their effect, and the more she wept the calmer and the colder and the more resolute became Aura; which, when Madame Louise perceived, she gradually and gracefully subsided, and wiping her eyes, intimated that she had controlled herself and was prepared now to enter on more prosaic business.

“You are cruel, madame!” she said, lifting up her beautiful brown eyes with a kind of mock-Murillo look. “Poor, abandoned, deprived of my children, deserted by my husband—what a life is mine!—while you—there is not a wish, not a desire, entertained by you in vain. Yet you grudge me the crumbs that fall from your table—you who have all!”

“I grudge you nothing,” replied Aura. “I simply deny your right to envy or to interfere with us. When you can prove your claim, as I have said before, you shall have all to which you are entitled, and neither I nor my husband will refuse you; until then——”

“Until then,” interrupted Madame Louise boldly, “I am poor, and I want money.”

There was a pause.

“This then is the object of your visit?” asked Aura.

“Fi donc, madame! what a materialistic view!” cried Madame Louise. “The object of my visit was to see M. Carthew and my children.”

“To this end,” said Aura quietly.

“Peut-être, madame; I do not deny among others,” said the little woman with a sly smile about the corners of her false lips.

“Yet you do not look in need of money,” continued Aura; “you are perfectly well-dressed.”

Louise smiled.

“You wear much jewellery; you have all the appearance indeed of wealth, not to speak of sufficiency.”

“It is all a mere nothing!” cried Louise with energy; “I assure you, madame, I am poor, very poor, and am kept on a few nothings, while mon gremlin de—” she stopped in time before she had said the “frère” she meant — “while you have all this, and he has deserted me!” she added by an afterthought.

Aura was silent. Naturally generous, she did not like to refuse any who asked for her help, but when she thought that perhaps this little wretch had the right to demand, and that at any rate she was of kin to his children, and of kin to Jasper's wife, then it seemed to her only just that she should have at least enough for her reasonable needs. Nothing could have frightened Aura into giving hush money; but it was not difficult for her own heart to persuade her to give alms, even to the undeserving.

“How much do you want, Madame de Chantreau?” she asked suddenly.

Louise's eyes sparkled.

“I have nothing,” she said; “can madame give me twenty pounds?”

“No,” Aura answered, “I cannot; I have not so much to give; I can give you ten”—that being the sum she had in her private purse—“and no more.”

“C'est une mesquinerie ça,” pouted Louise.

“It is all you can have,” said Aura.

Louise pointed to a small diamond throat-

brooch Aura wore. "With these," she said, "madame can always find funds for her suffering sisters."

Aura's blood rose to her face. The little brooch was Jasper's first gift to her after their marriage, and she prized it as an Arab prizes his amulet. It seemed like sacrilege for the woman to speak of it, or to notice it at all; but to speak of selling it was an insult hardly to be borne.

"If ten pounds will content you," she then said very haughtily, "you may have it; but I have no more, as I said."

"With such wealth!" cried Madame Louise, pointing to the ornaments about.

"Once for all, will you take this offer of mine or not?" Aura exclaimed angrily. "This interview has lasted long enough, and I wish to be alone. If the money I offer will do you any good you may have it; but no more, and nothing else."

"As a slight instalment," said Louise with an air of offended dignity; "but only as an instalment."

"As nothing in the world but a gift which I make to you out of my own private funds, because

I do not choose that any one however unworthily connected with my husband, shall want money in his neighbourhood and during his absence," said Aura; "as no instalment, as no precedent, and as no bribe; as a simple gift made out of respect to Mr. Trelawney—no more."

"Madame may formularize at her pleasure," said Madame Louise bowing; "and I accept this small—what shall I call it?" shrugging her shoulders.

Then Aura, unlocking her davenport took from it a purse and placed in the woman's hand ten bright, new, glittering sovereigns; part of a sum which Jasper had brought her not long ago.

Madame Louise took them with something of the manner of a cat springing on a mouse, or any other marauding creature pouncing down on its prey, and said "Merci" in such a natural voice of exultation, that Aura scarcely knew it.

The greed with which she clutched the gold revolted Aura more than anything else. That such a creature should perhaps have a right to

Jasper and the children—should be perhaps his wife and their mother—such a mass of vice and hypocrisy and low sensuality as it was! As she stood there and watched the little thief thrusting the money piece by piece into a small leathern bag she wore inside the bosom of her dress—for the experimental knowledge of what expertness could do made Madame Louise cautious, even at Clive Vale—all thought of herself left her, and it was not her own ruin, or her own loss, that blanched her cheeks and darkened her eyes, but the degradation of their future if bound up with this woman's. Aura was not a vain woman; she was too noble for a vice which belongs only to small natures or to untrue ones; but she had self-knowledge which is not vanity; and as she involuntarily contrasted this life with her own—this influence of intrigue and selfishness with her own love—she felt that the highest morality would be that which the world would call sin, and that natural ties are not always the holiest. But this creature here was not their mother!—she was not Jasper's wife! she said passionately to herself,

and God would defend the right and make the hidden truth appear!

Madame Louise with that marvellous tact of hers, felt what she could not explain, and soon became conscious that the longer she remained the weaker grew her influence over Aura; wherefore rising (Aura had stood the whole of the interview) and making a deep court curtsy she begged to wish madame good-day. She had waited as long as she could, having an appointment with *cette bonne Madame Price* who *vraiment* was *trop obligeante* for her; and sorry as she was to go without having embraced her dear children, she felt herself compelled by *les bienséances* which no lady who respects herself ever forgets, with a meaning stare at Aura, standing erect before her; and when Mr. Carthew should return, then there would be graver *affaires* to *regler* between them, and a very different account to make up than this of to-day. To which Aura made no other answer than, "When my husband is at home, come up to Croft and confront him."

Then she rang the bell for the servant to show the little woman out; and when he had done so, she called him back and commanded him very distinctly "not to admit that person again until his master's return."

The man noticed that she looked deadly pale while she spoke, and that her voice trembled, for the reaction was coming over her now that the pressure and need of tension had gone; and when he went back to the servants' hall, he told the rest that "he thought it was all up with missus, and that the new lady would be missus here before another month was out." At which they took to wrangling among themselves as to who would stay and who would not; and cook, who hated the lady's-maid because suspicious of her as a tale-bearer—which she was not, poor little soul—twitted her unmercifully, saying, "Oh yes! we all know who knows which side their bread is buttered, and good wage 'll go before handsome conduct any day; but as for me, I wouldn't eat that foreign slut's bread and desert missus, no, not if it was ever so."

On which the lady's-maid, being a meek-spirited young person afflicted with hysterical tendencies, began to cry, and ask plaintively for evidence as to what unhandsome thing she had ever done by missus; though she could tell tales of what went out as pig-wash and what went in as grease-pot if she'd a mind. And so they squabbled, being all in a state of ferment, more or less acid according to individual temperament, till the children came in and "the young ladies' teas had to be got ready that very instant minute," screamed nurse, who always made a great show of commanding for her own department.

Madame Louise was not to have the whole of her day marked with white. Immediately after passing through the lodge gates, she fell upon Mr. Grainger going up to the house to pay his respects to Mrs. Trelawney, as the consequence of the scene in church yesterday, and to assure her in his own way of his entire sympathy and indignation; offering his services if required, to kick, kill, insult, or most ferociously damage any one she might indicate, beginning with Madame Louise

herself and ending with the Price and the Bennet. He had been greatly put out, he said, by the gross insolence of this woman's conduct yesterday in presuming to force her way into the Croft pew, and when he saw her now coming through the gate, his anger rose to boiling-heat without farther provocation.

Madame Louise made a sliding reverence as they met, and was passing on, but Mr. Grainger stopping her, said rather savagely; "Good day, madam; what have you been doing here pray?"

"Cette madame and I had a small account to settle," answered Madame Louise cavalierly. She had found out by now that there was no good in trying to cajole Mr. Grainger. He did not understand her.

"It is not over delicate in you, madam, under all the circumstances, either sitting in Mrs. Trelawney's pew, or thrusting yourself upon her in her own house," cried Mr. Grainger excitedly.

"Will monsieur be good enough to mind his own business, and leave me to mine?" returned Madame Louise with a dark look. "When I ask

monsieur for his advice then he can give it; until I do, will he have the grace to keep it to himself?"

"These insolences cannot provoke me," said Mr. Grainger white with rage. "I am a man of the world, and used to impudent women among other things."

"Pardon, monsieur, you are used to nothing of the kind, unless it be your servant-wench who may laugh at your stupidity," returned Madame Louise with an insolent smile. "You are ridiculous with your pretensions of a man of the world; you, who are a common boor—a boor, monsieur, and *bête comme une oie*—a mere goose, a block, a nothing-at-all. Let me pass I say, and do you go mind your pigs, which is your only proper occupation."

"I will have you taken up as an impostor and a vagrant," said Mr. Grainger foaming.

"Bah! bah! old man, you radote, you drivel!" cried Madame Louise, giving him a sharp blow on his cheek with the back of her hand; and then she scudded rapidly down the road. Down the road

and to the Hollies, where she made up a lamentable tale to Mrs. Price of the impertinence of ce vieux monsieur, and why should he interfere in Madame Trelawney's affairs at all?—to Madame Louise, severe in feminine virtue and wifely devotion, it seemed inconveniént, to use no harsher word; but a harsher word might well be used by the uncharitable.

To which Mrs. Price made answer that Mr. Grainger had been always known to be rather too fond of Miss Escott, and that being a man of loose principles and worldly nature he had given way to feelings he ought to have shrunk from as so much satanic temptation. “But,” she added—this view of matters suddenly presenting itself—“Miss Escott might do worse under all the painful circumstances of her fearful folly and mistake, than make an honest woman of herself as Mrs. Patrick Grainger”—Madame Louise raising her eyes sweetly and exclaiming; “Could she be so depraved, madame? and he with so little delicatessen?”

Then she told Mrs. Price how Aura had offered her a bribe to leave the place, and say no more

about her claims; but how she had spurned it indignantly, resolute in remaining until M. Carthew should return; though indeed, (with meaning) she should not be surprised if, so long as she did remain, M. Carthew would find his affaires needing his presence abroad too imperative to allow of his return. And so she talked for an hour or so, till tea-time came and Mrs. Price invited her to remain; which Madame Louise did willingly, thereby making an economy of two meals not to speak of *la chandelle*, which she counted as a masterpiece of commissariat strategy in a strange place like Clive Vale.

When Mr. Grainger went into the drawing-room at Croft after his encounter with that little viper as he called Madame Louise in his heart, he found Aura in a state of intense nervous agitation. She was not weeping, and she was not fainting, but she was in that condition which would have turned to hysterics in a less controlled person, and that almost threatened convulsions with her. She did her best to hide her suffering from her visitor, but even he, dense

as he was in most matters of true perception, saw and understood it all.

“My dear Mrs. Trelawney!—my dear young friend!” he said kindly, taking a seat by her on the sofa and speaking in the old voice and manner of so many years ago now—all Aura’s real lifetime since!—“I have come up to-day to offer you any help, any expression of sympathy and respect that I can—publicly, privately, anyhow, Mrs. Trelawney—anyhow and whatever seems best to you.” He spoke with much emotion, and his small pale blue eyes were watery. “Now that your husband is away, and this little wretch here is playing the very deuce in the place, you may want a friend, and I should be gratified by being that friend; you may rest assured of that.”

“You are very kind, dear Mr. Grainger,” said Aura with quivering lips; “but I do not see what there is to do until Mr. Trelawney returns. The only thing is to remain perfectly quiet, and let her talk till she can be silenced.”

“But it is such a painful position for you!”

cried Mr. Grainger. "Gad! I am a man and a tough one, but it makes me—I don't know what to say—to think that the dear little girl I have known all my life, and seen grow up almost like a sister of my own, should come to such trouble, and just by the foolish credulity and gossip of the place. It is enough to make a man turn hermit, and never see his friends again."

"It is only for a time," said Aura; "a nine days' talk, and then the thing will fall to the ground. I have been too happy, Mr. Grainger, and perhaps needed this chastisement."

"Stuff and nonsense, Mrs. Trelawney; don't pray get to canting like Mrs. Price!" said the little man irritably; "you needed nothing of the kind, and it is very well if you have been so happy; I am sure no one expected it, with your husband's known temper."

"You do not know him, Mr. Grainger," said Aura earnestly, laying her hand in his and lifting her eyes, dark and moist with love and sorrow, full into his. "No one knows him here

—no one but myself; but indeed Mr. Grainger, he is the best and noblest man that ever lived. You have all done him infinite injustice, and you will see it some day.”

Her face, her voice, her eyes, her gesture, touched Mr. Grainger to the quick. He pressed her hand heartily, and saying, “I am glad of it, my dear,” made her feel the warmth he meant. Then he added—

“I am an honest old fellow, if a rough one as you know, Mrs. Trelawney, and I confess I have never particularly liked your husband; but, bless my soul! what’s a mere private feeling of like or dislike at a time like this? If the Vale is to be divided into two parties, as it seems more than probable it will be, I shall range myself on your side, if you will have me.”

“What will you do then with your friend, Mr. Dysart?” said Aura a little imprudently.

“Dysart? my dear soul! he has never been against your husband!—he has never said a word against him that one could take hold of—never one! It is evident there has been something

between them of an unpleasant nature years ago, and he has alluded to it, I own; but he has never given one the barest outline as to what it was; trust me, he has acted with perfect discretion, and with great honour."

Aura said no more; what could she say? It was a matter too full of danger for careless handling, and she was now as interested as Jasper in keeping still sacred the secret of his former life. Would it do to let it be known that, living or dead, the mother of the elder children was a convicted thief, and that they came of a gang of swindlers? She too felt with him that any false suspicion must be patiently borne, rather than this fatal truth be made public. So she was silent, only looking up with a wan, pale pleasantness more touching than tears, as she mutely thanked Mr. Grainger for his offer, and accepted the renewal of his friendship.

"Come, I am glad of that!" cried Patrick Grainger cordially; "and when you write to your husband, Mrs. Trelawney, give him my compliments, and say that if he will let bygones

be by-gones I will do so too, and that both I and Dysart will stick to him like wax, till this annoyance is put down. So don't fret, there's a good soul; you have friends you see yet, who will not let any harm come to you that they can prevent; and keep up a brave heart, and send for me if you want any one to help you, do you hear?"

Upon which, and after a few more vague but thoroughly honest proffers of the same nature, Mr. Grainger took his leave in a fever of pleasurable excitement, feeling all the glow of the knight-errant when putting lance in rest for the defence of injured beauty, and elated with the idea that somehow or other—mode not quite discernible as yet, but that was no matter—he was to be the defender, the champion, and the rehabilitator of Aura Trelawney, always his favourite and now his charge. And of all things to make a man happy there is nothing like the vagueness of an unperformed and shadowy act of heroism.

When he went home he wrote to Mr. Dysart a rather exaggerated statement of Madame de

Chantreau's delinquencies, and urged him to return as soon as he could, to "help in the unmasking of an impostor, and the defence of an angel." He directed his letter to the G. P. O., as Mr. Dysart had instructed him, should he wish to write during his absence, so that nothing was yet known at Legrand's of M. Désir's English connexions.

CHAPTER II.



MR. GRAINGER was not the only one in the place whose sympathies went with Aura ; though as yet he stood alone in their expression. It was a matter indeed from which the ladies hung back ; the single ones because it was “ so shocking,” and they did not like to be mixed up in anything so equivocal, and the married ones because of their daughters, and their sons, and their husbands, and their servants, and their status altogether ; unwilling to countenance either side because seeing evil passages in both ; even in Madame de Chantreau, who, the shrewder of them contended, must have been very queer herself to have been lost all this time—a lawfully married woman of ordinary life cannot be dropped like a hand-

kerchief in the street; and why had she not found out her husband before this? and why had she taken another name, and not kept to her own? These were grave questions to be answered, and satisfactorily too, before the Vale would adopt Mrs. Trelawney's rival; but they did not prevent the conclusion that Aura was even more reprehensible, and that she should have found out somehow all this painful story of the former wife, before ever she allowed herself to accept Mr. Trelawney's addresses. Thus, the impartiality of public opinion promised the luxury of two victims at once; which, be sure, was a luxury not despised.

But though the ladies would not as a rule take active sides, they did not object to definite talking; and as the Vale invested a large amount of its life in talk, they did talk to their hearts content. In the archery field, where many of them had assembled on the Tuesday after that scene at the church, there was a very Babel of high-pitched comment; but though Aura got no voices raised for her in the absolute, the little

Frenchwoman got many a turned-down thumb as well.

“A bold, horrid, impudent thing!” said Lotty Campbell, fitting her arrow to the string; “the idea of her going into Mrs. Trelawney’s pew like that! I know if I had been in Mrs. Trelawney’s place I would have turned her out.”

“And if I had been in Mrs. Trelawney’s place I would not have gone to church at all,” said Myssie; “I wonder at her venturing when she knows all that is said of her. She had much better have stayed at home.”

“Why did she not remain for the sacrament, I wonder?” said Lotty.

“Oh, fancy such a thing!” cried Zillah Price with a horrified look.

Zillah was a small, pale, ill-nourished looking young lady (past thirty now) with sandy hair, and yellowish hazel eyes very light, much freckled, and with the tip of her short blunt nose always red—which gave her an unhealthy and half-starved look somehow.

“ Mr. Bennet would not have administered it to her if she had stayed,” she added.

“ Did he say so ?” asked Myssie looking up in astonishment.

“ Yes,” said Zillah; “ I heard him tell mamma so on Saturday night when Madame de Chantreau was at our house.”

“ Lotty, come here — just fancy ! Mr. Bennet would not give Mrs. Trelawney the sacrament on Sunday !” cried Myssie in her loud voice.

“ My goodness !” said Lotty.

“ What is that ?” asked Kate joining the group.

“ Mr. Bennet refused to give Mrs. Trelawney the sacrament,” repeated Lotty.

“ What an abominable shame !” cried Kate.

“ What a hateful man that Mr. Bennet is !” exclaimed Ellen, who was too well supplied with beaux to be in any way dependent on the curate. “ He is without exception the most detestable man I have ever known !”

“ For shame Ellen !” said Zillah and Sara in a breath. “ Hateful ?—because he does his duty,

and acts conscientiously?" continued Zillah. "Is that the way you speak of a minister of the church?"

"Conscientiously!" said Miss Ellen with an unmistakeable sneer. "Mr. Bennet's conscience is only his temper nine times out of ten. He has always hated Mrs. Trelawney, and he was very glad of the excuse to insult her, poor thing. He daren't have done it if Mr. Trelawney had been at home. I hate such cowardice, that I do!"

"Well, Ellen, it is not very nice in you to take her part in this manner!" said Zillah. "There is no doubt that she has done very wrong, and though I do not like this other lady, this Madame de Chantreau as she calls herself—though I suppose we ought to call her Mrs. Carthew" (parenthetically) "as much as mamma does—still there is no doubt that Mrs. Trelawney has acted most improperly."

"How?" fired up Ellen, her indignation due to Zillah's reproach against her "niceness" rather than to any very strong partisanship for Aura. "What has she done? What could she

have done differently to what she has? Improperly, indeed! poor thing, she is only to be pitied instead of abused like this!”

“What has she done? What has she not done?” said Zillah. “Is it nothing going on living up there at Croft when she knows that she is not Mr. Trelawney’s real wife? Is that nothing Ellen? for shame!—how you talk!”

“I don’t believe this woman is Mr. Trelawney’s wife at all,” said Ellen, and that was a tremendously bold thing to say. “Who knows whether she is or not? We have only her word for it, and why should we believe her more than Mr. Trelawney, I should like to know?”

“I will not talk to you on the subject at all,” said Miss Zillah pettishly, turning away her head; “it is not a nice thing for young girls to discuss.”

And she went away to the farther end of the line.

“Do you know mamma always calls Aura Trelawney, Miss Escott now?” whispered Sara to Lotty; “is it not shocking?”

“What a shame!” returned Lotty.

“But mind you don’t tell,” said Sara glancing round; “perhaps she would be vexed with me if she knew that I had told any one. And yet she would very likely call her so before you if she spoke of her at all.”

“No, I shan’t tell,” said Lotty; and in less than five minutes Myssie and Kate and Ellen and the Rowley girls all knew, and were all “horribly indignant.”

It was one of those days when everybody is abroad—a fine, bright, enticing day, much as Sunday had been; and the Vale being a walking community and taking pleasure in fine weather, the archery field soon became quite animated with chance visitors dropping in. And though it wanted its crown and jewel and sceptre ornament to many in wanting Mr. Dysart, still it was very pleasant and very bright, and the young ladies were happy and amused; and perhaps in slightly less danger than when the handsome swindler was teaching them how to hold their bows, and how to accept love-making at the same time.

The first who came of those who had no business there was Harry Grant. He had never been in the field before, having as we know turned his back on all the amusements inaugurated by Mr. Dysart. The toy regatta he pronounced babyish, in which he was not far wrong; the archery costume was ugly, which it was not, and the amusement itself ridiculous, which it was not either; but to-day he forgot all his objections somehow, and came into the field with his handsome face as radiant as it used to be in olden times whenever he went into society, or saw the Miss Campbells.

His entrance made a pleasant sensation among the young ladies. Though known to be peculiarly "the Miss Campbells' pet," he was not disliked by any of them; and really in the dearth of pleasant companions with which the Vale was at present afflicted, handsome Harry was not such a bad *pis aller*, all things considered: provided only he stopped at flirting and did not propound matrimony, thought the young ladies with whom he had no intention of either flirting or wedding.

He had eyes only for one ; and though he spoke to every other lady first, even to Fanny Rowley for whom he had the very reverse of regard, Ellen was the one to whom he finally devoted himself as a matter of course. Which gave occasion for sundry nudges and sotto voce remarks, also as of course ; Ellen philosophically indifferent to everything they might say, no person of whom she was afraid being as yet among them, and she not unwilling to “ show off ” to Zillah in this truly girlish manner of retaliation for her offences.

Harry wanted to speak to her too. He had not been able to get a moment alone with her since the day of his final capture, and he was uneasy at the secrecy, and wanted to hazard his fate with Mr. Campbell, even if it should bring him a positive denial, at least for the present and until he could offer a sufficing home to Ellen ; purging his dishonour at the expense of his peace. So he said to the dark-haired, bright-eyed girl, standing a little apart under the pretence of doing something to her bow which did not want doing at all ; but Ellen, in a terror raised her eyes piteously to his, and cried—

“Dear Harry! do not tell papa! I would not have him, or Myssie, or Lotty know for the whole world!”

“But why not, Ellen?” urged Harry. “They must know some day; why not tell at once before the concealment becomes dishonourable?”

“Papa would be so angry!” said Ellen. “He would forbid you the house, and then we should never see you at all; for if he thought that I really cared for you, he would not let us go out to any parties where there was a chance of meeting you. He is so strict, you know, about long engagements; and he would never allow it to go on—I know he would not.”

“But it is not right,” Harry said uncomfortably.

“Well, if you do, papa will not allow it,” said Ellen a little despairingly; “and if you do, I shall think you want to break it off with me,” she added, lifting up her eyes again into his; with a different look this time.

“Ellen!” cried Harry, and in his agitation he snapped the bowstring, though he did not in the least understand how.

“There, see what you have done, you naughty boy!” she said, not sorry for the diversion, having now an additional “pull” upon him by reason of his damaging her property, and too good a general in her own line to forego the advantage; “now, what am I to do, you clumsy, careless creature?”

Then, in the midst of poor Harry’s agitation and regret and trouble and confusion, she gently slid her hand into his and whispered—

“Promise me that you will not say a word to papa till I give you leave!—do promise me this, Harry, else I shall be so miserable!”

“Very well,” said Harry, too much confused to know exactly what he did say; “if it is your wish, Ellen, I will not.”

On which the naughty, but very charming young coquette brightened up like silver in the sunshine, and skipped back to her place in the ranks quite content.

A little bit of private romance was a precious inheritance in Clive Vale; and forbye Ellen’s love for Harry—and she did really love him—she

was not sorry to have a pleasant little love secret of her own, just to see what it was like, and to know something of what girls in songs and novels feel.

While they were all standing about the targets—the Miss Campbells would call them butts, that having a fine military flavour about it—Dr. Hale riding past on his way home from some of his far-off patients, thought they looked very jolly and stunning, grouped there in the delightful sunshine; so he tied up his horse to the hedge and came swaggering forward, bending out his knees, smacking his whip, and hooking his left thumb into his waistcoat. But no one blushed or lifted up a pair of bright eyes made all the brighter for his coming, or had a sudden palpitation of the heart, or a sudden seizure of the breath, or trembled, or was confused, or indeed was anything but slightly disgusted. And though nature, happily for himself, had gifted him with a moral skin as thick as an elephant's, in virtue of which he never flagged in his efforts to “make himself agreeable to the ladies,” however ill-rewarded by

success, yet even he was aware that a difference was made between him and the other gentlemen, and that none of the young ladies were as "affable" to him as to Harry for instance, or "the nobs" as he called them—meaning Mr. Grainger, the curate, the major, and the swindler. He never could understand Kate Campbell's refusal, never; it was one of those inexplicable problems of an unkind fate which certain men are never able to solve.

What does it matter? Heaven tempers the wind to the shorn lamb; and the dense nature of self-complacent vulgarity which women loathe, and with which they will not consort if anything better remains for them, is just that which sees no slights and understands no hints. Poor Dr. Hale! he was a good-hearted man, and certainly clever in his profession, but he was as Bœotia to Attica in the well-mannered Vale; and his thumbs and his h's obscured a host of useful virtues. As is the way all the world over where the artificial life is accounted superior to the natural.

After he had displayed himself among the young ladies for a short time, looking at their bows and arrows and making familiar little speeches about them, half complimentary and half facetious, and always with a double meaning involved—which was just the kind of thing they hated, as girls always do—in came a group of three of rather more consequence in the Vale, and of more interest too, as things stood: namely, Mrs. Price, Madame de Chantreau, and Mr. Bennet. They had met in that strange way in which thoughts and wishes sometimes translate themselves into chance deeds—each thinking of the other; or rather, Mrs. Price and Mr. Bennet had been thinking of the little Frenchwoman, and she of them; and be sure she made the best of the meeting, anxious as she was to have the public with her.

She had quite different plans to those of her brother; plans which, if well carried out, would enrich herself not him; for of the five hundred a year to be paid to him that she might be kept buried, she knew that but a fraction would come

to her as time went on, and Gregory's vision of a family life was fulfilled. Wherefore she plotted for herself on independent grounds; and it did not ruffle her to know that her plots cut against his, and that in feathering her own nest with eider down and peacocks' tails, she left his bare of all but sticks and a rope. Greek against Greek, what of honour, consideration, or fidelity could be expected on either side? and what wonder if pussy having to singe her paws whether or no, preferred to pick out a few fine fat chestnuts for her own eating, leaving the master monkey's to burn to ashes? We all do much the same kind of thing for ourselves sometime or other in life, only not on so extensive a scale, or to such devastation of our neighbour's chestnut trees as in the matters now under manipulation by Gregory Field and his sister the Parisian voleuse, dite Trébuchet.

As the trio came up the field, the little lady flanked on one side by the tall, gaunt figure of the widow Price, and on the other by Mr. Bennet, dark, lowering, and bilious, and looking as unlike her companions as Dubarry among the Puritans, Dr.

Hale turning to Harry, said in a loud whisper :—
“ By George, Grant, the image of Dysart!—his sister I'd lay a wager. We M.D.s understand these things you know, and I'll bet you what you like those two are brother and sister as much as Miss Kate and Miss Ellen are sisters! Depend upon it, there is some confounded understanding between them that we have not come to the meaning of yet, and never shall perhaps ! ”

“ You are quite wrong, Dr. Hale,” said, stiffly, Miss Zillah who had overheard him ; “ Madame de Chantreau does not even know Mr. Dysart's name she says.”

Dr. Hale gave a smart whistle, and looked at Harry.

“ Ah ! so she tells you, Miss Price,” he said ; “ and it is all very well for you to believe her. One does not want young ladies to be as sharp as needles, but to a medical man things are different, and you must excuse me if I keep to my opinion, though I am always sorry to differ from the ladies.”

“ I don't suppose it makes much difference ! ” said Zillah scornfully.

And then she went up to her sister Sara, and exhaled her displeasure in abusing the young doctor, and in "wishing mamma would not take such a very prominent part in this dreadful affair, and always be seen with Madame de Chantreau everywhere; and as for Mr. Bennet he was getting perfectly bewitched, and it was quite wrong and indelicate, that it was," with much vehemence of offended modesty; that being in fact the central point of her indignation.

Meanwhile the three slowly made their way to the "fair Toxophilites"—Madame in a pretty little tremor of shyness and humility combined with her own peculiar grace and winning simplicity of manner; asserting only her spotless innocence, her cruel desertion by her husband, Jasper Trelawney, and her ineffable sainthood under her heavy trials. She felt that she was being "shown," so she put on her most angelic self, and went forward, meekly asking for recognition and respect.

"Allow me to introduce Miss Campbell to you, Madame de Chantreau," said Mrs. Price, in a loud

voice. “Miss Lotty Campbell—Miss Kate—Miss Ellen—the Miss Rowleys.”

The Miss Campbells bowed coldly, being resolved to “keep out of it altogether;” and Myssie said in an undertone to Harry, “Ugh, boy!—she is just like a cat!” And Madame Louise heard her; and immediately addressing her, expressed in her strongest French accent, and with more French words than English, the delight she felt in being introduced to the ladies of Clive Vale where all she loved had lived so long—sighing; and how she envied the calm, happy, affectionate lives they led here—so different to the poor creatures who had no home, no children, no one to love or to be loved by! All said in the tenderest and most tinkling little voice imaginable, and with such sweet eyes so gently raised!

But Myssie, whose straightforward nature scented humbug as a pointer scents game, by instinct as well as knowledge, answered her curtly, and turned her back upon her—as Myssie Campbell could turn her back—making herself all back, and her back one huge broad snub. Myssie’s manner of turning

her back on any one was very nearly a proverb in the Vale, and was understood as well as a trumpet call in barracks; in this instance obeyed by the whole female regiment of Toxophilites. For her sisters shrunk away in a group together with Harry Grant in their midst; and the Rowley girls even took up with Dr. Hale as a temporary body-guard; and soon madame and her godfather and godmother were standing in a little desert of their own; so that on the whole this beautifully-dressed, and perfectly-mannered lady's *début* among the second section of the Valeites was distinctly unfavourable.

Dr. Hale, looking something between a horse-jockey and a horse-doctor as Gregory used to say of him, watching her narrowly from the double vantage ground of his profession and the experience of his student life, unhesitatingly pronounced her, "no better than she should be," also "a fishy party," and "a flam," and declared himself ready to take oath by John Hunter, that she was Dysart's sister; Harry, quite as strongly but more instinctively and with less knowledge, whispered to Ellen,

that "she was a little wretch, he was sure of it, and he hoped they would keep out of it still." The Miss Campbells all distrusted her, and said her eyes were "queer;" and Myssie, hitting on the truth yet speaking as if it was a libel, "was sure she painted or did something odd with herself;" the Miss Rowleys left the field; and even Zillah and Sara Price, though supported by mamma and their minister, would rather mamma had kept outside the gate, and wished she would not drag this person into society in this manner, whether people liked it or not.

Madame Louise had not a pair of beautiful and vivacious brown eyes for nothing, and had not studied life on the Boulevards also for nothing, What each thought was his or her own private shorthand was all like print to her—a whole unbroken history, where she did not stumble once. Dr. Hale's extraordinary smile, and (if any one had known Paris) most compromising questions of localities and habits; Myssie's blunt replies and un-failing contradiction to all she timidly put forth in that charming patois of hers; Lotty's impertinent

giggles; Kate's quiet reserve and Ellen's flushed silence; the sweeping departure of the Rowleys—taking individual leave of no one; Zillah's cross face and Sara's tight lips, and the unusual paleness of both, with the tips of their short noses so very crimson, and their eyes so very hard; Harry's eloquent shoulders; all being perfectly plain to her in their intention and spirit, from first to last. Wherefore, mindful of that sage policy which declines to press the unwilling, she gradually edged herself away from the rest, and again absorbed her godmother and the curate.

Madame de Chantreau had one subject which was always safe—the children; the husband she wisely left alone. For though Mrs. Price was a woman who theoretically upheld the most appalling amount of Griseldadom as the only right line of life in a wife (practically poor old Mr. Price, now at rest in his grave, could have told a different story; but then the women who uphold this theory are invariably women with tremendous wills, and who rule their households with rods not of roses); yet in the case of

this profligate Mr. Trelawney, even she exonerated madame from the obligation of any special duty to him, and would have been horror-struck had she hinted at a lingering love surviving his ill-treatment. And Madame Louise seeing this, put the husband question into a case and kept it there, but paraded the children fearlessly. They were a grievance from which capital might always be made; and Madame Louise understood the art of making capital.

“If only I might see my children sometimes!” she said suddenly. She had that way of speaking suddenly on a subject, *à propos* of nothing said, as if she had been thinking of it all these silent hours. “Of course I know that their father has the legal rights to them, but it is afflicting to see them given to another woman, not their mother.”

“It is shameful and sinful!” said Mrs. Price with energy.

“Most unmanly, to say the least of it,” said Mr. Bennet; “most unchristian!”

“You would be justified in claiming them,”

said Mrs. Price; "and under all the circumstances I believe the law would give them to you."

"You think so?" said the lady looking up with a tender glance.

"I am sure so. What do you say, Mr. Bennet?"

"Unquestionably!" returned that gentleman. "Our laws are not very Christian, but I think there could be no hesitation in this matter; between a mistress and a mother surely no judge would need to doubt."

"I am glad you think so," said Madame Louise sweetly. "It is my prayer, morning and evening, that my dearest little girls may be restored to me, and that I may have the inexpressible joy to direct their religion, and to save them from the insouciance on this, that I hear reigns in their house."

"Mr. Trelawney is an atheist," said Mr. Bennet severely; "and this unhappy young woman is nearly as bad."

"Quite," said Mrs. Price; "and that, too, would weigh with the Chancellor."

“ So I remember,” answered Madame Louise. “ There was a famous poet of yours, was there not? who was denied his children—being an atheist? ”

“ Shelley,” said Mr. Bennet; and it was as if he had said Satan; “ but Shelley was not worse than those most sinful people at Croft.”

“ My poor children! my poor little girls!” said Madame Louise, and put her handkerchief to her eyes; “ I have seen so much of infidelity and papistry!” she then said; “ forgive me if the prospect so desolates me.”

But her companions told her that her tears did her honour, and that if ever the time came when they could, they would help her to recover her children.

CHAPTER III.



THE result of Mr. Grainger's letter to Mr. Dysart was a reply written in the curious mixture of familiarity, floridness, and politeness, in which that gentleman delighted, and which passed for "foreign" with those of his English correspondents who knew no better.

He expressed his deep concern at the strange news conveyed by his friend's epistle—news for which he could not account by anything known to him of Mr. Trelawney's past. He certainly had always understood that the young wife was lost soon after the birth of the last child, and he had never seen any reason to doubt the soundness of his belief. He would be charmed to be of the slightest use or assistance to this beautiful Mrs. Trelawney during her husband's absence;

for he did not think his friend Grainger would misunderstand him when he confessed to an immense admiration for that lady, and to profound and earnest sympathy. Then he branched off into inquiries of all his friends, "fair and strong," saying that, fortunately for himself—he who so delighted in little benevolences—he was on the eve of departure from London when his friend Grainger's letter came; and that after the winding up of a few affairs which needed his personal attention, he would present himself at Clive Vale, prepared to enter into any scheme for the restoration of peace and security to this lovely lady of Croft. After this he gave a flourishing description of the theatres, operas, balls, and concerts, at which he had assisted, regretting that his friend had not been with him; and then he bade him adieu, and signed himself his, very faithfully, Gregory Dysart.

By the same post came a letter to "Madame de Chantreau, at Mrs. Makemson's," addressed in a broad, sprawling, black-bodied, loose-legged hand, very different to Mr. Dysart's neat and

dapper caligraphy—a letter containing a short summary of about the choicest abuse which even Madame Louise had ever received; and she knew pretty well what hard words were both in French and English.

The letter told her that he, the writer (name not given) would be down at the Vale on such a day next week, when she was to meet him at nine o'clock by the great oak-tree in the lane leading from the High Cross Bridge, when the least she could do would be to tremble at the wrath her vanity, her stupidity, her obstinacy, had aroused. No longer “*chère petite chatte*,” “*ma jolie petite sœur*,” “*pauvre chérie*,” or any other of brother Gregory's affectionate cajoleries, she was now beyond all question the vilest of her sex since Eve's time, and apportioned as the mate to a whole menagerie of unpleasant beasts, the “*correspondencies*” of which were almost every vice, male or female, known to a fallen humanity.

The modest, well-conducted Valeites, whose worst objurgations were as milk and water is to brandy compared with the torrid eloquence of

this letter, would have been absolutely terrified if they could have read what their fine gentleman from Paris indited as fit pabulum for his little sister's intelligence. She, not unaccustomed to such lava floods, contemptuously tossed the letter into the fire-place, having first torn it into a thousand scraps after taking down the "appointment" in her tablets, much in the same spirit in which she would have taken down a partner's name for a dance.

"Stupid fool!" she said frowning; "he thought to make a mere catspaw of me, sending me to this horrid hole, just to play his game indeed, and win his stakes! And now because I have dared to act for myself, even with the absurd little bit of independence I have shown, he flies out like this at me, and thinks to frighten me with his Billingsgate! Bah! as if I had not learnt to the last letter that 'hard words break no bones;' and 'fine ones butter no parsnips,' Mr. Gregory—and that I've learnt too."

With which she seated herself tranquilly by the window again, and watched poor pale and lan-

guid Hannah creeping dejectedly about the room and garden, while waiting Mr. Bennet's promised pastoral visit to show her and aunt Dess the grievousness of their sins and the certainty of their condemnation—love, hope, and mercy being left shivering in the cold outside.

But no Mr. Bennet visited the invalid to-day: for as he was coming up the street, and when in full view of both houses, he thought he would just go in for a moment to “see how that interesting and delightful Madame de Chantreau was getting on.” And so he did; and the interesting and delightful little woman so bewitched him—what with her eyes and what with her manners, her horror of popery and mariolatry and the telling of beads, her fascinating way of consigning all the Catholics to perdition, her genuine love for her native country, her noble-spirited and pure-hearted hatred of France, and her many other characteristics and sentiments congenial to Mr. Bennet—that he stayed so late he was half ashamed to be seen leaving the house, not to speak of venturing on another visit that evening.

It is but fair to state that Mr. Bennet was perfectly ignorant of the state of his own feelings, at which he would have been as much shocked as any one could he have been suddenly enlightened; so that he was not likely to learn yet awhile, by the salutary lesson of his own failing, a shade more charity to others; nor, because he was falling madly in love with a little scamp, in loving whom he broke at least two out of the ten commandments and violated whole pages of holy precept besides, would he be more disposed to generous judgment on those whose feelings or whose passions were stronger than their reason. Had he known for instance, that Hannah's failing health was due in any part to an unhappy love for Gregory Dysart, he would have consigned her at once to everlasting destruction; and would have honestly believed her lost without redemption. He was one of those men with whom the mote is ever in their own eye and the beam in their brother's—good heavy beams too, weighing the poor sinful head down to the very gates of hell, but mere tiny specks in themselves, letting their

own float safely up to heaven. It was not that he would have judged his sin by a different standard to that of others if he could have been made to see it; but he could not be made to see it, and was therefore not self-condemned.

It was like the return of summer in its earliest splendour to the hearts of some, when Mr. Dysart dashed through the village in his little basket phaeton on the way from the station to Lea Cottage. The Miss Campbells, whom he met as they were taking one of their vigorous walks for the good of their complexions, broke into radiant smiles, flinging airy salutations to him gleefully; though Ellen blushed with more trouble than delight, and pinched Kate's arm as she bowed with infinitely less enthusiasm than the rest. The Misses Price too, trudging on their rounds, brisked up like drooping cage-birds when the sun comes out, as they turned at the sound of wheels, and "My goodness! there's Mr. Dysart!" burst from Sara in a very torrent of delight. For in truth the Misses Price were rather lonesome in their later days, their pastor having lost eyes for

any one but Madame de Chantreau, or “Mrs. Carthew, rather,” as he invariably added—and Major Morgan, just now suffering from his liver and more than usually ill-tempered in consequence, withdrawing himself a little grimly both from them and the fascinating Frenchwoman, and all the other amenities of life and society indiscriminately. Major Morgan had these attacks sometimes, and horribly disagreeable he was under them. So that when the two poor elderly lambs saw Mr. Dysart reappear, they were considerably brightened up, and as it were renewed in strength; feeling now that they could meet their deserter on equal terms, and balance seductions and infidelities.

As for Hannah, weakened by illness as she was, the sudden joy of that unexpected return was more than she could bear. When she saw the dark face turned with its old glittering smile and radiant flattery upon her, life grew too large and love too strong for her. Her sad wan face lightened into something like moonlight splendour, as she smiled and waved her hand with the full grace of her youth and love, because startled out of the awkward

consciousness that beset her; but when the carriage had passed, and her aunt called to her from the little parlour to tell her what she had seen, the girl was lying senseless on the floor, with a few faint streaks of blood about her lips.

Precisely at the time indicated, the brother and sister stood under the shadow of the old oak-tree in the lane leading off from the High Cross Bridge, the bridge forming the apex of a triangle, of which Mrs. Makemson's and Lea Cottage were the two angles of the base. It was a dark night; that is, moonless and cloudy; but quite light enough for secure walking and certain recognition even of those not so thoroughly well known to each other as Louise and her brother. As yet however, they had met no one, the Vale not being given to nocturnal prowlings especially in by-lanes leading nowhere; which they accounted no small mercy, not wishing to be seen together, and not caring to be met alone wandering about the lanes at what the Vale would consider most improper hours, and with a more than suspicious appearance.

As they stood in the shadow under the oak it would have been hard for any one to have recognised them, and harder still to have made out their conversation. They spoke low and rapidly and in French; but by their voices it was easy to know that the one was violently angry, and that the other, half cajoling, half remonstrating, was endeavouring to soothe and justify.

“C'est perdu! c'est perdu!” Gregory kept exclaiming; “the game is lost, and with it my last chance of safety in life; home, income, safety, marriage, all gone because of your cursed vanity and absurd inconsequence! What possible good did you propose to yourself by raising the whole neighbourhood as you have done? where was the gain? and what could have been your object? I have sought in vain to penetrate your design, and I swear I can see nothing but the merest wilfulness and folly! It could scarcely have been to entrap any of the men about, for that would cut against yourself; and there is not one I should have thought would have pleased you for even half-an-hour's badinage; besides, how would that

have fitted in with your other pretensions? I am willing to argue the matter calmly you see, and to take things from your point of view if possible; but the failure of the best chance a man ever had, through the cursed folly of a vain fool, is enough to send one mad outright."

And then Mr. Dysart, losing his philosophy, indulged himself in a rolling battery of oaths and imprecations which only so hardened an old earth-work as Madame Louise could have accepted tranquilly. She did however; repeating to herself the word of a "romance" she had learned just before leaving Paris, that she might not be roused into retaliation.

No good came of the interview. Louise was utterly impracticable and unmoved. She was very sorry, she said, to have offended son cher frère, but she was quite unaware how. People had thrust themselves upon her, and under all the circumstances it seemed to her best not to appear diffident of herself, or afraid of encountering the world. The Prices, who were as her brother knew of the parti prêtre in the place, and powerful

as the leaders of this party always are, had espoused her cause warmly without her seeking them; and Mr. Bennet had done so too; which gave her at once a standing of respectability, "a kind of weight in the minds of all."

"Yes! in the minds of all," interrupted Gregory; "just what I wished to avoid—this 'minds of all.' What did you want with respectability or social weight or any of this nonsense? What you wanted was to frighten Jasper, and only him; the secret once blown becomes useless, and is no longer worth buying. I should not have thought it had been necessary to demonstrate so self-evident a fact to you twice, Louise; one of the subtlest intriguantes and plotters of her generation, I should have imagined you could have understood a simple lesson like this, and have carried it through to the end without failure."

It was too dark for Gregory to see the full value of his sister's face while he said this. The contempt, the bitterness, the hatred, the scornful self-satisfaction that came upon it, would have rather staggered him as to the justice of his sweeping

condemnation if he had seen it all. As it was, when she spoke she made him pause and think; was she then really cleverer than he? and had her seeming vanity and inconsequence a deeper meaning and more practical bearing than his own clumsier scheme?

“And if one so clever as you say I am, my brother,” said Louise in her sweetest tones, “has a little deviated from the strict march of the programme laid down for her, is it likely to be simply from vanity as you say, or that she has had even a brighter inspiration than yourself? Suppose I have thought it well not to put all my eggs into one basket, what then? is it true that my basket has holes in it, and that I shall drop all my eggs? hein?”

“What the deuce do you mean, Louise?” exclaimed her brother irritably.

“What I say,” Louise answered; “I have not put all my eggs into one basket as you have.”

But when pressed farther she refused to explain herself, and at last took to humming “Le Sire de Framboisy” as a safeguard.

“Of course I must disavow you here,” then said Gregory. “That old fool Grainger——”

“Yes, what a nigaud he is; and a rude one too,” chimed in Madame Louise.

“—— Wrote to me to tell me all the hubbub you had been making. He wants *me* to see you,” with a conceited emphasis; “as he thinks I know everything under the sun.”

“The old fool!” again interrupted Madame Louise.

“I don’t see his folly in that!” said Gregory rather pettishly.

“Don’t you, *mon frère*? I do,” answered Louise very amiably—in a tone of cast-iron amiability indeed, which nothing could have deflected.

“We must contrive not to meet together in public here while you remain; which will not be long,” continued Mr. Dysart. “I am afraid of the likeness, even with Grainger who has no more eyes than a buzzard: still the family air goes for something, and when we are together it betrays.”

“Yes,” said Madame Louise tranquilly, “we must not meet; but I have no doubt the likeness has been already remarked and commented on. However, I have always denied you steadily.”

“You must leave the place at once, Louise; and let me manage the rest.”

She glanced up at him sharply.

“Very well,” she said submissively. “Give me money and I am gone. Life is not too gay here that I should wish to settle myself.”

“Can you go to-morrow morning? The sooner the better.”

She thought.

“Not quite so early, mon frère; the morning after, if you will.”

And Gregory would rather she had remonstrated or shown active fight than have yielded with such marvellous facility. He distrusted her submission at most times, and was generally conscious of a reason behind of which he knew nothing, but until now he had never found it of more moment than some womanly vanity which neither helped nor hindered his plans. To-night

however, it was different, and he distrusted her entirely, and was sure she had made up something of her own which might perhaps destroy every calculation he had formed. But he knew her too well to hope that she would confide in him if she had her own ideas; so, after a little unnecessary objurgation, he said abruptly—

“I am wasting my time in talking to you; let us go.”

“You are wasting your time in trying to persuade me against my better reason, my brother,” said Madame Louise gently; and they both with one accord left the shadow of the oak-tree, and came out into the road—at the very moment when Harry Grant, walking through the meadow on his way from High Cross, where he had been to take instructions for his will from old Graves, the butcher’s father, leapt lightly over the fence by the old oak; and leapt to within a foot of the conspirators.

Both started, and Louise checked a little cry just in time. And Harry himself was startled when he saw against whom he had stumbled;

thinking the voices he had heard muttering behind the hedge belonged to some Vale Corydon and Phyllis, and not much caring whether he interrupted their tête-à-tête or not.

Mr. Dysart was the first to recover his self-possession, and as Harry passed he cried out—

“Good evening, Mr. Grant!” in the tone of a man caught in no mistake, so why be ashamed?

Harry made no reply (Harry was a “rude bumpkin,” as Gregory called him) but walked rapidly on, and was soon lost to sight. But as he went he pondered greatly, and never came to the end of, “Why were those two hiding under the hedge there?” and, “What were they talking about?”

Soon after this little contretemps brother and sister separated and went back to their respective homes; and madame made Mrs. Makemson believe, without telling her in direct terms, that she had been kept to tea by *cette bonne Madame Price*; which served as the explanation of why she came home so late, and alone.

Now the secret which Madame Louise kept to

herself was, that she had bribed and bought the gatewoman at Croft, and had made her believe that she was the children's mother without ever having actually committed herself to the statement.

The next day Mr. Grainger and Mr. Dysart laid themselves in wait in all imaginable places to catch this Madame de Chantreau, if she might pass. They went on the Lea Woods road, and on the High Cross road; up the village, and down the village; past the house as often as if they had been pedestrians walking their hundred miles in a hundred half hours; and they haunted the lodge gates of Croft till Mr. Grainger was ashamed to be seen, he said. But it was all to no purpose; Madame de Chantreau was invisible, and they laid themselves out for her in vain.

Mr. Dysart refused to call at her house; being he said, too marked in its insolence and inconvenience; and having no absolute knowledge that she was an impostor (though, like his friend Grainger, he had a very strong belief on that head) he did not like to do what could be accepted in

only one light, and to stamp her unseen, unheard, undefended, as a "wicked woman." So they paraded the village and the roads adjoining instead; and when six o'clock came and still no Madame de Chantreau, nor any likelihood of her showing herself to-night at all, they both went home to Lea Cottage to dine.

And Mr. Dysart gave his friend some fine old crusted port, and some curiously good Madeira with a yellow seal; both of which he appreciated thoroughly, and to the very verge of that state which doubles down the sharp edge of enjoyment. The wine unloosed his tongue even more than usual, and Mr. Dysart was not long in coming to the end of all that his friend Grainger thought of the latest Clive Vale phenomenon. He said a great many odd things of this little Frenchwoman, certainly; many scurrilous, many satirical, more coarsely abusive, all insolent; till Mr. Dysart, careless brother as he was, and tainted in his own nature, had to put a certain force upon himself not to take friend Grainger by the scruff of his neck and pitch him ignominiously out of the

window. As it was he only laughed; in rather a false key with respect to human harmony; and told him he was too bad, and too clever, and far too wickedly keen-sighted, and knew too much of the world for him, and all the rest of the flatteries which went right down into Mr. Grainger's heart, and softened his backbone until it was just so much wax or putty to be manipulated by those clever Parisian fingers at leisure.

Then he diverted the conversation to his own side, and plied him with no end of anecdotes and scandalous chronicles of public people picked up during his late sojourn in London; and he invented so uncommonly well that Mr. Grainger never saw daylight through the smallest crack among them all, but took them for gospel, and swallowed them whole without sifting.

After this the time came for Mr. Patrick to depart; and, as he was standing in the hall, —perhaps a little less than firm upon his legs, —it was agreed that they should make another pilgrimage to-morrow again, with Madame de Chantreau for the shrine; for above all things

Mr. Grainger wished that his friend Gregory should confront her, and see whether she was the real Mrs. Trelawney, or Carthew, or whatever the man's name be—or not.

To all of which Mr. Dysart smilingly and zealously assented, adding his own belief that she was most probably an impostor turned up just to try it on, having heard somewhere that there was a mystery in the Vale (and a mystery is as good as a ghost to some people) and thinking she might make a good thing of it during the master's absence if Mrs. Trelawney was a woman to be bullied and frightened into giving money.

Then said Mr. Grainger with a waggish air—and it took all the port wine and madeira of the last three hours, with the farther exaltation of the fresh air to make him say this—“Do you know, Dysart, she is deucedly like you? I can't tell where or how,” giggling vaguely; “but she is.”

“*Bien obligé*,” returned Mr. Dysart with the forced false laugh he had had so often this evening; “after all you have said of her it is a doubtful compliment.”

“But her character don’t affect her skin, or make her hair or eyes one thing or another?” said Mr. Grainger; “and ’pon my soul now she ain’t so far unlike, ’pon my soul she ain’t.”

“Go home, go home, you fool!” laughed Mr. Dysart, taking him by the shoulders with more assumed than real playfulness, and turning him out of the door. “You have corrupted my innocence long enough; go home before I am utterly undone.”

And Patrick Grainger, who was just in that state when a man is supremely good-tempered or absurdly quarrelsome, took offence at the action, and walked home in dudgeon.

CHAPTER IV.



THE great bell rang at Croft for the half-past eight o'clock breakfast, when Aura and the elder two children breakfasted together. It was a large bell hung in a small peaked belfry of its own on the top of the house, and could be heard for miles round. Indeed people set their time by the Croft bell; punctuality being a house virtue there. This morning it rang twice, Aura standing in the morning-room waiting for the two girls.

As they did not come to the summons, she called the footman passing through the hall, and asked for them; but no one had seen them this morning he said, since they went out into the garden about seven o'clock. They had got up

early to-day—they were in the habit of “getting up over night,” Jasper used to call it, in the summer-time, and going out into the grounds for an hour or so before breakfast; for they were brought up independently and not denied any wholesome amount of liberty—and this morning they had risen at six and scampered into the garden as usual, since when no one had seen them.

“Ring the breakfast-bell again,” said Aura; “perhaps they are playing in the copse, and did not hear it.”

And the great full tones pealed out again vigorously. But still no children appeared.

Oppressed with a vague alarm, Aura went into the garden as she was, in her light muslin morning gown and slippers, hoping to find them hiding in the shrubbery, or playing some foolish, childish pranks which would be both reason and excuse for their delinquency; but they were nowhere to be seen. And yet they were under strict orders never to go outside the garden bounds alone, and the orders had been made still more

stringent since Madame de Chantreau had appeared in the Vale.

Vainly searching, vainly calling, Aura soon walked down to the lodge-gates, where she asked Mrs. Jackson the keeper, if she had seen the young ladies that morning? She tried to speak calmly and as if not disturbed, but her face was white and stiff with terror, and her eyes, large and dilated, looked black not grey.

“Yes, ma’am,” said the woman curtseying; “they came down to the gate about an hour and a half ago, and went out; and have not been back, that I have seen.”

“Were they alone?” asked Aura.

“Yes, ma’am; both together.”

“And you saw no one waiting about at all?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Were they dressed for a walk, or only for the garden?”

“I didn’t take no particular notice, ma’am,” said Mrs. Jackson; and then she began to cry.

She was frightened; for her treachery had borne fruits she did not wish to see. If she had

passed letters to and fro between the young ladies and their own mother, she did not wish that they should be stolen away from home and taken Heaven knows where ! For after all, no one was quite sure about this mother ; and Mr. Trelawney was their father. So thought Mrs. Jackson, sobbing in self-accusation behind her apron.

Aura, still standing by the gate in that kind of wilful hope against hope to see the lost reappear, sent up one of the woman's children for the men-servants at the house ; and soon they were all dispersed—one to the village to ask at Mrs. Makemson's where was the foreign lady, and was she safely housed there still?—and another to the railway station to inquire if the children had been seen there ; and a third, mounted, to certain favourite haunts and walks, in the faint belief that perhaps they had permitted themselves an extraordinary act of liberty, and had gone for a walk on their own account into the country. Nothing was to be done now till the men came back ; so Aura wandered up to the house again, keeping down her terror and anguish as bravely

as she could, but knowing the worst, as we do sometimes know the truth by inspiration—not by sight.

How empty the house looked as she went in!—how strangely silent and deserted, and yet so full of horror!—as if some ghastly murder had been committed, where the life had gone out but that frightful Thing remained. Not even in the nursery, where she went as a kind of refuge and for the warmth and life of the little ones, could she shake off that terrible feeling of cold and deathliness which the house gave her—that feeling of some ghastly secret lying hidden somewhere, making her shiver to be alone. The women too, crept about with such awe-struck faces, and the unusual absence of all the men added so much to the desolateness and loneliness, that Aura felt as if they might all be murdered in the broad morning sunshine, for what of help or protection there was for them.

Of course this was simple nervousness and imagination, and must not be encouraged, else it would run into absolute folly; and, knowing that

her terror would repeat itself in the family under all sorts of exaggerations if too plainly shown—knowing too that her blanched face and hollow eyes were revelations enough, and more than she would have made if she could have controlled her heart as she could her actions—she gathered her forces together again, and went back into the lonely room, waiting for what she knew would not come.

While waiting there, trying to make herself believe that she was reading, but ears and eyes and all her senses strained to catch the faintest sound or shadow that might tell her for a certainty what the truth really was, the letter-bag was brought in. She opened it, scarcely expecting to find anything beside the morning paper, but the first thing she fell upon was a letter from Jasper—a letter in that dear, beloved hand, every line and stroke and accent of which she knew as an artist knows the touches of his picture, and a poet the meaning of his poem. It was almost like a passing glimpse of himself when she saw it; and she pressed it to her lips and then to her bosom, tenderly and caressingly like a great girl with a bird or a doll.

Womanly and motherly as she was, she was girlish too; as perhaps the best women are to the end!

Then she opened her letter, first clearing her eyes of their gathering tears; and for the moment forgot everything but the sweetness and the wholeness of her love. Oh! thank God that we can love, and thank God when we have loved! Let it all go from us—let it be stilled in death, or quenched in tears—the past remains true and our own, and the love that has been can neither be denied nor destroyed! Whatever the future held for Aura, she felt the eternal potency of the past as she pressed that precious letter to her heart, and read the history of her life in its opening words, “my own.”

Yet it was a sad letter, dispirited and full of doubt; for as yet his inquiries had led to nothing, he said, and he was beginning to feel baffled. He could find no record whatever of any one of the name of Field or Carthew dying at Funchal; save last year an old lady, a Mrs. Field aged sixty-six, obviously no connection with what he wished to

find. Still, he had only just commenced his search, and he might yet light upon the truth. In the meantime all that he could do was to hope and trust, and to rest in full assurance on the perfect faithfulness and love of his wife—of the breath of his life. “He had received her dear letter,” he said, “and, but that greater love kept him from her, he would have returned that very day to snatch her from the pain and humiliation she was undergoing. Had she been less strong than she was, or a shade less loving, he would not have left her, even for the business he was upon; but he trusted in her courage and her love, in which indeed was his only hope now under heaven. She had vowed herself to him,” he continued, with a kind of despairing re-assurance—and she knew so well the look and accent with which he would have said this!—“and he knew that she would not forsake him; come even the worst, she would remain with him—his wife, his own true, faithful wife!”

And Aura, when she read this paragraph, again kissed the letter passionately, as she would have

kissed his face ; but burst into tears nevertheless, thinking of her children and the shame that lay upon their fair young heads. And yet—how she loved the father ! with a love that in very truth meant her life !

Enclosed in hers was a small note written to Julia and Mabel jointly, full of tenderness and loving sweetness ; and Jasper's notes and letters were as beautiful as poems ; bidding them love dear mamma well in his absence, and be obedient to her and very gentle, and above all not to believe anything any one might tell them—no matter who or what, did they understand ?—unless mamma said it was true, and that they might believe it. They were to take great care of baby and Tiny, and not let Dotty shake down the peaches or trample on the beds ; to both of which garden crimes he was inclined ; and they were all to be careful, and not eat too many grapes. And then the note told them of some of the wonders of Madeira, and promised them each a basket full of pretty trifles, to show them that papa had remembered his dear little girls in his

absence from them, and that he loved them with his whole heart.

It was strange that this letter should have come to-day; and sad that it did not come yesterday. If it had, perhaps to-day's misery would have been spared; for the children loved their father intensely, and his words would have kept them from the original act of disobedience which had brought this sorrow upon them. For Aura did not believe that, if the woman had taken them, they had gone willingly and knowingly. They had been decoyed; but they had not voluntarily left her and home.

Then the men came back one by one. There was no lady at Mrs. Makemson's; she had left this morning at seven o'clock; she had had the "Blue Bell" phaeton to take her to the station, but when they came to ask there, she had not been to the station at all, and no one had seen her or the phaeton, and no one knew where it had gone any more than if it had been swallowed up in Lea Moss. The groom, who had ridden out farther than the children could possibly have walked, came back too in his time, with no tidings of

them; no one had seen them anywhere; and so the whole matter remained as before—the only mystery in the mind of any one, where the lady had gone to, and how she had got hold of the young ladies; but no one doubting that she had got them and carried them off somewhere. “And not to be wondered at either,” said some, mothers themselves, feeling for her as it was natural women would who believed in her.

Mrs. Jackson at the lodge could have thrown some light upon the mystery of how the young ladies had been got hold of, if she would; but she wisely thought the less she said about it the better, and the farther off she would be from sliding down the precipice, or scraping her shoulders against the rock. So she only put her apron up to her eyes and sobbed, and said: “Pretty little dears, who’d have thought it, and missus such a kind lady as she is!”

Later in the day the boy of the “Blue Bell” came up to Croft with a letter from Madame de Chantreau, which the driver of the phaeton had brought back with him. She had taken the carriage

some twenty miles on the London road to Hindfirth station where she had caught the morning express, and so would be up in London before any telegram could stop her. Where would be her future destination she declined at present to say; but wherever she went, she would take the children and not give them up again. Madame Trelawney might keep the man she chose to call her husband, if she liked him well enough; she did not wish to trouble her domestic repose in this relation; but the children were nearer to her than to madame, and should not be taken from her. Clive Vale, judging of her from the sacred basis of Nature, would approve of her deed; to which, *au reste*, she had already had Mr. Bennet's sanction. And as a religious Protestant, she counted the pasteur's sanction as very sufficient and encouraging. And Mrs. Price, a mother and a widow, said *she* should certainly claim the children under the circumstances in which she, Madame de Chantreau, found herself. Indeed every one was on her side. The good woman at the lodge, touched by her grief, had helped her to communicate with the children; and her pretty

little girls had not been unwilling to throw themselves into her arms. She had once before thanked Madame Trelawney for her care of them, and she did so again to-day, though she must say there were certain things in them she would have to alter, certain gaucheries à l'Anglaise, and certain grossièretés which must be checked speedily and by severe discipline. She would make them more fine and polished than they were, both in manner and person; she would keep them more at home, and not allow them liberty by which they might entamer des intrigues under her very nose; she would subdue their animal tendencies, and not give them quite so much pouding and rosbif as they had been used to have; in a word, she knew the possibilities of young girls, and would take more intelligent care of them than madame had done. Indeed she thought it quite time that they should come into the hands of a person who understood human nature, and could meet the vices half way. Madame's care might be taken as the physical and material basis, but hers would be the social, the moral, and the intellectual super-

structure. Her little girls sent bien des amitiés to madame and their papa, and she added her compliments.

This was the substance of what Louise Trébuchet wrote ; and if Aura had been indifferent before, this letter, with all the subtle threats and wickedness it contained, would have made her eager to snatch any child—no matter whose or what—from the influence of a mind which could instil only the evil in which itself was steeped. Yet, though she had character, she had no experience and knew nothing of the routine of business life. She had never yet had to act independently in any emergency ; and even with a strong-headed and clever woman, used only to the country, there is necessarily a vast deal of wild speculation as to what can be done by those who know life and outside action better than they—a kind of vague belief in somebody's omnipotence, and a hazy idea that "going up to London," implies meeting with the object of your search on London Bridge or at the corner of Saint Paul's. And Aura's only feeling was, that some one ought to go up to

London at once to look after the children—but how, where, what inquiries to make, or how to find the trail—of all this she was as ignorant as the children themselves. If Jasper had but been at home!—he, who knew everything, would have had that little traitress by the throat before the night was out. She never felt how thorough her reliance on him had been until now, when life was so empty and she was so near to shipwreck in all things without him.

What should she do? who could she trust? To apply to Mr. Dysart was of course out of the question—she believed that he was in the plot with his sister, and that he knew all about the children; which he did not; Mr. Grainger was fussy and consequential, and pretended a great deal more than he knew—and yet he was the only one to whom she could turn. Her father and mother were away, and would have been useless if at home; and she was afraid to set even so mild a lawyer as Mr. Mountain to work; having that other not uncommon superstition of country people, a profound belief in the superhuman

sagacity of all lawyers, and afraid lest, once set on the track, he should discover all that both her husband and herself wished concealed. So, terrified but resolute, she sent down to Mr. Grainger, asking him to come up to Croft without delay.

But in the meantime, and before the groom had well left the grounds, young Harry Grant presented himself. He came to see if he could be of use in the matter; for there was no possibility of pretended ignorance to-day with any one; the whole Vale was convulsed with the news, and the town looked like a fair, thronged as it was with groups discussing the morning's event. And though Aura did not know all that was going on down below, Harry did, and accepted it.

Aura liked Harry Grant; partly for his good, honest, handsome self, and partly because he had always kept out of the anti-Trelawney faction, and had believed in Jasper throughout; so that she welcomed him cordially when he came in, with almost the feeling of an elder sister; and though she was older and prouder and higher

than he altogether, was not ashamed to let him see that she was in sorrow, and that his presence was a relief.

“I have called, Mrs. Trelawney,” said Harry plunging into the heart of the subject, as was his way, “to offer my services if they can be useful to you ; my best services, and my heartiest.”

“You are very kind, Mr. Grant,” returned Aura ; “and I thank you greatly. At this moment I am rather helpless and very lonely.” The tears came into her eyes as she spoke.

“Yes, I know,” said Harry ; “and if Mr. Trelawney had been at home I should not of course have presumed to call. He would have known better than any one else what to have done ; but I thought that in his absence you might be glad of some man’s help.”

“Indeed I am,” said Aura candidly ; “for I cannot go myself, and the poor children must be rescued at once from the hands of this vile woman,” shuddering.

“Mrs. Trelawney !” pleaded Harry, “will you let me go for you ?—if you have no one better will

you trust to me?—you know that you can trust me; and that at all events zeal and honesty may be able to do something, if I want the experience and the sharpness an older man might have. Unless you have some one better let me go! I am sure I can do something for you, and if I can find the children, I should be so happy!”

“You have always been friendly to us,” said Aura, looking up at him kindly.

“I have always admired you both, Mrs. Trelawney, more than any people I have ever known or seen; and I have never believed a word of the shameful things that have been set about the Vale concerning Mr. Trelawney,” answered Harry firmly.

“Thank you,” she said, and held out her hand; “all that I can say to you is, that your confidence is not misplaced and that some day it will be publicly justified. The Vale has never understood my husband and never will. A few individuals may, but not the general society.”

“Things were not so bad till this man, this Mr. Dysart came,” said Harry bitterly; “but he has done

Mr. Trelawney so much mischief!—not by anything he has said openly, but by sly insinuations which go twice as far as open accusations, because you see, people can put their own interpretations on them, and make them mean whatever they like.”

“He is a wretch!” said Aura warmly; “and that too will be made clear some day.”

“I hope so, fervently,” returned Harry, with all his heart in his voice; and Aura guessed why, but she did not say what she guessed.

“And now this woman,” continued Harry, “giving herself out as Mr. Trelawney’s wife, while he is away too—of course that has been another tremendous thing for the place to take hold of: but, dear Mrs. Trelawney,” he continued, his fair Saxon face flushing scarlet, “you must not mind about that; no one whose opinion you value believes such a scandal for a moment!”

Aura’s pale face grew a shade paler.

“Some things must be left with God!” she said; “we are not able to regulate all our lives, even when the truth seems very clear and injustice very patent.”

“But it is not pleasant to suffer injustice,” cried Harry with a youth’s impatience.

“No,” said Aura; “yet there are worse things even than this!—that my sweet, innocent little girls should be in the hands of this dreadful woman is one of them.”

“Let me rescue them,” urged Harry, his heart throbbing, as he saw the tears in Aura’s eyes, and the painful quivering of her lip. For to a young man it is like the descent of a goddess when a woman of more mature age and higher position shows her feelings, and confesses to a sorrow before him; and Harry at that moment could have devoted himself for life to Aura, like one of the knights of old time, and for no other reward than the glory of serving her.

“You might as well try as another,” said Aura naively. “Some one must look for them, and some one must find them!”

“Trust me,” cried Harry.

She looked into his face. He was very young, very inexperienced in the ways of the world, and by his boyish honesty and straightforwardness but little

able to cope with the shifty craftiness of professed swindlers, and yet she trusted him in that involuntarily, heart-whole manner which certain thinkers hold to be direct inspiration and which others call instinct—trusted him with the dearest charge she had, and the most delicate business that had ever come into her hands.

“I will trust you, dear Mr. Grant,” she said frankly. “You must go up to-night by the evening express, and God speed you and reward you!”

“I know that I shall succeed,” was all that Harry could answer; for his heart was very full, and he did not wish to “make a baby of himself,” of which there was danger.

While they were talking of the plan and course of action which Harry thought would be best to adopt, as well as of a few other matters—for Aura had to give him money, for one thing, and to arrange how he could draw more if needed—Mr. Grainger came up.

It was not a time for small vanities or personal feelings of any kind, and yet he could not repress

a sense of disappointment and being baulked of a fine position, when he found that all was arranged, and Harry on the eve of setting out for London ; if need be, to follow up the scent to Paris ; without the aid of his suggestion or arrangement. He did his best to forget himself, it must be owned ; but his head was very narrow and his spine was very stiff, and he could not always rise to the height of magnanimity, or be superior to the smallness of vanity. But Aura, seeing that he was a little annoyed (“huffy” was the Vale term for Mr. Grainger’s susceptibilities), made up for the disappointment by such a winning manner of appealing to him for confirmation in all they had arranged, that, though it was clear to Harry it meant merely a smoothing down of ruffled feathers, to Patrick Grainger it was the indisputable acknowledgment of his superior sagacity ; and, taking it in that light, he brisked up again marvellously, and became as eager and excited as if he had been the creator of the scheme from beginning to end. And Harry, who would have conquered any amount of smallness in himself if he

could have better served Aura—who would have even shaken hands with Mr. Dysart if it would have advanced her interests or have pleased her in the least degree—took his cue from her, and deferred to Mr. Grainger's greater knowledge of the world and profound acquaintance with mankind, till the little man was not only completely mollified, but ready to swear the whole thing had been his planning from beginning to end. He did say afterwards, and for all his life afterwards, that he found them in an awful mess when he went up, quite lost and at sea as you might say; but he set them straight, and told Grant what to do; else he did not know how they would ever have got on without him! And when he used to say this, he was not conscious of untruth.

“I'll tell you what I'll do,” then said Mr. Grainger suddenly, “give you a letter of introduction to Madame Delaperrière's husband. Being a Frenchman and living in Paris, he may be able to help you if you find you are obliged to go on there. Hey! what do you say to that, Mrs. Trelawney?”

“It will be very kind of you,” said Aura ; and Harry exclaimed delightedly—

“Just the very thing !”

Upon which Mr. Grainger turned to the writing-table, and saying, “By your leave, ma’am,” took paper and pens and began his letter to his sister—the first he had written to her for more than a year now—enclosing a note to her husband introducing Mr. Harry Grant to his notice, but leaving him to explain the business which had taken him to Paris. “Ah !” he said, sucking in his cheeks when he had done ; “if things had been so that my friend Dysart could have taken up the affair, we should soon have got to the bottom of it ! It’s my belief the woman cut and run as soon as he came home. She was afraid to meet him, that’s the truth of it, and wouldn’t show all the time he was here.”

Aura was silent and Harry coloured.

“Did Mr. Dysart pretend he did not know Madame de Chantreau ?” he asked ; and his question made Aura start.

Mr. Grainger screwed himself round in his chair.

“ Know her ? ” in a tone of surprise ; “ of course he did not ! ”

“ What an impudent lie ! ” thundered out Harry ; “ I caught them myself, hiding together under the hedge by the High Cross Bridge the night that fellow came back ! They did not see me, because I was cutting across the meadow, being late ; but when I got over the fence and came into the road there they were, and there they had been for as long as I could hear their voices. Depend upon it, they are both connected in the plot together,” he added.

“ Dear Mr. Grainger,” said Aura earnestly, laying her hand on his shoulder and speaking with extreme emotion ; “ believe me you are deceived in that man most grossly ! I must not say more, but I know what I am talking about ; he is a swindler, and you are taken in by him, and have been so from the first ! ”

“ Swindler ! deceived ! swindler did you say ? I cannot believe it, Mrs. Trelawney ! ” returned Mr. Grainger agitatedly. “ How the deuce could he know all the people he does if he was an impostor ? ”

“But does he really know them, or does he only say that he knows them?” said Harry. “Who can prove the truth of what he tells us? One thing we do know, that he can lie when it suits him, as in the matter of this woman, who I believe is his sister, or some very near relation. I am certain of it, and said so the instant I saw her; and so did Hale.”

“His sister, pshaw! nonsense, Harry Grant!” cried Mr. Grainger. “What cock-and-a-bull story will you have next? There certainly is a kind of likeness between them; that is, they are both small, both dark, both talk French better than English—but she can’t speak English at all, and he, if he would leave out a few confounded words, has no accent that a born and bred Briton need be ashamed of—but as for more likeness than this, I deny it. And all foreigners are alike, more or less. Brother and sister—what rubbish!” scornfully.

“Mr. Grainger, she *is* his sister!” said Aura impulsively; and then—she would have given worlds not to have spoken.

“Do you *know* this, Mrs. Trelawney?” he asked with an almost frightened look.

“I do,” she said. “I ought not to have told you, but you are an old friend and a good man, and I cannot bear to see you so deceived. I trust to your honour and secrecy not to divulge this fact to any one living ; least of all to Mr. Dysart himself. Will you give me your word ?”

“On my honour as a gentleman,” said Mr. Grainger, putting his hand to his heart in the old-fashioned way ; then he turned very pale. “Mrs. Trelawney, my dear, will you give me a glass of water ?” he said in an altered voice. He was more near to fainting than he had ever been in his life before.

But he was not convinced yet. He had set too much on the stake of the new comer’s respectability, and more than respectability — of his superiority to every one in the place—to abandon him lightly and without overwhelming proof. At present he saw no reason why he should do so, save that a fair-haired youth as dense as a block of wood, he said to himself, and a handsome woman one mass of prejudice instilled into her by her husband whom he did not like, told him

some absurd story, which might very likely be cleared away in half a moment's explanation. And as for that secret meeting behind the hedge—well, it was a nasty thing to do, especially with all his pretended looking for her and wouldn't call and all that, with himself—but, lord! there might be a dozen reasons for it if one only knew them, and the evil of it might rest entirely on her not on him! And then the likeness—he had noticed the likeness himself, and told Dysart so last night, and didn't quite please him by saying what he did—but, bless his soul, what did it amount to after all? As the blood gathered back about his heart he was all his obstinate old self again; and Aura and Harry both gave up the small chance they thought they had seen of opening his blinded and bewildered eyes. Aura knew that her imprudent confidence was safely housed, and that no harm would come of it; and Harry determined to add a side search on his own account in Paris, as to the character and condition of the only man he had ever hated—Mr. Gregory Dysart, Rue de la Paix, No. 15.

And now, as there was nothing more to do, both the gentlemen took their leave; Harry to make his small preparations for going off by the evening express—object and destination to be kept a secret, and Mr. Grainger to go home and go to bed. He was so upset with what he had heard, so ill at ease, so uncertain of himself and his condition, for all his obstinate adherence at Croft—that he took to his bed as the only thing to be done under the circumstances.

As Harry was going down the village towards his lodgings, he met Ellen and her sisters; and with them Mr. Dysart, walking of course next to Ellen, and plying her with the old flatteries and brilliant courtesies, the covert compliment, the poetic allusion, the warmer word coming very near to open love-making, and the still warmer look, all the thousand arts by which he knew so well how to trouble the peace of the young and inexperienced. In this instance though, he himself was a little troubled; and though not madly in love with Ellen, or prepared to risk the smallest fraction of peril for her sake, yet he was in love

with her, and, did his plot succeed and he became the possessor of an assured income, he intended to marry her; her refusal never counting among the possibilities of fate.

To meet them thus, with the flattering tongue seeming to him to be pouring poison into her ears—like the serpent and Eve he thought when he saw them—and to know that he was going to leave her in her peril, was a trial to Harry. Softened at the prospect of his absence even for so short a time—and yet the vagueness of his aim gave a certain vagueness and largeness to his time; besides, a week in a foreign country to a country youth accustomed to stay at home for years, is equal to a voyage to Australia to men of more locomotive habits—Harry would have given all he possessed to have had one loving word alone with Ellen before leaving. If Dysart had not been here, and he could have left her safe, he would not have minded so much; but as it was, what with the secrecy which she herself enjoined, and the certainty he had of this man's tampering with her, and his want of confidence in her stability—for

Ellen, dear good girl as she was, was one of the unstable rather than inconstant sort, and could be warped without much difficulty—all these things destroyed his peace and confidence; and when he saw them coming down the village together, his heart sank like lead. Why too did she look so conscious when he met her eyes? why did she blush so confusedly? and why was she so cool and embarrassed to *him*—not returning the secret pressure of the hand with that masonic passport of lovers, as an assurance all is well?

He was so tormented with his own thoughts and the anguish of his jealousy, that he scarcely heard Myssie's kindly phrases, or noticed Lotty's laughing jokes upon his gloomy looks. But he answered Mr. Dysart's airy satire with a kind of broad-shouldered honesty of annoyance, that put him at that gentleman's mercy with a bared heart and a naked throat.

Things were made no better by Miss Mason's sudden appearance out of Digges', the grocer's; for she fidgeted up to Ellen, and said to her in a loud voice—

“ Well, my dear, when is it to be? We are all looking for bride-cake and wedding-favours, for of course Mr. Dysart went to order the breakfast? When is it to be, hey?” both gentlemen hearing what she said; and Mr. Dysart making for answer—

“ I assure you, Miss Mason, it only depends on Miss Ellen herself;” which he would scarcely have said, so publicly at least (Miss Mason being equal to the town crier) if it had not been for the pleasure of annoying “ the bumpkin.”

But in truth Ellen was getting very much spoken of with Mr. Dysart, though in all honour; and since the famous ball at Lea Cottage, for all that she had engaged herself to another man in between, the Vale looked upon the thing as good as settled, and waited daily for the announcement to be made in formal terms; which did not tend to reassure poor Harry on the eve of setting off on his first great legal undertaking.

Time beginning to press he could not remain longer to be tortured, but saying with a very unsteady voice and a very forced laugh; “ Well,

Miss Ellen, I must leave you to discuss your wedding-day with Mr. Dysart; when it is settled let me know," dashed off down the village, sobbing for breath.

The next thing Ellen heard of him was that he had left the Vale, and no one knew where he had gone, or when he would be back; Mr. Dysart only suspecting the truth, but wisely keeping his own counsel.

Kate had a bad time of it the night they heard the news; for Ellen declared he had committed suicide, or had gone to sea, or enlisted as a common soldier, or had gone off to the diggings, and she should never see him again; and she very nearly roused the house with her hysterics, when everything would have been discovered, to the infinite terror of Kate who would have got into nearly as much trouble as herself if things had come out. However, she managed to get her quiet at last at the expense of a little coaxing and a great deal of scolding, and one or two small if stinging slaps administered to her hands and cheeks; and as even a girl in love and frightened

cannot cry for ever, Ellen at last left off sobbing and went to sleep; and so the danger was tided over for the time. But Kate made a vow to herself that she would never be mixed up again in any of her sister's love affairs, come what would. "It is quite enough to manage one's own," she said, thinking of Dr. Hale and his ridiculous proposal; and how he squeezed her hand in the archery-field the other day; and how papa, who could be cross when he chose, put her into the witness-box on the occasion of that horrible proposal and scolded her for half a day about it; being sure, he said, that she must have encouraged the young man else he would never have had the presumption. And as she thought and fumed at Ellen, and hated Dr. Hale, and wondered where Harry was, and why Mr. Dysart had chosen Ellen the only one supplied with a lover, she too went to sleep like a good girl. But they both got up with sorry faces the next morning; and Myssie and Lottie agreed between themselves that "something was going on — they did not know what."

CHAPTER V.



It was not likely that the Vale which considered everybody's business public property, should take quietly such an event as the abduction of two children from its Best House, and not immediately make the pie, such as it was, a great deal larger by putting all its fingers into it, and pulling out the plums of scandal and gossip with unmerciful energy. To most of them Madame de Chantreau had incontestably proved her maternity by her robbery; and Aura at the best was only a usurper grieving for the loss of a borrowed crown. Besides, they said, it was absurd that she could grieve at all. She had her own children, what did she want with these?

“ Goodness ! ” cried Miss Mason, who knew

about as much of children as she did of matrimony or mathematics, "what more can a woman want than her own? I am sure I never felt such extraordinary love for any other person's children, and I can't understand how Mrs. Trelawney could have cared for these as she did. It would have looked very queer if she had not always been at home; so that one knows;" she added, shaking her head rapidly up and down—what Mrs. Escott called "noddling"—as she did when specially scandalous and emphatic.

Most people had something to say in the matter; many gave themselves something to do. A few wrote to Aura, expressing their sympathy with her and sorrow at the sorrow she must feel—among whom were aunt Dess and Hannah—sweet, innocent, genuine notes; and Miss Fitton, head-milliner and postmistress, who had an affectionate but humble if highly sympathetic sort of way with her, not ill-received in the Vale generally; and Mrs. Mountain, with an eye to the possibility of a trial, when "Mountain" might perhaps be employed to conduct the defence and receive the

thanks of the court for the way in which he had got up his evidence and instructed counsel. But neither Myssie nor her sisters stirred publicly one way or the other; nor did the Rowleys nor Major Morgan nor Dr. Hale, beside talking and making comments, without much limit as to their extent or direction.

Mrs. Price of course took sides openly with madame, and said she had done right, and as any mother would understand and applaud; and as the thing looked so well, and had gone thus far successfully, she was rather loud and forward in proclaiming what share she had had in the transaction, as to the counsel and countenance she had given. And Mr. Bennet went beyond her. And as this was an occasion favourable for the reception of good seed, he thought—the obdurate heart being very likely softened—he determined to go up to Croft, and preach from many texts to Aura of her sins. To his view of matters he might preach from almost all and yet not overload the judgment against her, honestly convinced that she was a very sinful and sinfully-living woman, as was

perhaps natural to the dense bigot he was. He was dull too, and unhappy now that Madame Louise had gone; and he felt the hours since her departure, few as they were, hang like lead upon his heart, which made him all the more ill-tempered. She had written to him from London (what a pity she forgot to give the address!—but then she wrote in haste, and it was very sweet and kind in her to write at all)—and her letter, while it consoled him in part, stirred up his anger still more against Aura. She had spoken so tenderly of the children; so touchingly of the want of vitality in their religious teaching; so humbly and yet so hopefully of the good she might be enabled, by special blessing, to work in them yet; that Mr. Bennet had groaned aloud when he read her few heart-stirring words; hating Aura fiercely for the grief she had caused this angelic soul, and hating Jasper more fiercely for having barred any other man's possession of such a prize, yet he himself not valuing it. Mr. Bennet had never been in love till now and now he did not know it.

The Escotts too, were drawn into the whirlpool.

They had come home from their little outing—
“They could not stay away for ever because Aura chose to live with a man who had once been her husband, and wasn't so now,” said Mrs. Escott petulantly; so they came in for the new eruption of lava from the Croft volcano; and it would be hard to say whether Mrs. Escott most dreaded the burnings probable or took pleasure in the excitement of the outburst.

The Rector held his tongue, but he looked worn and feeble; and every one said how suddenly he had sunk into quite the old man, and that the winter would go hard with him if this trouble lasted and he did not get peace of mind. He was not a very sensitive person generally, but the misery and mystery encompassing his daughter seemed to have almost broken him up.

As for his wife—she talked. She had never liked the two elder girls, so she did not care a fig, as she elegantly expressed herself, for their loss. Indeed, she thought it a very good thing on the whole, as Aura would have more time to give her own children, and of course it was right that they

should be with their own mother ; and as for being stolen away, as some crack-brained people said, they had gone of their own accord she would bet any money—forward toads ! Though after all, that was not so wonderful when she came to think of it, as it was their own mother, and of course they liked her best ; only they need not have been ungrateful.

“ And I quite well remember, Aura,” she continued, “ saying to you when Mr. Trelawney—or Mr. What’s-his-name, for no one seems to know !—first came, that no stepmother in the world was equal to a real mother ; but you flew out at me, as you always do, and snapped my head off. Oh ! I remember it all quite well ! Don’t think that I forget things, if you do ! And now my words have come true, and they have treated you just like dirt under their feet, as soon as their own mother came, ungrateful little monkeys ! At least they might have remembered all you had done for them. But I never liked them—never ; and now you see I was not so far out in my ideas.”

“ She is not their mother, mamma, and the children have not gone away of their own free

will," said Aura firmly. "Why do you take such positive views on such slight foundations? I know the children, and know how utterly incapable they were of doing such a thing; they have been decoyed or stolen."

"Decoyed and fiddlesticks!" said Mrs. Escott impatiently. "How can you tell such a story, Aura? What is all this I hear then, of Mrs. Jackson at the gate — nasty deceitful hussy — giving letters between the children and their mother? Do you think the Vale is silent on your affairs? and don't you think everything is known? Of course it is! I have heard the story a dozen times already, and no one but yourself talks such nonsense as being 'decoyed and stolen' indeed, when they were carrying on a correspondence for days and days before they went away! I am sure it is a mercy they did not take the spoons and forks."

"Mamma, mamma, this is really too bad!" cried Aura; "I cannot hear you say such things of my husband's children, and my own too—for I love them like my own, and consider them my own."

“More shame for you if you do!” retorted her mother. “You make me sick, Aura, about those two girls and all your tremendous love for them. It is quite unnatural, I declare it is, and you a mother too with children of your own! I wonder your hair does not stand on end at all you say and do; I am sure mine does. I do believe you like those two little ungrateful, deceitful minxes better than you do that precious babe, or than Tiny and Dotty; though, being the first boy and girl one would expect them to be so much more to you.”

“Oh, mamma, how you talk!” said Aura wearily.

“Well! and how I talk! and what then, Aura? How would you have me talk? with my fingers, or in Greek? How I talk, indeed! I suppose I talk like other people, and not like a Hottentot or an Esquimaux. If I had talked a little more to you when you were at home, and had whipped you a little oftener, it would have been better for you and me too, I can tell you! Spare the rod and spoil the child. I spared my rod and spoilt my child with a vengeance.”

“ I don't think you spared it much, mamma,” Aura said. “ According to my recollection, I had more whippings than anything else.”

“ You deserved them,” answered Mrs. Escott coolly.

“ And I don't think we quite spoilt her, mother,” said Mr. Escott fondly.

“ Oh, you were always so silly with her ! ” cried his wife. “ You always made such a difference between her and Herbert—it was quite disgusting the way you went on ! I am sure the times out of mind I have had to stand up for that precious boy when you would have scolded him for Aura's faults ! I have cried my eyes out of my head many a time for your injustice.”

“ But I remember Herbert being often whipped too, mamma,” said Aura, anxious to draw her mother away from the central subject into her family reminiscences, of which she was generally very fond.

“ Ah, pretty fellow ! ” she said smiling complacently ; “ he got his little spanks sometimes ! ”

“ And deserved them more than Aura,” said the Rector unluckily.

“That’s like you,” fired up his wife. “If I had been as stupid as many women, I should often have been made jealous by the way in which you sacrificed Herbert and me to Aura, from the very first. Thank God, I may say I was too fond a mother to be jealous of my own daughter, but I have often felt it, papa, as I dare say you know—I dare say I may have mentioned it to you before.”

“Yes, my dear; I think you have,” the Rector answered dryly.

“However, we did not come up here to-day to talk of what I have suffered from your ill treatment of me, papa,” said Mrs. Escott a little stiffly; she did not quite like her husband’s accent; “we came to know what our daughter intended to do *now*,” emphasized, “and to see whether we could not bring her to a sense of her duty—the duty she owes to us, to herself, and to her children. Now then, Aura, what are you going to do?”

“What do you mean, mamma? do about what? the children? I have sent some one I can trust to find them and bring them back again,” Aura

answered quietly, but knowing quite well what she was doing.

“ Sent some one you can trust, have you ? ” said Mrs. Escott, with portentous calmness.

“ Yes,” said Aura.

“ To find them, and bring them back again ? ”

“ Yes,” she said again, in the same quiet voice.

“ Then, Aura, all I can say is, that you are one of the most unnatural women I have ever seen ! ” burst forth Mrs. Escott. “ You are a mother yourself, and you have actually sent some horrid, nasty person to tear those two wretched children away from their own mother, and bring them back, poor little things, to a stepmother ! Where your feelings are, and where your heart is I cannot imagine ; but then I have never been able to imagine that ; and I am sure *I* have never seen much heart in you for any one but yourself. But I do call this shameful—most cruel and unnatural ! The country will rise up against you, Aura ; and you will deserve it ; richly deserve it—that you will ! ”

“ Papa ! is there any use in speaking to

mamma?" appealed Aura in a tone of mingled weariness and impatience; "she is so determined to take part against me, and to see only evil in all I say or do, there does not seem to be much use in my speaking at all."

It was not often in her life that Aura had spoken thus to her mother. She generally let unpleasantnesses pass unnoticed, or tided over difficulties with a great deal of patience and a little caressing, or smoothed down ruffled feathers with unconquerable good temper; but to-day she was not quite so much mistress of herself as usual, and the cry escaped her before she was well aware of it herself.

"I think, my dear, if you would be a little less excited Aura would have a better chance of explaining herself," said the Rector rather timidly to his wife. "I must say you do a little too strongly prejudge her, though I am sure nothing is farther from your intention."

"Oh, very well—I understand! it is all very well indeed, and I am quite content!" said Mrs. Escott flushing apoplectically. "I have been

used to it all my life, and I can bear it! Oh, yes! I can bear it!" she repeated, her lips quivering and her eyes overflowing.

"Oh, mamma! if you could but know how painful, how sad, all this unreal trouble seems to me, standing as I perhaps do by the wreck of my whole happiness!" exclaimed Aura with deep feeling. "Come now, mamma dear, be reasonable, and have some kind of trust in those who love you! For my sake try to keep down all these discontents, and what you have to say to me, say out at once, without finding fault with me in small insignificant matters which only irritate you, and make me even worse tempered than usual."

And she smiled half tenderly, half sadly, as she took her mother's hand, and kissed her loose empurpled cheek.

"I am sure, Aura, I don't wish to make your temper worse than it is; I need not do that," said Mrs. Escott, sobbing and wiping her eyes. "You were never a good-tempered child, never; and that sulky little Tiny of yours, bless her

heart, pretty dear! is just such another as her mother before her. I cannot tell where you get your temper from; I know it is not from me, for my poor mamma used always to call me Sunshine when I was a little one; and I am sure it is not from papa, who is as meek as a mouse to any one but his wife: so how you came to be so snappish and obstinate I do not know. But you are."

Aura and her father exchanged looks; and fortunately for them Mrs. Escott was blind at the moment and did not see.

"And now I ask you again, Aura, what are you going to do?"

"Nothing, dear mamma, but what I have done."

"You are going to stay here?"

"Till my husband returns, undoubtedly."

"When you are not a wife, Aura?"

And the poor lady fell a-crying piteously as she said this, the full meaning of the shame contained in her words striking upon her with intense clearness.

“I am his wife, mamma, till proved the contrary,” said Aura steadily. “When that is fully proved—and only then—it will be time to discuss my future life.”

“I should dearly like you at home again, my child,” the Rector said in an undertone; “it would cheer your poor old father’s heart and make his last days very blessed.”

“Ah, dearest papa!” she answered, “how can we ever ‘go back’ to the old home? A mother—and neither wife nor widow—how could I stay at Clive Vale at all; still less at the Rectory?”

“With your father, my dear; a father’s love is stronger than the world’s hate.”

And as he spoke the door-bell rang, and Mr. Bennet was announced.

As he entered Aura rose from her seat and made two or three steps impulsively forward. The curate came towards her and held out his hand, but she, standing very erect, with her head a little thrown back and her face set and stern, folded hers together, and made so slight an inclination with her neck it was scarcely visible as an inclination at all.

The Rector greeted him stiffly but Mrs. Escott quite warmly, not sorry at the arrival of so uncompromising an aide-de-camp, and feeling all the comfort of a powerful reinforcement.

And when these first forms were over, Aura said in a low distinct voice: "Have you come on any special business, Mr. Bennet? as I would much prefer that any communication you have to make, should be made to my husband when he returns. For myself, I wish to decline all personal intercourse with you."

"My business is with you, madam," answered Mr. Bennet; "with you as a Christian woman, which I suppose you are—the daughter of a minister of the Gospel, and the mother of immortal souls."

"I understand your preface," said Aura sternly. "If you have come to speak on my private affairs, Mr. Bennet, I refuse to hear you. A man cowardly enough to insult a defenceless woman is not the man I care to associate with for the most insignificant courtesies of society, still less for the graver things of life, which none but the noble-hearted and the gentle ought to touch."

“My goodness, Aura, what does all this mean?” ejaculated Mrs. Escott.

“I have offended you, madam, by doing my plain straightforward duty,” said Mr. Bennet. “I am sorry for it; nevertheless, if occasion required I should do it again.”

“Whatever is it all about?” said Mrs. Escott to her husband in a low voice.

“I give you credit for sincerity, Mr. Bennet,” said Aura disdainfully. “Bigots generally are sincere; but that does not make you less unmanly, less treacherous, less prejudiced, or more fit to be received into my house during my husband’s absence. You have chosen your side, even to the counselling an impostor to steal away my children—your place then is not here.”

“It is here, madam! it is here! My place is wherever there is sin to be reprovèd and a sinner to be reclaimed,” Mr. Bennet answered warmly. “If you will persist in this sinful life of yours, you must expect that your pastor, knowing his duty and doing it through good report and evil report, will endeavour to rouse you to a sense of

righteousness; or failing, that he will publicly renounce you as a Christian, and hold you as one on whom the rites and consolations of religion are not meet to be bestowed.”

“You seem to forget, sir, that her father is a clergyman,” said Mr. Escott irritably. “To hear you, one would imagine that I was a mere nobody in the parish, and that you had had the care and cure of all the souls about for the last generation. I should not wonder if you denied that we were Christians at all until you came, or that I was of either use or influence in the place. Your vanity, Mr. Bennet, is as egregious as your insolence; and both are monstrous.”

“I do not see much sign of a Christian father’s influence, or of godly training at any time, in your daughter’s present condition of life and frame of mind, sir,” returned Mr. Bennet. “Perhaps if you had done your duty better in past times, mine would not be so unpleasant in the present.”

“There, Aura! just what I said,” Mrs. Escott observed in a loud whisper. “Your papa never

believe a word I utter, and now you hear what Mr. Bennet says, and how right I have been."

"You must remember one thing, Mr. Bennet, which you seem to forget," said Aura haughtily; "you have to earn respect before you gain influence. I have no respect for you, consequently you have no influence over me. And even had I had any, it would have been destroyed by the shameful manner in which you have acted respecting this woman—this Madame de Chantreau as she calls herself."

"Mrs. Carthew as she is—Mr. Trelawney Carthew's wife," said Mr. Bennet in a loud voice. "I confess freely all that I have done for this lady. I assisted her by my sympathy, by my prayers, and by my advice, to withdraw her children from a house where they were seeing only iniquity, and to take them with her to be nurtured in virtue, piety, and the knowledge of the Lord; nurtured as only a Mother," with a stress on the word, "can nurture her children; and she only when converted and cleansed, as by the grace of God is this lady. This I did, madam, and I glory in

having so done. Also I assisted her with such small funds as I had it in my power to bestow ; helping her needs to the utmost of my poor ability, on the same day as that on which you so cruelly and disdainfully denied her out of your ill-gotten superfluity. This too I am proud of ; though I would rather that you had not made so sweet a privilege possible to me, by having done your own duty as a Christian woman should."

"As true as all the rest !" Aura said with contempt ; "but as there is not the slightest use in attempting to open your eyes, Mr. Bennet, I shall leave you in your delusion till you learn the truth in the future. When you do learn it, you will be rather ashamed of the part you have taken, and of the dupe you have been made."

"The dupe *I* have been made !" sneered Mr. Bennet ; "this is a reproach that does not sit very well on *your* lips."

"I will not stoop to bandy words with you," said Aura. "Again I tell you that your presence is distasteful to me, and that I desire you to leave

my house ; shall I ring for my servant to show you out ?”

“ Not yet, madam ; I have many things to say to you yet, which must be heard,” cried Mr. Bennet excitedly.

“ Which shall *not* be heard,” said Aura ; “ I refuse to listen to you ;” and she turned away.

“ Woman !” cried the curate, seizing her roughly by the arm, “ you *shall* hear me ! In rejecting me you reject not me, but the word of God and your own salvation ; and I will not have your blood crying against my soul for lukewarmness or want of instant preaching, when the day comes for us all to be judged according to our merits. On that awful day, do you think that your youth or beauty or rank or wealth will save you ? —that your portion will be fairer than the sinner’s ?—that the condemnation pronounced against the adulterous will not be dealt out to you as well as to others ? Miserable woman ! turn aside from your evil and repent while yet there is time, for soon the night cometh when there will be no repentance.”

Aura, having once or twice vainly endeavoured to shake off his hand during this speech, took up an ivory paper-knife which lay on the table, and struck the curate's knuckles so sharply that he was obliged to let go his hold.

“Your touch degrades me, sir!” she said haughtily, drawing her handkerchief over her hand and arm as if to wipe off a stain.

“Mr. Bennet,” said the Rector, doubling his fists with the thumbs in and speaking in a voice almost choked with passion; “if I were a younger man and of a different profession I would kick you out of the house for this!”

“I am glad, Mr. Escott, to think that your profession exercises any kind of control over you,” retorted Mr. Bennet insolently. “And as for you, madam,” he continued, turning to Aura; “it is not *my* hand that degrades you!”

“I think it is!” said Aura, flinging up her head; “your touch and your presence I hold to be utterly degrading to me!”

“Gracious, Aura! are you mad?” cried Mrs. Escott. “I never heard anything like this in all

my life—you must have taken leave of your senses, think.”

“What can you expect, Mrs. Escott, from an evil life but evil ways?” said Mr. Bennet in a voice of forced patience, but with a face mottled green and black and purple and yellow.

“Will you leave my house, sir?” said Aura, laying her hand on the bell.

“Shaking the dust from my feet as I go, madam ; and giving you up as a hardened sinner for whom there is no mercy and will be no salvation,” said Mr. Bennet wildly.

“Mr. Bennet—sir—I shall represent your conduct to the Bishop, and see if he will not give me redress !” cried Mr. Escott.

“And I will represent your conduct to the Bishop, and see if he will not give your parishioners a better example than a man who partakes with sinners and maintains his household in its iniquity,” replied Mr. Bennet. “Two can play at that game, Mr. Escott, and perhaps you will not find yourself the strongest player of the two.”

“There, Aura, do you hear that?” said Mrs. Escott crying; “Mr. Bennet will have your poor papa’s gown stripped off his back, and his living taken away, and then we shall have to leave Clive Vale, and have only my six hundred a year to live on, and all because of your being so obstinate and unfeeling.”

Aura made no reply to her mother, but, ringing the bell, said to the curate meaningly—

“Spare me the pain of publicly humiliating you, Mr. Bennet, and leave now with a good grace, before the servant turns you by main force out of the house.”

“Do not be afraid, madam, I am too happy to leave it!” he said with a little laugh. “I have been in it long enough—longer would be scarcely advisable for my own reputation! The next time I visit it I hope to find ruling and adorning it the rightful mistress and the lawful wife—virtuous, religious, high-minded—and not a usurper whose position I could, if I would, characterize by a harsher name. I wish you good-day, madam; I pity you profoundly, and shall some day pity you

more, as Lazarus pitied Dives tormented in the flame.”

With which words Mr. Bennet left the house, satisfied that he had done his duty—like another Elisha reproving a more dangerous because more insidious Jezebel.

And when he had gone Aura had to explain to her father and mother the mystery of this strangely stormy interview, and to tell them of the Sunday's incident—while they were away. At which Mr. Escott lashed out furiously against his curate, but Mrs. Escott, insisting on getting a prayer-book, would read aloud the rubric concerning; whereby she found that Mr. Bennet had been in the right after all.

“If people will do improper things they must expect other people to find fault with them,” she said: “and you have only yourself to thank, Aura, for whatever unpleasantness comes upon you. If you would be guided by papa and me you would not be subject to these disagreeable things, but you are so self-willed, you see, there is no doing anything with you; and I'm sure I don't wonder at

Mr. Bennet—who never liked you or this Mr. What's-his-name of yours, and who does not get on very well with your papa—I don't wonder at his coming up to speak to you, and you living with a man who is not your lawful husband!"

CHAPTER VI.



HER brown hair loosely lying on her shoulders where it had fallen in her dreams ; her naked feet hastily thrust into a pair of purple slippers ; her hands warm, white, and moist, trembling in their eagerness to fasten the belt of her muslin wrapper ; her face softened by sleep but pale from the suddenness of her waking—pale too, from the passion of her delight ; her eyes dark, dilated, bright, and full of yearning, turned wistfully towards the door ; and her bosom heaving as her heart throbbed tumultuously beneath—Aura stood by the dressing-table, and listened to the loud ringing which woke up the Croft household at daybreak.

She had no need to ask who was standing in

the young morning light under the porch below, with love as deep as her own filling every vein with passionate joy. It was no insolent intruder this time, come to threaten her love or to mock at her sorrow; it was the man of whom she was the wife, mate, lover—the man whom she loved as is given to us to love only once in our lives. Never again!—never again! There is only one true marriage of the soul, which death cannot destroy, nor even unfaithfulness annul.

Aura had not long to wait. The servants had been as quick to hear as herself; and now she heard the bolt shot back and the door-chain rattle, and then the loved voice speaking in its old quick, half-haughty and yet so genial tones, and now the well-known imperious step mounting the stairs by broad strides to her room. She flung the door wide open, standing a little way inside, and in a kind of framework of light between the door and the window.

“Darling! darling!” she sobbed rather than said, as Jasper caught her to his heart with the old cry of love and longing, by very excess become pain.

It was like waking from some long, lonely dream, to find herself in his arms again—to feel the beating of his heart against her breast, the nervous pressure of his hand, his warm breath upon her face, and the touch of his dear lips; all life seemed concentrated in this one instant, and it was not only lip and lip, but soul and soul that met in their intense embrace.

“My life! my love! thank God for this moment!” murmured Jasper, pressing her to him, pliant and supple as love makes the loving woman; while Aura, throwing back her head so that she could look into his face, her long brown hair streaming round her like a fall of dusky gold, could only sob with joy and say: “Darling! darling!” once more.

The deep passion in her voice—passion so deep that it became pathos; the clinging gesture, clinging and caressing at once; the full, frank love in every feature of her upturned face, thrilled Jasper as in that summer evening six years ago, when she knelt between the yellowing corn and told him that she loved him. Loved and desired

then, she was even more loved and desired now—for marriage had only enriched and strengthened, it had not cloyed or hardened; and as he held her to his heart, and pressed her to him as if he would have pressed her into his very life, he felt as if he had never known the supreme exaltation of love before—as if he had never loved her to the fullest until now. It was a moment of absolute divinity with both—such a moment as sometimes comes to us when the love is very true, and is not ashamed of confession, nor afraid; and it was almost worth while to have endured their separation, for the delicious joy of their reunion.

How beautiful each looked to the other! To Jasper, Aura, thinner, paler, saddened as she was, was still the divinest perfection of womanhood as she stood there in the fresh morning light, so soft and warm and loving yet with so much womanly power and dignity; and to her there was nothing in heaven or earth to equal the delight of that first loving look into his grief-worn face. When she passed her hands over it, and clasped them round his throat, it was as if

she had found everything God had to give; no lost child taken back to its mother's breast, no exile returning to his home, no blind man restored to sight, no discrowned queen come back to her own again, ever felt more intense rapture than when Aura touched that worn, thin, furrowed face, and went over all its landmarks one by one. How well she knew those dear old signs and marks! There was the mole upon his cheek, the favourite little curl of grizzled black upon his temple, the whiter patch in his beard, the one long eyebrow hair that would always sweep so far past its fellows, long and shaggy as they were, the deep line across his forehead—how deep it looked to-day!—the scar down the upper lip, where his school-fellow Bates laid it open in that cricket-match so many years ago now; all the precious little places that she knew so well, and had so often visited with her lips and cool finger-tips—with what eager, loving looks her eyes took them in now again, after such a dreary time of privation!

And then his hands—those handsome, clean-

cut, capable hands, with the generous palm and the sinewy wrist—she took them up as if they had been independent creatures, and looked at them and kissed them and doubled them up under her chin, with that sweet mixture of womanly love and girlish fondness which made her greatest personal charm to Jasper; and while she played with them, she said in a low, soft, caressing voice—

“Poor old hands! they have had no one to love them lately!” almost as if she was crooning a cradle-song to herself.

Jasper drew her closer to him.

“Go on speaking, Aura,” he said feverishly; “I want to hear as well as see and feel you, to be convinced that it is not a dream, and that I have you in my daily life again. This separation has been like a horrible nightmare to me, and now—it is almost too great joy! Talk to me, wife! else I shall expect you to fade away while I look at you.” He was trembling as he spoke, though faintly smiling. “And yet this is the dear old place,” he continued, looking round the

room, he too counting up the familiar things about—the pretty trifles on her table, the ornaments on the chimney-piece, the pictures, the very pattern of the carpet and the roses on the curtains ; all looking so lovely to him, so exquisitely clean, and so perfectly well-appointed ! “ Ah ! it is home, and I have my wife again ! ” he said, and stooped his face to hers.

“ And I have you,” returned Aura with her hands on his cheeks. Yet she did not call him husband.

Jasper looked at her searchingly, with a wistful expression in his face ; she only hid hers in his bosom silently, unable to say the word he wanted.

Then he sighed mournfully. “ Your husband ? ” he said.

Aura kissed his neck, but did not answer, and neither spoke for some moments.

“ I am tired,” then said Jasper, “ for I have travelled far and fast, my wife, having only one object in life—to get back to you.”

And indeed he was not only tired, but ill and feverish ; and with an expression as much of

over-strain as of fatigue on his face. He had travelled night and day, stopping nowhere; so that all letters and telegrams had missed him. By which he knew nothing of what had happened, or of the new sorrow waiting him at home. And at the first he was full only of Aura—feeling only the joy of holding her to his heart again, and of being once more together, man and wife married in the sight of God and His holy angels—even to remember that he had other loves and other ties. But it had to come.

“And the children?” he said.

He was sitting now in the large easy-chair by the window, Aura on a low hassock by him, her white wrapper falling in broad folds on the floor, and the naked feet, with their transparent blue veined insteps arching up from the purple slippers, just seen beneath; but her soft hands, with the broad frills of her sleeves falling far back so as to show her arms, were held between his, and her arms were resting on his knees.

“How about the children?” he asked again.

“Are they well, and have they been good?”

“You have not heard?” Aura said with some surprise, pressing his hands, and tears starting to her eyes. She knew none of the details of his journey yet.

“Heard what? I have heard nothing!” he said, turning pale. “What do you mean, wife?”

“Julia and Mabel.”

“What of them?” he exclaimed, leaning forward with an eager look.

“She has taken them away, Jasper!”

“That woman?”

“Yes.”

Jasper uttered something between a groan and a curse as he started up from his chair and paced through the room. “Following the shadow, and losing the substance,” he kept repeating, as if he did not know what he was saying.

Then he came back to Aura and sat down again; first flinging up the window to the utmost, and standing in the cool air feverishly, but doing his best to master himself, though indeed his anguish was very great.

“Now tell me all the story,” he said,

taking her to her former position, "and how it was possible for them to be carried away, unless indeed by their own free will."

"That I can scarcely believe," she said; "and yet I have found many letters of hers to them, which were passed, with their answers, to and fro by Mrs. Jackson at the gate; so that perhaps she did work on their imaginations till they thought it right to leave home for a real mother. But I will tell you all I know," she added; and then went on to tell him what she had done, and how she had sent young Harry Grant in search of them; and in short the whole account from first to last, omitting nothing.

And when she had finished, she looked up into his face and said earnestly—

"Have I been to blame, Jasper? If you think I was in any way negligent, or culpable by only a hair's breadth, tell me truly, for the sake of my great love for them and my earnest desire to do what is right."

Jasper put back the hair from her face with both his hands, holding it up while he looked into

it with that wonderful expression of tenderness and reverence which made his own face like a prayer ; and after smoothing off the rich heavy locks many times, he kissed her, and said fondly—

“ No, my Aura, you have done no ill ; you have acted as you always do well and wisely ; and for the rest, no care short of absolute imprisonment, or unremitting surveillance—which neither of us thought necessary, dear love!—would have prevented it. But the children must be rescued, Aura, at any cost ; I would rather see them both dead in their graves than have them destroyed, soul and mind and reputation, by association with this wretched woman, whoever she may be—mother or only aunt. I must go for them myself, now at once.”

“ Not quite at once, dearest Jasper,” said Aura gently ; “ you are not well, and need rest ; and a day’s quiet here at home will help you so much ! Wait until the evening at all events ; the delay of a few hours more will not hurt them so much, poor darlings ! and will make you better able to look for them. Will you wait with me for the day ? ” she added caressingly.

“Yes,” said Jasper, “one more day of heaven before I die! We have had some days beautiful enough for heaven, have we not, wife?—as how should we not if love is heaven, and heaven is love! *Aura della vita mia*, can the angels love as well as we? Life of my life! without you life is death, and the earth one large lonely grave.”

But he spoke unlike himself in voice and manner, and his eyes were wandering, blood-shot, and unsteady. Yet there was nothing to cause grave anxiety for the moment, or what might not be accounted for simply by fatigue; and *Aura*, never an alarmist though vigilant and perceptive, hoped that a few hours' rest and the soothing influence of love and home, would restore him to his usual vigour and give him strength to go through to the end.

But he would not rest. He was in that over-excited state when a man from very weariness can neither sleep nor keep silent; besides, there was so much to say and so much to do and to see!—but chiefly there was so much to say. And first there was that terrible subject of his journey,

which neither had touched on yet; the one from despair and the other from dread.

Drawing her still closer to him, and holding her to his heart while he spoke as a mute sign that what he had to say was no cause of sundering, he told her of his ill-success; no news to be had anywhere! The French police knew only that the one sister was alive; they knew nothing of the other, who had left the country before the expiry of her term—interest having been made to procure a remittance of part of her sentence, and granted the more easily because of her failing health. The law did not wish to make her a martyr because she had been a thief, said the commissaire, concluding his statement with an epigram. Once out of their hands, they had taken no further heed to her goings, and for all they knew she might be still alive, and as Gregory had said, remarried and the mother of a second family. So that nothing could be learnt from them, continued Jasper; and as Aura knew, nothing was to be learnt at Funchal; and they were still as much in the dark as ever, and still as uncertain whether all

this was only a hideous dream or still more hideous truth. Anyhow they were yet in the power of Gregory and his sister, to annoy and seriously damage, if not to ruin.

“The only thing to do,” then said Jasper, “is to leave the place, and get out of this scoundrel’s reach somehow; we shall never be rid of him while he knows where to find us, and has the hold over me that he has here. If I thought that an annuity *would* keep him silent, I would not hesitate; but I know that it would be only planting a ladder for him by which he might climb to my destruction—I know that!”

“Oh! do not give him money,” cried Aura; “brave it out—see it to the end—face the worst rather than live in such slavery to any one! Better go to ruin boldly, Jasper, than exist in seeming safety by the mercy of such a man as that!”

“But you, Aura; but you!” exclaimed Jasper passionately. “If, when all is done, I find this woman is really the one I married thirteen years ago—will you leave me then?”

“Do not ask me,” said Aura, looking up with

her face suddenly blanched and wan, and her earnest eyes full of piteous pleading, but without tears. "I am not a coward generally, but I cannot look forward to this. Sometimes I feel that I will brave everything and endure everything rather than leave you; and then I remember the children, and all the social shame and ruin that would come to them if I stayed with you; and perhaps your highest love for me, Jasper, would go by the loss of your highest esteem. And then I had better have never been born. I could not bear it! To see one sneer on your lip, to hear one slighting word, to know that you no longer loved me as you do now—I could not live through it! But I cannot talk of it; I cannot see my way," she said kissing his hands, tears falling from her eyes now. "Sufficient for the day is its own evil; until it comes, we are not parted."

"The loss of my love!" laughed Jasper scornfully, but not scornfully to her only to the subject, "you might as well fear the loss of the sunlight, Aura! But I do not think you could leave me," he said, twining her hair about his fingers, and some-

times carrying it up to his face, while speaking in a quiet, almost uninterested voice. "If you do I must die, for it would be taking away my life; and how could I live?"

"Do not let us talk of it," said Aura; "we have misery enough in the present as it is; let the future bear its own."

"Ah! the future!" sighed Jasper and shivered.

"The future may be our best friend, beloved," she said tenderly.

"If I felt sure!"—he said. "Aura! Aura! promise that you will not leave me," he then cried, flinging his arms round her and straining her wildly to him, while he kissed her face with a frantic almost ravenous passion. "Better for us to die now at once in the perfect fulness of our love, than to drag on a miserable death in life, destroyed for a mere form. Better to die, Aura, far better to die!"

"Better to hope, my Jasper, and to wait to the end," Aura said very tenderly.

Her sweet voice seemed to calm him for the moment. "Yes, you are the angel," he said,

“the sweet, calm, holy angel, strong and tender too; I am only the man, passion-tossed and terror-stricken, and hunted from my lair by the evil of the past in present shape. Do you know what it is to be terror-stricken, Aura?—to live with a deadly fear always at your heart?—the fear of losing your all!”

“Have I not had it too?” she said.

But he did not seem to hear her; and after a brief pause he burst out into a cry of despair, almost like the cry of the hunted animal he had pictured himself, “My life! my wife! you will not leave me?” he said, forcing her to look into his ashen face, convulsed as it was. “Swear that you will not; here in the very presence of God swear that you are mine, and that no power of man in the name of society, or will of the devil assuming righteousness, shall take you from me! swear it, Aura! let me feel this one thing safe, or, as God lives I shall go mad!”

His wild eyes and the fierceness of his anguish terrified Aura; and yet she could not swear, undecided in her conscience as she was, and torn between wifely love and motherly duty, with old

teachings and the general morality of society calling to her so loudly against him.

“What can I say!” she cried pleadingly—
“I who love you, Jasper, as woman never loved before, and who fear only to do evil, and fear that in great part because making me less worthy of you—what can I say? I would give my life for yours—my happiness to save you pain; you know that I would! And if we are torn apart, I shall not live long after. But yet—if I am not your wife!”

She hid her face against his shoulder, and her very neck burned with blushes.

“You are!” cried Jasper. “God gave you, and man shall not take you from me.”

“Man shall not; only God’s laws,” said Aura in a low voice.

“Aura, you are cruel!” Jasper groaned; and then, utterly broken down with fatigue and anxiety and the long strain of his misery, he gave one deep convulsive sob, and fell into a paroxysm of grief more terrifying than even his despair had been.

It passed in time. Soothed by Aura's soft voice and tender words, by her caresses and the loving touch of her gentle hands, the terrible violence of his passion passed as our worst moments must; and he even slept, with his head on her bosom and his arms round her waist—the first real sleep he had had since he left her, he said.

When he woke the morning had fully come, and the house was astir and noisy with the children's clamour for papa; and in a few moments Dotty, fearless, impudent, curly-headed, good-tempered, rampaging as ever, burst into the room, and there was no more gloom or sorrow while he was there. Then came the others—Tiny, fascinating, lovely, sulky, shy—a thing always being made love to and always resisting; and baby with his big, blue, wondering eyes, and his maniacal fits of crowing and kicking, and his sublime contempt of all things human save himself: there were these to kiss and pet and play with, though they made the absence of the elder two more painfully felt, like

a picture with one whole side cut away. Still, their clear young voices and innocent happiness gave a gaiety and animation that helped to lift up the thick curtain of gloom overshadowing the house. And after breakfast there was the garden to visit, and Aura's special flowers to look at, and the conservatory and the greenhouse and the horses and old Pon and all the other dear incidents of home to rejoice in, and to make Jasper feel his life not all unstable and a dream as yet.

This day of love and reunion was a day of glory snatched from misery for Aura and Jasper—Heaven vouchsafed for a short resting-time to suffering souls in purgatory. Yet though so full of love it was too solemn and intense for anything like joyous happiness; and the horrible uncertainty about the children, and the fearful possibility still existing in the background, gave an almost death-bed kind of tenderness to all they said and did. It was indeed as if they were standing by the death-bed of their marriage—by the death-bed of their happiness, their love, and

their very existence. For both felt that, if this terrible thing was true, and if it resulted in their separation, they should have done with life, never again to know peace or joy till they died: and then God would reunite what the world had so cruelly torn asunder. In which hope indeed, lies the only consolation for those whose true love has suffered shipwreck in this life.

So the day passed, and Jasper began to talk of the evening journey. But through the day he had grown so much worse in physical condition—so much more feverish, so unconnected at times in his talk, so uncontrolled in his feelings, so strange and unlike himself, that Aura besought him not to leave them to-night, but to remain at home quietly, for that she was sure he was ill and needed rest and nursing.

To which he assented with a patient smile, saying—

“It will be worth the trouble of being ill to be nursed by you, Aura.”

Before nightfall he was so much worse that Aura sent the groom for Dr. Hale; and when the gentlc-

man came, which he did at once—returning with the man—he made very little question as to what was the matter. It was the beginning of brain-fever consequent on exhaustion and anxiety, he said; but he promised, having been called in so early—so wise of Mrs. Trelawney not to attempt any old woman's pottering and quackery herself!—that he would cut it down in a very few days, and he believed he should not have a difficult job. Still, brain-fever was an ugly customer, as Mrs. Trelawney knew; and there was no use in buttering up people with false 'opes, was there now? It was always best to be Honest, said Dr. Hale with a marked aspirate, and to tell the truth when one could.

So once more Aura was alone, and with another anxiety gathered to the mass already besetting her. And once more the Vale had its dishful of gossip to discuss; for of course Mr. Trelawney was said to be raving mad with no possible hope of a recovery.

CHAPTER VII.



By this time the poor children had found out their mistake. When they met the carriage to wish *cette chère maman* good-by, their young hearts had been full of grief at losing her; but now their hearts were full of grief at the loss of home and the dear *mamma* who had been their true mother—far unlike this flimsy bit of painted sham-work.

Aura's conjecture was right; they had been decoyed away—Mrs. Jackson at the gate helping: they had not gone voluntarily, knowing that they were leaving home. It had been *madame's* private plot conceived from the beginning—even while her brother was talking to her at the hotel—to get the two children into her possession, that she

might be able to make terms for herself; believing, and rightly, that Jasper and Aura would give any sum she might like to ask to get them out of her possession; and she had played her game with skill, assisted by Mrs. Jackson to whom money had never come amiss in her life yet. The girls themselves had done a childish wrong in "breaking bounds," and going outside the gate alone; a thing so positively forbidden; but they had done no worse than a childish wrong. They had only rushed down the road to the turning at the bridge, to wish *cette chère maman* good-by; perhaps never to see her again, as she said; but they had no thought of going with her for even a step of the way. However, when they came up to the "Blue Bell" carriage waiting for them in the road, she said she would take them to the station with her, and they should be back again at Croft before breakfast; and she said this with her pretty caressing manner of mingled coaxing and peremptoriness, which even older people than Julia and Mabel found hard to withstand.

After they were seated, and the man had driven

on, she read aloud a letter which she said she had received from their so-called mamma; in which letter, not only was permission given but Madame de Chantreau was even asked to take the two girls with her to Paris, and to take them thus in the morning quietly, so that she, Aura, might be spared the pain of parting with them.

What could the children do? They never dreamt of doubting *cette chère maman*; and though it seemed very odd to them that mamma should have wished them to leave her so strangely, and while papa was away too, still they were too young to criticise motives: and was not Madame Louise their mother? So they cried for just a moment as they thought of having left home and baby and Pon and Tiny and all of them without knowing it; and Mabel wanted her doll, and Julia her work-box, and both some favourite books, and they said—"Goodness! what shall we do for clothes?" And then they laughed—this kind of complication generally recommending itself as "what fun!" to the youthful mind; and they looked out of the carriage window, and delighted

in the railroad, and fatigued madame with their incessant questions.

Madame Louise was not used to children, and was not fond of them even in imagination ; and before they had travelled half the way to London she had become thoroughly weary of her little companions, and had twice spoken more harshly to them than Aura had ever done in the six years of her motherhood. She was one of the women who act amiability to perfection when they are abroad and anything is to be got by it, but who at home, and when put out, are like red hot coals all ablaze with quick petulance. Nevertheless she was naturally good-tempered, and, but that the children fatigued her horribly as she said, would have kept her serenity if for nothing else than to avoid making wrinkles on her face. But they worried her by their questions and the unchecked exuberance of their animal spirits ; and the air of freedom and individuality and strength about them shocked her ideas of propriety in girls of their age. For she was thoroughly French in all that is bad in the French character and system,

with a pretty large handful of English evil in addition.

She made Julia and Mabel open their black eyes very wide by the way in which she spoke to them, and the things that she forbade. She spoke English to them without any foreign accent now; and more than once called them little fools and miserable little wretches; and she accused Julia in an undertone of making eyes at a young man in the train, to whom she herself had taken a fancy, and who had certainly given them all no small amount of attention. For they were a striking trio, and very beautiful. But Julia did not understand her, and asked her full of wonder what "making eyes meant?"—to which madame made answer that she was a little hypocrite as well as a little fool, but could not impose upon *her*. Mabel she threatened to whip like a "naughty little girl," because she fidgeted about the carriage; and both girls reached Legrand's in tears, after having very indignantly, and rather unnecessarily, proclaimed their intention of going back to Croft that night. At which madame had

laughed scornfully, and told them she had them safe now, and did not intend to let them go again.

Before they came to London she forbade them to call her *maman*, or to speak to her in English; the reason for which she would tell them by-and-by, she said; but indeed they had nothing to do with reasons, and must learn simple obedience without question or remonstrance. And this was what they must specially remember at Legrand's—where they were going—to speak to no one whatever (but she would take care of that) and to call her “*ma tante*” when they addressed her, and on their lives not *maman*. In commentary on which Mabel afterwards said to Julia in a terrified whisper—

“July, she is a nasty gipsy woman who has stolen us, and is not our mother at all!”

Very well pleased was Legrand to see *la petite Parisienne* again; and well pleased too with her nieces, her dear sister's children, whom she was taking to Paris to educate.

“It was evident to see that they were of *madame's* race,” he said; “for they were almost

as beautiful as herself, and promised to rival, though he did not think they would ever equal her.”

He meant his praises of them to mean double-shotted compliments to herself, but *la petite madame* was not particularly well pleased with them; and though she smiled oh! so sweetly on him, and took all he said in the most modest and womanly way possible, yet the poor children suffered, and she called them serpents and vipers when they were alone.

All this passed in a moment. It was a matter of some anxiety to her that this initial interview should be only for a moment, for she did not feel quite sure of her dearest little girls, nor what they might say in the wild impulse of the moment. However it went very well; Legrand led her to the best salon as of old, and was far too well-conducted, and understood the proprieties too thoroughly, to address *les jeunes miss* without invitation. When they went to bed—and she took care to make them go early, and to have them in a room opening only into the salon, so that they

could not pass without her seeing them—she and Legrand had a pleasant little evening together. She told him where she had been, only she called the place Lea and forgot that it was Clive Vale ; and she told him that it was the most dismal of all possible places even in this dismal England, and that her sister had become completely anglicised, and was raide and affreuse like the rest ; she caricatured the Valeites—Mrs. Price whom she called a grenadier, and Mr. Bennet whom she called an odious Lutheran, chiefly ; though she reserved a choice corner for Patrick Grainger, on whom she exhausted the whole of such vocabulary of abuse as, mindful of her character for womanly sweetness, she dared employ before Legrand. She said how hideous and horrible all these Englishmen were ; what utter bêtes were the women ; what atheists all Protestants—call that religion, bah !—and how she had longed for the mass and the priest and the confessional ; and then she took out the little medal of the Holy Virgin and kissed it devoutly, crossing herself and faintly repeating an Ave.

All of which delighted Legrand, who for a Frenchman was assez dévot, as his compatriots said of him, and who held it as a point of honour and patriotism to be très bon Catholique, and to hate the Protestants, if not quite so ferociously, yet nearly as intensely, as Charles IX. or the Duc d'Alva. And people do love one so much when one goes beyond them in prejudice! One seems so truly on the right road, and so very sure of heaven then! So that on the whole madame's interview with Legrand to-night was a decided success, and placed her if possible on even a higher pinnacle of that gentleman's esteem.

Madame did not stay long at Legrand's. She had to go back to her husband as soon as possible; and indeed expressed more than ordinary anxiety to return. She expected a letter from him with a remittance; she hoped that it would be waiting for her at the hotel when she arrived; but certainly she expected it to-day (the day after her arrival). It was very sad for the poor little woman, and she wept bitterly; for her child was ill, and she was terrified lest her husband should

not have written because it was worse, either not wishing to pain her, or having really forgotten her need in his own anxiety: her only child—now just three years old—at the most interesting moment of its life, and undergoing the perils of permanent dentition.

Legrand's soft heart could not resist this mute appeal. He offered her the loan of five-and-twenty pounds—and of course the standing-over of her bill—if that would be sufficient for her, as he supposed it would; so that she need not delay a moment longer, and might leave at once for Paris and her sick child. He would have made the offer fifty, had not his wife objected too strenuously—growling indeed a little at the present accommodation; and had not Madame Louise—feeling her ground with that rare tact of hers—vehemently refused the larger sum, assuring her kind friend that twenty-five pounds, and her hotel bill unpaid, would be all she needed for herself and her dear little nieces, till they reached home.

Of which affair Madame Louise wrote a tolerably

true account to her dear brother sitting in the dining-room at Lea cottage frantically cursing her ; and leaving it to his calculations whether he would redeem her credit or not. “ For herself she should probably never see le gros bon homme again, so that she was perfectly indifferent which way it was ; it was a matter for her brother’s consideration only, and he was to act with the clear judgment and practical good sense which characterized him.”

So she got clear away from England and Le-grand’s, and the children had not spoken to any one during their stay ; and because it was politic, and had a natural air, she took them out with her to see London for the one day, and bored herself and them at the Polytechnic, till they were all weary and cross together. But that was doing her duty ; wherefore she was content.

In Paris the girls were horribly in the way, and she was seriously incommoded by them. Indeed it was a matter of grave consideration what she should do with them. Her doll’s house was too small to give them sleeping room at all events,

too small indeed to rightfully give them day room; and yet it was essential that they should be under the strictest surveillance—in fact, imprisoned.

Au septième in her house lived a grim uncomfortable woman, a couturière, nurse, femme de journée, anything on occasion; who worked for such fabulously small sums as could scarcely keep soul and body together—but then she was willing to do any kind of work, not inquiring into it too closely, so that she made up in area for what she wanted in special charges, and on the whole did manage to keep body and soul together; and a very gaunt body and a very grim soul they were too. She was a Madame Amadée, but no Monsieur Amadée was to the fore; and she was shrewdly suspected by some to have been married in the thirteenth arrondissement. However that might be, she lived a very quiet, industrious, and painful life now, intent only on getting enough money for her loyer and for sufficient nourriture, chauffage, and éclairage. All life meant only these three words to Madame Amadée, and she would have done anything

short of murder to have secured them. She made no hesitation then in agreeing to receive these two young English misses as night lodgers for a small sum, undertaking to keep them securely, to suffer no one to address them, and to conduct them by the staircase quite carefully, watching every glance, and being very sure that nothing happened—no letter dropped, no feint of something forgotten, nothing whatever but the straight strict march up and down those dirty stairs, to and from their bedroom au septième to their prison à l'entresol; always under the eyes of Madame Amadée till they came under the eyes of Madame Louise.

Both these ladies understood the capabilities of la jeunesse indeed; but they understood and suspected and foresaw and provided for things as impossible for Julia and Mabel to imagine or execute, as the deciphering of Chinese or squaring the circle. Indeed, they said things which the girls did not understand, and accused them of faults and vices not known to them even by name. But that was not in the way of cruelty, only to keep them out of mischief and inconvenient independence. They

did not mean to be wicked when they put bad thoughts into these innocent young heads; they only meant to prevent the fructification of the evil seed which they were sure already existed. It was a first-rate school for teaching vice by the very method of eradication; and the only thing to be hoped was, that the children would be dull scholars, and slow at the lessons set them to learn. If not, God help them!

By this time too *cette chère maman*, having graduated from *maman* to *ma tante*, was now simply *madame*. Also from *Madame de Chantreau* she had become *Madame Trébuchet*; and what other changes and transformations were in reserve the children could not guess. But if she had turned into a fairy godmother of the wicked sort, or had announced herself as queen of the gipsies, or the purveyor of little climbing boys choosing girls for a difference, it would not have surprised them. All they knew however was, that she was *Madame Trébuchet*, not *maman*, nor *Madame de Chantreau*; that they were vipers and not her dear children; and that she had stolen them, certainly

not for love of their fine eyes, but for her own purposes with which they had nothing to do; and that though they were frightfully in her way—she called it being on her back—yet she should not part with them, and so they need not cry about it, until—no matter what—but until something happened.

For the rest their lives were miserable enough. On madame's "days" they remained *au septième* until five o'clock or later, shut up with Madame Amadée with a silk pocket-handkerchief knotted round her head—"fagotée" the usual term, so far as the girls could learn—shut up rigorously in the small low garret, with the "mansardé" roof and the queer little casement, which constituted her home; helping her to run up seams, or run down hems, or sew up gathers, or stitch up sleeves, or to do any other part of dressmaking not needing special ability, and which young fingers could perform; which had its advantages, in that they learnt the proper names for the various parts of dress, and learnt also how to work with more purpose and expedition than they had ever learnt before.

And during these hours they could talk to each other in English without Madame Amadée's understanding; and for all that this was a forbidden indulgence, and they were commanded to speak so that honest Christian folk could understand them, and not that horrible baragouinage fit only for horses, yet they quietly disobeyed in that unconquerable way of young people, and chattered English to their heart's content, abusing Madame Louise and Madame Amadée without fear of the consequences. Madame Amadée never made a great sin of this to her employer. She was a taciturn woman herself, and did not care to talk to the children save when she had to reprimand them for careless sewing, and then she did not spare her words; but in general she had her griefs and her anxieties to think of, and sometimes indeed did not hear them when they spoke low and did not cry. At other times she used to talk to them for half-an-hour or so, and teach them all manner of craft and wickedness in the honest idea that she was warning and interdicting.

Then they were conducted down the staircase to

the doll's house where they had dinner; scant in quantity and poor in quality; soupe à l'oïsele which they hated (naturally enough) being one of the dishes daily set before them, haricots blancs—which they also hated—another. Madame Louise did not intend to damage her finances by luxurious living; at least for them: for herself she had still her private little dinners at Véfour's and Les Trois Frères with some of her friends, when she escaped her slavery as she called it, and left the children to Madame Amadée. Besides, she thought it well to keep down those mysterious vicious tendencies which most French women assign to young girls, and which they think to subdue by watery living, and not enough of it; and made it a point of honour and morality, as well as of economy, to have the days very meagre at all times. She would have fed them much in the same way had she been a millionaire, and from the same motive; so that when, added to this wholesome mortification of the flesh which she believed to be absolutely necessary for every virtuous young girl to undergo—or rather for

every girl intended to be made virtuous—were the two other motives of economy and selfishness, she had no kind of compunction in half-starving the wretched little creatures, and keeping them perpetually hungry for the good of their souls. Soon however the amount of food allowed was sufficient for them; for what with disgust at the kind, no exercise, want of fresh air, and incessant fretting, they lost their appetites, and faded away from their healthy, vigorous, aristocratic English look into the semblance of two ill-used and half-starved charity children.

It was pitiable to see them; but no one about them had any pity, for Madame Louise though good-tempered was too entirely selfish to care for anything in heaven and earth but herself and her own pleasures and successes, and Madame Amadée had had too hard a fight with life to have much tenderness or sentiment left in her. It was a little to her credit, considering the kind of woman she was, that she preserved so much instinct of duty as made her perform her duty of jaileress conscientiously—not allowing herself to

be moved by the tears and plaintive voices of her little prisoners. She would have done something for them perhaps if they had been French and good Catholics, but being the offspring of La Perfide, and heretics, they did not seem to her so worthy of compassion.

Yet she was not unkind to them. She gave them nasty tisanes occasionally, when she thought them looking worse than usual; and sickly eau sucrée sometimes—as a treat and only out of pure benevolence, with orange-flower water in it; at which they made wry faces secretly. I am afraid they did not appreciate the benevolence, and certainly they did not drink her tisanes when they could escape them. And sometimes she brought from out her stores in an old armoire a brioche or a madeleine dry and stale with long keeping, or a triangular scrap of galette, or a bit of cinnamon-coloured pain d'épice which they at first eagerly accepted thinking it to be honest English gingerbread, but made away with surreptitiously ever after. Had she been richer she would have bought her little delicacies at the

grand shops, and then they would have been palatable enough; but with her poor little two sous what could she do? She did her best; and it was very bad; and the poor children only ate her nasty messes as they called them, from simple politeness and good feeling—unless they were very hungry, and then they ate them from instinct.

Then their clothes, or rather their want of clothes, made another source of trouble to them. As they had been taken away without their own premeditation, they “had nothing but what they stood upright in,” said Madame Louise scornfully, as if they had been beggars; wherefore she was obliged to provide them with some. But she took care that they should be of the coarsest material and least coquettish form; dressing them indeed, in that quaint puritanical fashion known by the name of the pensionnaire’s costume—a fashion as unlike the simple elegance of their former life as was all the rest.

“But good enough,” said Madame Louise carelessly; “as they did not go out, it was not

much matter what they wore; and whatever it was, 'maman,' with a grimace, "would have to pay for it."

So they went about in their long dark blue frocks with little capes and white tuckers, and looked pretty enough while these were fresh and clean, because they themselves were graceful and pretty; but they "felt dreadful," as they said, and Julia, who had a decided leaning for finery, cried with anger at the hideous costume—"just like charity-school children" she sobbed with indignation.

There was still another trouble for them: "madame spoke such wicked things of mamma, and papa, and the little ones, and home, and everything." She was always abusing Croft to them, in all its relations; but especially Aura, whom she called by all manner of contemptuous names, as is the way with the vulgar envious; and she used really to "say such wicked things," as they said to each other, that sometimes their tempers rose, and they answered her passionately and impertinently—which got them some material punishment,

such as bread and water for dinner ; or the office of “ washing up ”—*laver la vaisselle* she called it—which was a favourite mode of punishment with madame ; or confinement for the whole day chez Madame Amadée, one of them alone and the other in the kitchen, or in the doll’s parlour with herself—which was the worst punishment of all ; for the poor little things used to go half wild with terror lest madame should do something dreadful—they did not know what—and separate them for ever. Or, if they were not indignant and impertinent, their hearts broke and they cried ; which got them a scolding and banishment to the kitchen, because madame’s nerves took a crispation at hearing them sob. Not that she meant to be cruel to them ; she only meant to be careful, strict, and a good disciplinarian. When she exceeded, it was from selfishness not design.

The existence of the children in the house at all was a dead secret to every one save the concierge and Madame Amadée. If by chance any visitor came unexpectedly and out of due course (sometimes that did happen, but not often) while they

were in the doll's-house, they were shuffled away into the kitchen, or the sleeping closet where they could both barely stand shoulder to shoulder, before madame opened the door; but once or twice a week a commissaire de police, or a sergent de ville, would look in and demand to see les jeunes demoiselles; which he did, somewhat after the fashion of a dumb doctor, looking at them intently but not speaking to them. That the two pretty, graceful little creatures were property dishonestly come by, the police had not a doubt; for all that they were sufficiently like madame herself to be blood relations. Which however she denied, asserting that they were the daughters of an English lady, given into her charge to educate and teach French with a Parisian accent.

Her stories had no weight with the quiet, far-seeing officials, who never wavered in their belief that the two young English girls with the pale cheeks and the red eyes had been stolen; but as yet no application had been made to them, and it was not their business to hunt up those bêtes of British parents who cannot take care of their own

children. So they contented themselves with looking at the young girls, and assuring themselves that they were not murdered, and that they were sufficiently fed, and decently clothed, and not yet turned into the streets of Paris to swell the ranks of the criminal population.

And it so happened that one day, by one of those fortuitous occurrences without which nothing would ever be discovered and no novels written, as a certain sergent de ville was leaving madame's apartment, after one of these mute inspections which were so terrible to the poor little girls understanding nothing about them, M. Delaperrière, who had just heard of her return to Paris, was mounting the last two steps of the stairs immediately fronting her door. Standing in the doorway, madame could not retreat to give the children their dismissal. M. Delaperrière was not a man to be received with other than most scrupulous attention; and to shut the door in his face was hardly the way to conciliate one whose good-will represented silk gowns and grand dinners to Madame Louise, and might in the

future, who knows? represent much more. So there she was fain to stand, smiling and delighted, while the handsome, portly, well-to-do citizen came leisurely forward, and in another moment stood in the tiny salon face to face with Jasper's children.

“No great harm done; he knows nothing of them!” thought Madame Louise, ignorant of the existence of Patrick Grainger's sister, and of the fact that Harry Grant was at her heels with that letter in his pocket.

She would have sent the girls away, but the banker who had daughters of his own of about the same age as these laughingly forbid; and drawing them to him got from them their names, ages, and where was their English home. And when they told him that they lived at Clive Vale, he lifted up his eyes and eyebrows suddenly and said, “So,” in a long-drawn accent, half in surprise, and looked as if he would have said more but that some secret instinct of prudence, or it might be better knowledge, prevented him.

“Does monsieur know this Clive Vale?” then asked Madame Louise, whom nothing escaped.

To which answered the banker with less truth than diplomacy :

“No, madame, I do not; I know nothing of England. But what took you there, to this unknown corner of the globe?”

“Family business,” said the little woman carelessly. And then very rapidly, too rapidly for the children to follow her, she added, “I have a sister who is married there; these are her children whom I have taken to educate.”

“So!” said the banker again; “your sister must be a happy woman. What did you say your names were, mesdemoiselles?”

“Trelawney,” answered Mabel; and then half crying, half hoping, she added, “Are you going to take us home again?”

“Pas encore, ma chérie!” said Madame Louise, patting her cheek—Mabel drawing herself away, and putting up her shoulder.

After a little more pleasant talk with the two pretty young English girls, and when M. Dela-

perrière had heard all he wished to know, he suffered them to be dismissed, Madame Louise saying to them with a sweet smile and in the tenderest voice possible : “ Allez donc, mes petites anges ! ” as if she was sending them to a private heaven of their own, to be found in the doll’s kitchen among the charcoal.

And when they had gone, M. Delaperrière again offered Madame Louise “ tout un avenir ” if she would give him her brother’s address, as really he had some great good fortune to propose to him.

“ I hope to be able to give it you soon, monsieur,” answered the little woman sweetly ; “ but my wicked brother has forgotten his little sister in these late times. Since I have been in England I have received no communication from him at all, and I am completely in the dark as to his movements or locality. When I know, monsieur shall know.”

Thus keeping in reserve the possibility of playing Judas to advantage, if the abduction of the children failed as a paying speculation.

Between the two chances she was sure to do well, she thought, and must surely come to a good market with one ware or the other !

Yet not relishing the accident which had brought the banker face to face with the children, and not knowing where it might end nor what premature discovery it might not bring about, she wrote to Croft by that day's post, directing her letter to "Mr. or Mrs. Trelawney," and the next morning Madame Amadée and the children were placed in other lodgings; and when M. Delaperrière called again he was told they had been sent home--they fretted so for their chère maman. But the police knew better; and so they told him when he went to the bureau and stated his doubts and fears with respect to them.

CHAPTER VIII.



To mystery was now added horror. The general belief in the place was that Jasper was raving mad because he was delirious, and the most wonderful accounts of the awful things he said and did were set afloat, giving "cold chills" to Miss Fitton who had a speciality that way, and causing more or less dread and dismay to all. Every one of course said that it was a judgment on both him and Aura for their sins, and just what might have been expected; but still it was a very awful state of things for the Vale, and flavoured even the domestic life of many. More than one nervous woman expected to fall upon the tall Master of Croft concealed behind the cupboard as a raving maniac when she went for the

salt or sugar, or to meet him as a ghost in the gloaming when she came home later than usual from a friendly gossip with her neighbours—most likely about him; and starts and little screams were plentiful among the hysterical.

The Vale was not sufficiently rationalistic or Sadducean, as Mr. Bennet would have called it, to accept brain-disease as it accepted gout and rheumatism, and carefully retained the old superstitious horror, and sentiment of God's special judgment on the wicked, with which this particular form of inflammation or disintegration used to be viewed by the ignorant. So that when it was told from one to the other that "Mr. Trelawney was quite mad," it was as if God had wrought a special miracle against him, and had set a mark upon him for all the world to read his condemnation. Wild stories were repeated of how he had tried to cut his own throat, but the razor was too blunt; of how he had tried to murder Aura, but was prevented; of the awful blasphemies he had repeated, and the terrible secrets he had told of his past life—cheating,

forgery, murder, and "more than one wife in the background, my dear," said Miss Mason to Myssie Campbell; "more than this Madame de Chantreau even, who perhaps is no wife after all—no more wife than Aura herself. Indeed, no one knows who's who now," she added, shaking her new flaxen "front" dubiously. Miss Mason was fond of little confidences with Myssie Campbell, and liked to make a crony of her. It was a link between her and the younger generation, Myssie approximating to the matrons and their sisters by reason of her position as mistress and eldest of her household.

If the Vale could have seen into that sick room, it would have seen something rather different to the ghastly picture it made for itself. In the half light which alone was permitted, Aura, dressed in a soft, grey, clinging gown which did not rustle when she walked, and which did not shine in the light, sat in the easy chair by the bed, generally with Jasper's fevered hands in hers; for even in his worst moments he was soothed by her touch and amenable to her voice; the open

window, shaded as it was, brought the fresh autumn scents into the room, and wisely sceptical of the theory which forbids flowers for the sick, the conservatory had been robbed of some of its choicest plants to make beauty for the invalid. Everything indeed was beautiful, well-ordered, and refined; even the little phalanx of medicine-bottles and glasses on the white marble table was beautiful from cleanliness and order; the snowy linen of the bed; the pretty chintz of the hangings; the muslin drapery about; the richness which was not oppressiveness, and the sufficiency which was not overcrowding; all helped in their place and degree to make that sick room, which the Vale imagined to be the riotous cell of a maniac, like the resting-place of a queen; and if outside care and loveliness could have healed poor Jasper he would not have been many hours disordered.

But ill as he was he was very unlike what report had made him. A low half unconscious moaning escaped him when the pain was more than ordinarily severe, but in easier moments vague words of love and thanks flowed from him, more

fervidly rendered certainly than if he had been himself, but no more than that; sometimes the wandering mind went all astray among its own visions—dreams and fancies at times painful, at times grotesque, but also if more rarely lovely, taking the place of realities; but his delirium was never violent, never muscular so to speak, nor was his condition desperate; and never, even when the fever was at its highest, was there any show of wrath or passion. But as it would not have interested the Vale to discuss a mere ordinary illness they invented the mania, and then illustrated it by anecdotes of what had been said and done in it; and it did not in the least signify that it was a fiction altogether, without truth or foundation anywhere.

To Gregory this illness came as an opportunity. His game had failed as he had set it, and he must now make a second combination. Nothing ever answered he said to himself, when other people were involved, and a man was safe only so long as he did his own business himself. Wherefore, his first plot having broken up through

the treachery of his coadjutor, he took to weaving another which he trusted might be more efficient. One way or another he must turn Jasper to account. It was the last chance he had—the last barrier between himself and ruin; and if he let it go, he should fall into the abyss and there would be no return possible for him. In the midst of all his apparent gaiety and security and well-being at Clive Vale, he alone knew the desperate struggle going on between himself and fate, and the frightful alternative of destruction which he must accept if he could not utilize his knowledge of Jasper's former life. As yet he had got no permanent advantage, only a lift for the moment—all very well in its way, but not what he wanted; and he had lost one hold in his sister's having told Jasper's real name, so that this secret was no longer purchaseable; for how long his other represented money value remained to be seen.

“ You are wanted, ma'am, if you please.”

The nurse spoke in a whisper, but her voice roused Aura sitting half asleep, leaning her head

on the bed with her lips against Jasper's hand. He had been very still and quiet all the day, but dull and heavy as if he had been stunned; and Dr. Hale was a little anxious about him, and spoke of him less briskly than he had done; but now he was apparently in a natural sleep. Aura, who had watched through days and nights, was weary however anxious, and in the late dark evening (for it was quite dark in the bed-room where lights had not yet been brought) soothed by the intense quiet and the darkness together, was very nearly as much asleep as the invalid.

“Who wants me?” she said, roused in an instant.

“A gentleman, ma'am; he will not keep you long, he said.”

“Who is it?” she asked again.

“I don't know, ma'am; I did not see him,” said the woman who was a stranger in the Vale: “he is in the drawing-room waiting, I believe. I can take care of master till you come back, ma'am, if you like to go.”

“Are lights in the drawing-room?”

“Yes, ma’am ; I saw Jones take them in.”

Aura rose. She was not one to shrink from a disagreeable duty ; and as it was her duty to see those who might come on business now that Jasper was disabled, she quietly gave up her place to nurse ; and just as she was—in her soft grey clinging gown without crinoline and without ornament, — went downstairs to the unknown gentleman waiting for her in the drawing-room.

But though in her nursing dress as she called it, perhaps she had never looked more lovely than she did at this moment. Languid yet flushed—for she was fevered with weariness and watching—her hair a little disordered and pushed off from her temples, and in the graceful Greek-like robe which hung in true folds and real drapery about her and did not stand out as a bell-work and so much mere millinery, she opened the door, looking of a race and nation wholly different from the ordinary English woman of her class. And as she opened it, there came quickly forward with his light, half-dancing step, bowing low as he came, Gregory Dysart, Louise Trébuchet’s brother.

“Forgive me, madame, if I have intruded,” he said, seeing Aura’s start and haughty gesture so soon as she recognized him. “I have called to see you in self-defence; and you will not refuse me the justice of a hearing.”

“Self-defence!” repeated Aura; “that implies an attack, Mr. Dysart, which I have not made.”

“Which you may not have made perhaps, madame, but which others have,” he said.

“I have nothing to do with the gossip of the Vale,” returned Aura coldly.

“I know that you keep yourself nobly above all the littlenesses *là bas*, madame,” said Mr. Dysart deferentially. “Still, things do filter through society, and falsehoods at last poison minds even as far removed from the small scandals as Mrs. Trelawney’s.”

“Would it not be as well to wait until there is evidence of this so-called poison, Mr. Dysart?” asked Aura.

“To a man of quick and generous feelings that is impossible, madame,” he replied. “I have been implicated by name in this unhappy affair of

the children — I have been mentioned as an accomplice and abettor in the wickedness of this wretched woman, whose coming among us no one deploras more heartily than myself—wherefore I come to defend myself to you, and through you to my friend Jasper, assuring you on my word of honour as a gentleman ”—here he glanced at her sharply—“ I knew no more of the affair than yourself or any other : only when it was done and public property. Do you believe me, madame ? ”

Aura bowed.

“ I can hardly tell you to your face that I do not,” she answered as coldly as before ; “ but I prefer not to be questioned.”

“ I am Jasper’s friend,” said Mr. Dysart speaking rapidly and with great apparent feeling ; “ and I am your friend, madame, and have been throughout. It was the farthest possible from my thoughts to injure Jasper, but appearances have gone against me, and I know that I am prejudged and condemned. Unjustly, madame ! unjustly ! I have tried to shield you, as God is

my witness, and not to betray you nor bring you into grief."

He said these last words as if impulsively—the generous feeling of a man overcoming the colder law of conventionalism.

Aura trembled, and mechanically moved nearer to the fireplace.

"And now," continued Gregory, "knowing of Jasper's illness I have come to offer you, his wife, my best services; frankly and in good faith; with no *arrière pensée*, and no self-interest intermingled. Will you accept them, Mrs. Trelawney? will you suffer me to serve you?"

"You must explain yourself, Mr. Dysart: in what way do you propose to serve me? In what way *can* you serve me indeed?"

She spoke with just a shade less coldness in her voice; for neither was she, clear-sighted and forewarned as she was, wholly proof against the wonderful fascination of the swindler's manner, nor able to distinguish the real from the false in his earnest tone and well-trained face.

"Madame, I can recover the children for you," said Gregory.

“ Ah ! ” she cried bending forward, her lips parted with a smile that made her face like an angel’s.

“ I presume that you have sent young Mr. Grant for them,” he continued making a bold guess. “ Bah ! bah ! a worthy young fellow enough, but what can he do in such a delicate affair ?—a mere boy as he is—a bumpkin, who knows no more of life than a little dog ! He will be turned inside out like my glove among the clever heads of Paris, and will find the children about as much as he will find the mystery of the Man in the Iron Mask. I tell you, madame, it is time, hope, money, all thrown away to employ one so inefficient and so ignorant. To me, knowing Paris *comme ma poche* as we say, the thing will be as easy as A B C, and I can lay the police on the track in half an hour after my arrival. It will be a costly matter ; that I confess frankly ; but though I am a poor man I will undertake the office, and succeed in it—have I but your authorization. I would delight in thus proving my friendship for Jasper, and my respect and devotion for yourself, madame ! ”

“Thank you very much,” said Aura; “I do thank you, because I believe that you are sincere in your desire to restore the children; but it would be scarcely fair to employ two agents at the same time, and I think I shall recover them by the means I have already taken. Should I fail I will then accept your services, Mr. Dysart, though of course you shall be at no expense. But if I have no right to recover them?” She raised her eyes to his and looked at him steadily. “The French law I know to be very stringent on the rights of a mother—what then?”

“You have the right to take them from their present guardianship,” said Gregory distinctly and slowly.

“Then she is not their mother! I was sure of it!” cried Aura flushing to her temples, and the tears falling in large drops from her eyes; not tears of sorrow but of an infinite and passionate relief.

“*She* is not,” he said with emphasis. “Following on my traces she came here in my absence to play off this foolish farce upon the world. The

thing was the creation of her own brain ; her own plot conceived Heaven only knows for what purpose ; but simply her own plot and her own contriving. She personated her sister," he added very slowly ; and looked at Aura.

"But how did she dare such an iniquity!" cried Aura.

Gregory shrugged his shoulders.

"Que sais-je, moi! In Jasper's absence and my own she was safe from detection and exposure. You are aware of the relationship between us? I know that you are, so I need not ask. Had I been here of course she would not have ventured to act such a daring falsehood ; but, sister as she is, I grieve to have to accuse her of constitutional mendacity — as much a moral mania - let us charitably hope, as homicidal mania, or kleptomania, or any other form of madness of a class not affecting the intellect only the morals. With Louise the mania is falsehood, as I have said."

"Still it was such an extraordinary thing for any woman to think of!" cried Aura ; "why did the idea ever occur to her? One moment's

interview with my husband and the whole plot was shattered to pieces. Plot!—it was too slight and flimsy to be called a plot at all—it was a mere piece of bravado and insolence!”

“Indeed yes!” assented Gregory; “but as I said, in Jasper’s absence and mine she knew that she was safe from immediate detection, and she knew also that Lavinia could not come forward.”

“Was Lavinia the name of my husband’s first wife?” asked Aura.

“It was,” said Gregory.

“But how could she ‘come forward,’ as you say? What a strange expression to use for one dead!” said Aura looking at him fixedly.

Gregory turned away his eyes and was silent.

“Is she dead?” asked Aura in a low voice.

“Madame, had I money I could bring you proofs of her death,” he answered. “And this is also why I have come to you to-night,” he continued, speaking rapidly like a man throwing a load off his heart; “for I have grieved, and that without figure of speech, at all the misery my chance arrival here has entailed on you and my

friend Jasper. „Had I foreseen it I would have cut my right hand off before I would have slept a night in the place; but when I knew what mischief I had innocently done, it was then too late to retreat. I had compromised myself; and indeed my departure would not have saved Jasper a moment's pain. Now I put myself at your service to undo the complications which I have so unintentionally caused to arise. Make this use of me I beseech you, madame! and give me back my self-respect and peace of mind. For whatever my sins may have been—and I have done many things I ought not in life—I have never injured, or been the cause of injuring any one, so far as I know. Least of all would I have harmed Jasper, my brother-in-law and former very good friend; or you, madame, for whom I can entertain none but sentiments of the profoundest admiration and respect.”

He spoke with great feeling, with great apparent sincerity, in a voice that almost quivered with earnestness, and with eyes that were moist and tender as a girl's.

“ Yet you do not answer me,” said Aura pushing her hair still farther from her face ; “ is she yet alive ? ”

“ When I say that I can bring the proofs of her death ? ”

“ Can you do this, Mr. Dysart ? ” she asked earnestly.

Had he been any other man she would have held out her hands to him.

“ With money I can, madame ; but this I must confess as frankly as all the rest—it will be a costly affair ; more costly than to recover the children.”

“ Why ? ” asked Aura in a half-bewildered way.

“ An obstructive witness will have to be bought off.”

As he said this he watched her keenly.

“ An obstructive witness ? ” she repeated slowly ; then covering her face with her hands she exclaimed piteously. “ She is alive, and she is the witness ! ”

“ Madame ! do not disturb your mind for her !—arrange your own life independently of her whether living or dead ! fear nothing, doubt nothing ; if you

can supply the money—I confess that I am too poor, alas ! for this, else I would not allude to so base a part of the question—I will deliver into your hands documentary proofs of her death,” said Gregory earnestly.

“I can have no happiness in this kind of uncertainty and falsehood,” cried Aura, strongly agitated. “If she lives let me know it clearly; if she is dead, what can there be to buy off? Pardon me, I must speak the truth—you have been so false hitherto—you and this woman your sister—how can I believe you? Even now this woman, this Madame de Chantreau, may be his wife for all you say; or the real wife may be alive and she has simply personated her; or it may be all a mere plot for malice, or for money—I cannot tell anything—I cannot believe anything!”

She spoke impetuously and grievingly, but with an uncertain, unconvinced manner that showed how little vital influence Gregory’s words had had over her.

“I tell you again, madame,” he said quickly
“(I cannot forge documents!) let me have money,

and you shall have the proofs of her death; nothing but money bars the possession of these—nothing else!”

“But why is it so difficult to procure an ordinary certificate?” said Aura, going back woman-like to the point. “Why is so much money needed for such an every-day matter?”

“I have already said — there are certain obstructive witnesses to be bought off; I can go no farther; I can say no more.”

“The wife herself!” cried Aura wringing her hands.

“That wife shall never trouble you even in your dreams, Mrs. Trelawney, if you will attend to me,” said Gregory warmly. “Grant me the authorization to seek your children, and they shall be brought back to your arms before forty-eight hours have elapsed; grant me funds sufficient for this other purpose, and the slander and gossip of the Vale is at an end—and your own uncertainty,” he added with meaning.

“No, not that!” Aura answered. “By no method like this would that be at an end! I

should never feel sure that your papers were real, Mr. Dysart, and should be always expecting some frightful discovery."

"What would reassure you?" he asked.

"Let my husband see this sister."

"Tut, tut!" Gregory said in a tone of half-annoyance, "to what good? Do I not say that Louise is not his wife—never was his wife? To see her would tell you no more. I confess that she played off a trick upon you and the Vale, and that she personated her sister—if indeed that could be called a personation which did not include mistaken identity—and what more can you discover? Madame, you are mad to refuse my offer," he continued speaking very rapidly; "if I were a rich man I would do it, at my private cost, for your own sake, for Jasper's, and for the sake of your children—the children of both unions. It is a moment for honest speech; you are strong and reasonable, let me speak to you then without reserve. If Jasper dies! ah, do not start and cry so piteously, dear lady! he may be saved yet, but it is my duty to tell you that I saw

Dr. Hale to-day, and that his report of him was very unfavourable——”

“ He did not speak so to me,” interrupted Aura, her pale face stiffened with terror as she turned it slowly towards her companion.

“ No : he dared not tell you. As all hope is not gone, he told me he would rather keep you up than show you the worst of the danger. To me he was naturally more explicit. If then he dies—pardon me that I must touch the depth of your sorrow, though I would only tenderly and lightly—would you not wish to have a clear pedigree to show your children in after times? If he dies, where will be the gain of recognizing a prior wife? If he lives”—he shrugged his shoulders. “ But living or dead, let me urge upon you—buy the proofs of Lavinia’s death.”

For a moment Aura thought ; for many moments indeed ; pondering over all that Gregory had said, and clearing up his arguments to herself. Then the natural instinct of the woman tore aside the sophistry, and she said, turning away : “ No, I

will buy nothing ! I do not believe your statements, Mr. Dysart ; I do not believe that any one has to be bought off save the wife herself, and I refuse to do this. Let the worst come, at least the worst will be the Truth, and I cannot live in falsehood or uncertainty. You have bewildered me between your two possibilities : I prefer to see to the end of both, rather than buy a false security."

Gregory sighed deeply. " *Pauvre enfant !*" he murmured with such pity, such manly superiority of sense and knowledge, that the words sounded kindly, only not familiar. " I grieve, madame, at your decision," he then said ; " but I cannot alter it ! If Jasper dies—which I sincerely hope he may not—I am your friend ; and so far as my means go I will employ them in your service. It will be a satisfaction to me to prove to you that I never was his enemy however much appearances were against me ; and that I was ever his friend and the friend of his children."

" But answer me straight and to the point," exclaimed Aura—" is she dead ?"

“Madame!” he said in a remonstrating tone, “how should she not be when I say that I can bring you proofs of her death? Soyez raisonnable, madame!—be logical!”

But he did not speak heartily, being fond of two-edged words and loopholes left for farther interpretation.

“I will tell you a little of her life,” he then said, “which perhaps will help to convince you. After her separation from Jasper she retired into the country near Paris, under an assumed name. When there she heard of Jasper’s marriage. Without consulting me, she soon after married herself to a gros bonhomme who had won her affections, believing that Jasper’s marriage had released her from her own obligations. She was a very childish, innocent kind of person at all times; and acted too much from impulsé. She had children, and lived in all peace and honour at Auteuil, never suspecting that things were wrong with her till told the truth of her situation by some kind friend, such as one always meets sooner or later in one’s career. Now you can understand

the complications that stand in our way; the change of name—the children—the husband who knows nothing—the involved forms—all the tra-casseries of French law—hein?”

“I understand and believe nothing!” cried Aura in despair. “It is a network of falsehood from end to end, and I will not sully my hands with touching it! Let me have the truth! I would rather lose my home than hold it by falsehood and intrigue. I will face the worst, Mr. Dysart, and if the wife is alive, let her be produced and let her have justice!”

“Madame,” said Mr. Dysart gravely, “you are destroying yourself for a phantasy—for a bugbear of your own creation.”

“If she was dead,” said Aura, “you would say so distinctly. You only assert it by implication.”

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently. “I am sorry for you, madame—ah! sorrow is too cold a term! Farewell! In the ruin to your happiness, and to your children’s name and honour, that all this doubt and uncertainty will

so surely entail, remember the man who offered to befriend you — who offered at his own charge to restore you your elder children, needing only your authorization—and who offered to prove you the lawful wife and your children legitimate, if only such necessary expenses as he could not meet should be provided for out of your own estate ! Farewell, madame, again. In your worst distress think of me ; summon me to your side ; give me your confidence ; and I will free you from your pain.”

He held out his hand ; Aura put hers into it ; he raised it to his lips, bowed low and sighed ; and then he left the room, lingering for a moment at the door in the faint hope that she would recall him—and retract.

“ I am not his wife and my children are not legitimate ! ” groaned Aura as she leant against the chimney-piece, shivering.

Her long-kept hope was at last destroyed, and with it both her courage and her strength. She had nothing now left her but her love ; name, wifehood, honour, certainty, and station, all had gone

from her, and her life had become a mere by-word for the scurrilous to blacken as they chose !

How long she stood there wandering through that terrible hell of despair she did not know ; but she was first recalled to herself by the sharp ringing of Jasper's bell. He had wakened and, missing her, had become uneasy almost to violence ; for indeed he seemed to live only in her presence and as if he would have sunk altogether without her ; and, hearing this, she thrust Self away and went back to the room which held her Love. But she was icy cold, and shivering as if it was mid-winter ; and the nurse remarked when she went down stairs, that missis was killing herself over master, and that she had far better have a regular to take turn and turn about.

“ Wife ! wife ! ” moaned Jasper, tossing feverishly from side to side ; “ *Aura della vita mia*, why have you deserted me ? Wife ! come back to me !—come back to me ! ”

“ I have come back to you, dearest Jasper, ” said Aura bending over him, while her tears fell down like rain on the pillow. “ Here I am—do you not know me ? ”

“ Ah ! ” he said, crushing her hand in his ; “ this is the Magdalen ; this is not Aura , ” and turned away his poor restless head plaintively .

“ Oh God ! let me die ! ” moaned Aura ; “ my cross is too heavy for me to bear ! ”

Then Jasper called again, “ Aura ! Aura ! come back to me ! You have forsaken me ! come back, wife ! come back ! ”

“ I have come back and will not leave you again, darling , ” said the soft sweet voice again tenderly, broken as it was with its own grief .

“ Don't weep then , ” said Jasper wearily . “ The Magdalen wept not my Wife . ”

And possessed by a new fancy he continued to call her Magdalen, till she bound back her hair which had fallen loose, when he seemed to recognize her more clearly, and smiled contentedly, following her with his eyes whenever she moved. And finally he sank into a calmer sleep than he had had yet ; a sleep that looked like healing .

But oh ! that long weary night to Aura ! Sitting by the bed, listening to the sharp ticking of her watch or to the slower pulse of the clock on the

stairs—which, so essentially monotonous as it was, yet took all sorts of rhythm and degrees of loudness, like steps advancing and then receding, or like voices loud with passion and then whispering in malice, like the first bars of an air, like the tramp of horses, or like the clatter of railway wheels ; while the sharp, nervous, querulous jerk of the watch sounded like an impish voice calling always the same word—it seemed as if it would never end, so lonely as it was, and yet so full of crowded thoughts : so full too of pain and terror and distress !

She went over the past, striving in vain to clear the form of the future ; but it was all dark and dim ; she could see nothing, she could understand nothing—neither of what had been, nor of what was, still less of what was to be. All that she knew was her pain and humiliation. Not his wife, only his mistress—not his wife, and her children not legitimate—and yet loving him with a love so pure and so intense, and their separation the death-blow to both !—where was it to end ? what was it to be ? In the chaos of

circumstance in which she stood, she felt her brain bewildered and the landmarks of right and wrong remove themselves in her mind. The world or nature—by which has God spoken? Of forms or feelings, which are the truest and therefore holiest? A wife and mother by love and honour and nature, and not by the legalities of man, which was her noblest duty—to renounce the world and its forms for the word spoken in nature? or to renounce her love for the word spoken in the churches?

“Enlighten me, O God!” she cried, lifting her clasped hands to heaven. “Teach me Thy Will, and give me strength to walk in Thy Law, through whatever pain it may lead me!”

And while she prayed the morning light came softly through the darkened window; the birds sang tenderly, if not with the delirious melody of spring; the sun broke up through the eastern clouds; and Jasper, opening his eyes, said in a quiet and natural voice weak and soft and no longer roughened by fever—

“My wife! why are you sitting there? Kiss me, my life!—*Aura della vita mia!*”

CHAPTER IX.



IF Gregory was standing on the edge of a precipice, fighting hard and fast for very existence, the Vale knew nothing of that inner tragedy enacting. To outside appearance he was the same as ever—gallant, gay, complaisant, debonnair; floating lightly on the surface of life, and taking the good things that fell in his way with the easy acceptance of a man who has not a care graver than the perfect arrangement of a dinner, or the undisturbed flow of an entertainment. Only in his eyes came back the sharp, watchful, hunted look which had been so noticeable when he first appeared in the Vale, though no one had had perception enough to read this or any other sign of the truth upon his face; and what had not

been read at the first was just as far from interpretation now.

Still the most popular man who had ever come among them ; still enthusiastically delighted in by the young, and as thoroughly, if more placidly, acceptable to the old ; trusted, believed in, looked up to, respected ; who would have thought that he sat long hours into the night cursing his fate and his sister's treachery, now with the blaspheming despair of a maniac, and now with the colder malice of a fiend devising means to avert the ruin crowding slowly and irresistibly on him, and shrinking from no scheme of safety, let it include what vengeance it would ? It seemed so hard upon him to have to lose all he had won ! It was so long since he had had a spell of honest life—since he had slept without the fear of the police for his awaking ! And though the place was dull, and the people were narrow-minded and stupid, still it had been like sweetest rest to the man's soul to find himself once more among honest gentlemen as their equal, and to be received into the houses of stainless families as with a right to be there. It had

been his dream not to lose this newly-won position, but to fortify and consolidate it; and but for Louise he believed that he should have done so. It was the old story! Grasping at too much he had lost what he had, and not content with the good to be got out of a fragmentary plot, he had sought to make it artistically perfect, and so had failed in all. Fool that he had been, he was rightly punished for his folly! And yet—what a punishment!—the loss of his whole life, and his last hope.

It did not do to show anxiety or change to the Vale; and if anything he was more “gaillard” and ubiquitous than ever; flashing about the place like a wandering sunbeam; “stirring up” every one, and shaking the thickening elements of society together with such a skilful hand that gaiety and good-humour bubbled up like beads upon champagne wherever he appeared. Every one felt his influence, and in truth every one was the better for it, no matter how frothy the works he wrought; for the Vale was spiritually bilious—dyspeptic rather—and mental stimulants were good for it.

The Campbells were always his favourites; and not a day passed that he was not many hours in their society. He paid Ellen even more marked attention than before—attention not dishonourably but very distinctly compromising her in the eyes of the Vale world, so that every one was talking of the flirtation, and looking for the time of frank announcement. And the colder and more embarrassed her manner to him, the more ardent and decided grew his to her, till at last, without anything having been actually said, he assumed the attitude of an accepted lover (barring the greater personal familiarities belonging to that condition) and passed by poor Ellen's feeble repulses as things not worthy a man's consideration—mere girlish coyness, no more! Indeed, he was one of those whom coldness piques and on whom success soon palls; so that Ellen gained nothing by her backwardness, save the unwished-for result of determining Mr. Gregory to follow out his own will. He had made up his mind to be publicly engaged to Ellen Campbell before Harry's return, and he was not in the humour to be balked. An engagement would

not hamper him much, he thought; nor indeed would a marriage for the matter of that.—and whether he failed or succeeded in his endeavour to make Jasper Trelawney into an annuity, he would have had the amusement; which was worth something. Wherefore, he asked Mr. Campbell's permission to address himself to Miss Ellen (he was a man to do all en règle he said) and when it was granted he made the best of his opportunities.

Of course all this was a matter of talk and consultation among the four sisters; but the house was divided into two parties concerning the great Dysart question, as the Campbell's house generally was on most questions, though without acrimony; and while Myssie and Lotty were triumphant and jubilant, Kate and Ellen were perplexed and distressed. To refuse such an offer, and such a man, for no more valid reason than a girl's whimsical "I don't wish," was so unlike the natural course of events that both Ellen and her confidante felt the truth would be suspected at once. And suspicion in their case would be just as bad as certainty, and

just as entire severance between herself and Harry—if indeed he ever came back again at all! thought Ellen, weeping. If he did not—if she was quite sure that he was dead, or married, or unalterably removed, she did not know but that time, Mr. Dysart's fascinations, pride, and the rather dangerous difficulty she found in saying no, might not make her unfaithful to his memory; but with the chance of his reappearing any day, she could not, she said to Kate; and Kate answered gravely, "Well; Ellen, I must say I don't see how you could!"

It was all very well for them, however, to talk honour and moralities together when safely closeted in their own bedroom, but to act them under the pressure of circumstance and temptation was another matter. When Mr. Dysart came trippingly to the house, bringing a bouquet of choice flowers "for Miss Ellen," which he presented to her with a compliment in a half-whisper, and in full family conclave, what could she do? If she had been strong and direct she would have refused them point blank; if only strong, and a little

less than direct, she would have received them with coldness or contempt according to her nature; but being weak and a coquette, and unable to say no, and with very little womanly dignity, if any, she blushed scarlet and took them, and rang the bell for the servant to bring her a jug of water for the vase.

When again Mr. Dysart met them in the lanes, and singling her out separated her from the rest with as much precision as a sheep dog fetching out a certain lamb from the flock; had she been other than she was, she would have resolutely returned to her sisters, or have refused to be separated at all; but being Ellen Campbell she merely looked after them wistfully with her eyes, mutely beseeching one or other of them to remain with her as a body-guard. And naturally they would not do that; not even Kate who understood her, but who did not like the appearance of "spoiling sport," as they called it; while Myssie and Lotty put her imploring looks down to mere bashfulness—as did Mr. Dysart—and left her contentedly in that gentleman's possession for the rest of the afternoon.

It was not a very intricate coil into which poor Ellen had got, but she was unable to free herself for all that, and day by day saw her more closely involved and more stringently fettered, till at last she felt so helpless she would not have been surprised to find herself some morning carried off to church almost without her knowledge, and married to Gregory Dysart before she was well awake. As it was she was as good as engaged both to the world and at home; and unless one of her two aspirants would be kind enough to die, she did not know how she could get out of the scrape into which her own weakness and coquetry had led her. If only Harry could find some fairy godmother, and come back with a well-furnished house and a couple of servants in his pocket! But failing miracles she fell back upon manœuvres, and hoped, in some way undetermined, to make Mr. Dysart understand that she did not want him, and so induce him to relinquish her of his own free will.

Things did not look much like this at present; and day by day the fine gentleman from Paris

pressed his suit with greater fervour and with diminishing distance, and the family took their congratulations with an air of solid certainty, not even affecting now to consider them as premature. Yet Ellen had never said "I will," still less "I do;" and the certainty which should have stood firm and square upon the ground, was balanced only on the tip of one shaky leg, and might fall over into the dust-heap at any moment.

The reports of this approaching marriage passing so loud and fluid through the Vale perplexed Hannah Marks almost as much as they distressed Ellen herself. She could not understand why they should have been set afloat at all; and was still more puzzled at the entire credence with which they were received. But then it was the way with the Vale, she thought; everything was believed here, and people had only to talk, no matter what, they would be sure to get an audience. So she took comfort from the thought; and disbelieved.

Her failing health had opened the door of their

pleasant little home to Mr. Dysart at last; and without apology or permission he had established himself as a constant visitor, all in the way of philanthropy and the kindly consideration of the social superior: thus leaving no room for the most prudish to take exception. For even the Vale, censorious as it was, could see no common ground on which to object to Mr. Dysart's kindness to Hannah Marks, unless they had accused him of an infamy they would have regarded as high treason to admit, or of a low-mindedness in selection which would have been nearly as heinous high treason as the other. And aunt Dess, usually watchful enough, or rather careful enough by the very teaching of her own innocence, was so grateful to any one who could bring back a moment's colour to Hannah's pallid face, or restore the semblance of elasticity to her flaccid muscles, that she too bound up her eyes and sealed her lips, and welcomed "their kind neighbour" whenever he chose to call—seeing only neighbourly kindness: as was meant that she should.

It was a questionable kind of relief he brought the sick girl. To call her his *petite amie*, his violet, his little golden-haired seraph, his child-woman, and all the thousand flatteries which sounded so innocent because they dealt in diminutives, did truly seem to restore and give her new life. But if they healed on the one side they wounded on the other, and when the end came where would they have landed the poor girl then? To say that she loved her flatterer was too cold a word, and too restricted; she worshipped him; asking nothing but the leave and liberty to worship, dreaming of no return, still less of any fulfilment. Yet, with all her modesty and childishness, she was woman enough not to hear of his loving another without anguish. How could he love another? Did he not say to her yesterday, when he was talking to her of the sunny south, "How I should like to take you, *chère petite*, to Italy, and show you all the beautiful things there — the myrtles and the grottoes, the footsteps of the heroes and the places of the old gods! I would soon bring back the

roses to this little liliated face. Would you like to come with me, petite ? ”

And when Hannah had breathed her bashful little “ Yes,” had he not sighed and said, “ Ah, this cruel world of ours ! it raises up such wretched barriers between hearts and lives ! Why should I not heal a poor little daisy like yourself ?—why, indeed ? ” energetically ; “ because Mrs. This and Mr. That, and the Misses These, would hold up their hands and cry, ‘ Oh fie Miss ’Annah ! We are ashamed of you ! ’ ”

“ I should not mind if they did, if I was with you,” said Hannah simply.

“ Chère petite ! you are too good for a worthless old sinner like myself ! ” answered Gregory pressing her hand ; and it took all Hannah’s constitutional reserve and timidity not to fall on his neck, or at his feet, and assure him that he was too good for her, and might she spend her life in his service ?

The silly child was silly enough to believe what he said according to the usual folly of the innocent young ; and far enough from the truth she

wandered in her wild trust! In the meantime, however, she revived apace, and with restored happiness seemed to have quite thrown off her late strange failing; so much so that Dr. Hale doubled his right fist and struck it against his left palm with a sounding blow, as he said to Cust the chemist—

“I’ve got that girl through, Cust; and by George, I never thought I should!”

So his bitters and pills had the credit of her recovery: which was just as well, seeing who the true physician was, and what the real medicine had been.

With Mr. Grainger alone were Gregory’s lines not quite in such pleasant places as before. Between him and the “Vale terrier,” as Mr. Dysart called him in confidence to Miss Ellen, a chilling shadow had fallen, no one knew from what cause or when it first stole down. Coincident with this coolness was Mr. Grainger’s rather exaggerated partisanship for the Trelawneys; though indeed that could be no cause of misunderstanding, for Mr. Dysart had veered round

to the same point too, and was even louder than Mr. Grainger in his admiration of Aura, in his pity for Jasper's sad condition, in his indignation at the abduction of the children, and in his denunciation of Madame de Chantreau as an impostor, unknown to him personally before, but detected at a glance by his acquaintance with the world in general.

For he confessed now that he *had* seen her ; he had met her in the lane one evening and had spoken to her, thinking, as he said to the gentleman, that he might be able to amuse himself with her a little perhaps—*quien sabe?*—knowing the tribe as well as he did. And Mr. Dysart's word being as yet credited in the Vale, the resemblance between them was laid aside as a coincidence meaning nothing. Even with Mr. Grainger Aura's disclosure of the sisterhood was set to a half kind of sleep as a probability only ; perhaps a mistake ; perhaps a belief of Jasper's not verified ; or an impulsive assertion of her own made on appearances and likelihood, not in knowledge. Anyway he administered the anodynes usual to

those who wish to quiet an importunate intellect, and slumbered like the others.

For the rest, Mr. Bennet and the Escotts had come to a decided "cut," which was not exactly the way in which to inculcate Christian charity, peace, and goodwill to the Vale; and Mrs. Price had followed the curate's rather loud-sounding rallying-cry—not to the entire cessation of friendly relations with the Rectory, but to great coolness therewith; vaguely mixing up Jasper's concealment of his rightful name, and Aura's iniquity in maintaining Madame de Chantreau's place, with the Rector's sleepy sermons which she called "dry bones," and Mrs. Escott's Stuart tartan satinette which had always been an abomination to the austere widow of the Hollies. That the various counts in her indictment had no earthly connexion with each other did not disturb her logic; but what did disturb her, and some others as well, was the Rector's pertinaciously preaching both sermons himself of a Sunday now, leaving his curate only the prayers; being in fact, good old man, half afraid of what Mr. Bennet might say if he got free

speech in the pulpit, and not wishing to add thorns to the fire already crackling and blazing in the Vale.

Mr. Mountain, seeing no hope on the other side, went about the Vale with his eyebrows lost in the roots of his hair, talking confidentially to every one in turn of the chance there was when Mr. Trelawney got better—that is to say if he was not quite stark mad, as was reported, when of course there would be a commission de lunatico, or something of the kind—but, if he did get better, of the more than chance there was of an action for conspiracy, when certain members of their community would be made to look rather blue, if all was true that was said.

On hearing which Major Morgan grimly congratulated himself on the effects of the East Indian climate, and expressed his thankfulness for having been mercifully kept out of the latest cabal by his peccant liver. And the hints and innuendos which Mr. Mountain threw out—and of course he was not a child, and understood what he was talking about—together with Mr. Dysart's very loud denunciations of Madame

Louise (luckily she was not by to hear them) gave serious "turns" to Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Price, and made them both shake in their shoes, as Mrs. Escott said they ought. Though they had not done or said much more than herself; except in their public adoption of Madame de Chantreau, whom she also believed as firmly as any one to be the true wife.

But Mr. Dysart scouted the popular theory of a prior wife, of late very vehemently. At the first he had only expressed a virtuous grief and some surprise; then he had gently contradicted the idea, arguing from his commanding position as a man of the world, which gave all his views such tremendous power; but as time went on he grew stout on the subject, planting himself on his two feet, and not allowing so much as a hint of the thing to be made before him. Which coming also to the notice of Mrs. Price, she pondered on it seriously; and her daughters observed that she dropped the "Miss Escott" she had lately adopted, and slid back to "Mrs. Trelawney" again, as if by the force of old habit.

They knew better ; and they knew too how and when the change was effected ; as did Mr. Dysart. Thus, at the moment when Aura had lost all hope for herself, her strongest enemy had abandoned one of her outworks, and while she was breaking her heart over the true wife at Auteuil, her own claims were settling into quietness as Madame de Chantreau's pretensions declined. It is such a strange life of contradictions, this of ours !—such a perpetual misfitting of circumstance and feeling !

On the great Carthew matter Gregory was discreetly silent. When asked point blank if Jasper's name was or was not Carthew in the days when he knew him at Paris ? he returned only evasive answers ; or when not forced into speech, wisely held his peace. And it was not the long-eared hares of Clive Vale that could circumvent that wary old fox from Paris ! And while this social revolution was making its way, Jasper was gradually recovering from his illness, and Aura was looking to the time when her trial must come and her election finally be made.

The proudest man in the Vale at this moment, on account of Jasper's "pulling through," was Dr. Hale ; whose knees bent more outward, whose swagger was broader, whose aspect was more horsefleshy, and whose thumbs were more obtrusive than ever, to the greater disgust of the young ladies of the place—not one of whom had a charitable impulse for him, and all of whom disliked him as children dislike brimstone in their treacle—being something that should have been nice and that was nasty instead.

"Then you never liked *him*, Miss Ellen?" said Mr. Dysart, as they were sitting in the inner drawing-room playing chess, as was his habit. They were alone ; but the folding doors were open ; though the three sisters, when they had retreated one by one, had discreetly put themselves out of the line of vision, and the old father Campbell as Mr. Dysart called him (but not to the girls) was picking green caterpillars off his winter-cabbages in the garden.

"No, indeed ; that I never did !" returned Ellen. "None of us could ever bear him."

“One rival the less,” said Mr. Dysart; “check to your queen, Miss Ellen.”

Ellen said nothing.

“Is *that* the reason why you don't like me?” asked Mr. Dysart.

“What the reason?—what do you mean?” she said distressed, looking nervously to the folding doors.

“No, don't look there; your sisters will not come; and you know very well what I mean, Miss Ellen. You are a little slyboots for all those bewitching eyes of yours, and know what it is to have two strings to your bow, playing ‘Love's Labour Lost’ with variations on both.”

“Indeed I don't understand you, Mr. Dysart,” said Ellen. Nor did she clearly, though she knew his aim; being of the entangled order of mind, and soon bewildered.

“Do you understand me if I say that I love you, and do not intend that you shall love any one else but me?” asked Mr. Dysart in a low voice; and took her hand, *bongré*, *malgré*, as he would

have said, holding it prisoner notwithstanding her little efforts to release herself.

“ Oh Mr. Dysart—what nonsense I am sure !” cried Ellen, scarcely knowing what she said or what to do.

“ No nonsense at all, Ellen, but a truth, serious and entire, and what must have an answer now without more trifling. You have played with me long enough, *ma belle*, and I cannot accept my not too noble position another day. I love you, do you hear ? And you ?”

“ I have never said I loved you, Mr. Dysart !” said Ellen beginning to cry.

“ No, not in so many words—not with your voice—but you have with your eyes and manner,” returned that gentleman a little severely.

“ Oh Mr. Dysart !” said Ellen : it was all she had to say.

“ Well, have you not ?” he exclaimed in that tone which dominates and terrifies young girls—the tone of accusation proved and sworn to, and from which there is no appeal. “ You cannot deny, Ellen, that you have done your best to

lure me on ; that you have played off all your pretty little coquetteries against me ; that you have accepted my attentions as anything but unpleasant ; in fine, that you have flirted with me *éperdument*, and have not rebuked my love. I do not think *ma belle et bonne* is so heartless a coquette as her denial or refusal of me now would make her appear. I do not believe that ! On the contrary I believe that she does love me, in spite of certain former little escapades with one beneath her to which we will not now allude, and that she will be my little wife before the year is out." And as he said this he put his arm round her waist, and looked into her eyes.

Ellen dared not answer ; she could only cry piteously ; but he set her tears down to girlish excitement and modesty—at least he said so ; and, as the seal of their betrothal, kissed her as one who had the right. And Ellen felt as if she should have died for shame and humiliation, and quite involuntarily wiped her lips with her handkerchief ; which action Mr. Dysart saw and understood.

He took no notice of it however, but went into the other room tripping through the open doors gaily, saying, while extending one hand to Myssie and another to Lottie, “ My dear sisters, I am now your brother ! let me embrace you ! ”

Which he did, to their intense astonishment, and to Myssie’s displeasure as well ; kissing them all with a will and as if he liked it : but Ellen went on crying, as her ratification of the engagement—Myssie and Lottie wondering at her, and Kate wondering too, though on other grounds.

And when Mr. Dysart went away he told every one he met that he thought there would soon be something else to make the Vale talk ; and when asked—What ? he only nodded and laughed and bid them inquire of Miss Ellen Campbell. So by nightfall the fact was published to the whole village, and the gossips said : “ Well I’m sure !—so one of the Miss Campbells has got a beau at last !—They’ve been long enough about it ! ” And others said, “ I always thought young Mr. Grant was to be him ! ”

And now Mr. Dysart was revenged on Harry's slights and shoulders, and as he went home, more than once laughed softly to himself saying, "Ha! ha! I thought I should cut out the bumpkin!"

CHAPTER X.



LOUISE was beginning to feel the children a heavy charge on her finances. With all her economy—and Madame Amadée knew to a liard the lowest price of everything, and the thinnest shred upon which life could be supported—they cost money; and money was la petite madame's god—a god very hard to be entreated sometimes, chary of his presence, and of quite a different manner of being to what he was in the days when Danaë was young, and Plutus limped among the sons of men.

By one of those perversities of destiny which so often come to disturb the even flow of circumstance, her letter to Croft had missed fire. It had gone astray somehow, no one knew how,

for no one ever inquired, and only Gregory could have enlightened them if they had ; and nothing short of the rack or the thumbscrew could have got anything out of him that he wished to conceal. But he could, if he would, have told what had become of it on his laughing disappearance from Miss Fitton's shop, where he had called for his own letters just as she was making up the Croft bag. He had lately taken this habit of going in the morning to her shop—post-office and shop in one ; alleging the slowness of lame Fanny Rogers, the foot post, as his reason ; so that his appearance there to-day was in nowise remarkable. Indeed Miss Fitton would have felt the morning lonely now if not enlivened by his brilliant, dark, good-humoured face, and pleasant chapter of amiabilities.

“ He is such a one ! ” she used to say confidentially to her bosom friend, Sophy Cust the chemist's sister ; “ I never did see such a gentleman in all my life !—such amusement as he has in him, and so affable ! ”

How she did laugh to be sure, when Gregory

inquired of her the amount of postage to Corfù this morning, for he had a letter to send to Her Majesty there; asking her how she would like to be Queen of the Greeks and wear her hair plaited down her back, if he was made King? and setting her off again with some more nonsense of the same kind, while she stood with her back to him and the counter, trying to make out the rate from the printed papers hanging up among the caps, and bags, and packets of Berlin wool, and antimacassars, representing her trade.

And while she stood there shaking with suppressed giggling, putting the end of one cap-string into her mouth and peering at the dancing figures on the papers, Gregory, quick as lightning and noiseless as a snow-flake, slid his hand into the Croft bag, and before she turned round again sister Louise's letter was safe in his own pocket. The Croft man coming in a moment after, and having a little talk into the bargain, the bag was hastily locked and given to him; and thus Madame Trébuchet's offer to give up the children for what she could get for them never reached the yearning

eyes of her to whom even this equivocal offer of restitution would have been such unutterable relief!

When no answer was returned to her letter Madame Louise became troubled, and uncertain which of the two reasons to assign—that her brother, whose capabilities and *modus operandi* she knew as well as he knew hers, had done just what he had done—or that the Trelawneys had found her trail, and were in the way of getting without cost what she had offered to sell for gold. As she had stolen the children on speculation, just as a man might invest in a stack of wheat or a cargo of tea, it did not suit her to be unable to dispose of them; and consequently she was very fierce and savage at her ill-luck, and hailed bitter speeches without much mercy on their young heads; threatening them with all sorts of punishments of a vague and terrifying kind, if their parents did not redeem them without much farther delay.

The poor children asked nothing better than to be taken out of the hands of their present possessor; for though Madame Amadée was less

actively unkind than Madame Louise, being of a saturnine not nervous temperament, consequently less irritable, still she was hard and bad enough ; and at the best what a change it all was, both in life and love, from their sweet home and Aura ! They themselves were as changed as the rest. Scared, pale, speaking in frightened whispers together, and shrinking from observation as if they had really done the wrong things with which they were perpetually taxed, ill-dressed, and out of health—how different to the happy, graceful English family which, laden with flowers and ferns, swept up the lane past Gregory and Hannah Marks, making the whole air sweet and joyous as they went !

Even Louise herself sometimes almost pitied them as she contrasted their present with their past ; and had they been less expensive would have treated them kindly enough, always supposing that they did not irritate her, and that she might repress and instruct them as every true Frenchwoman thinks it her duty to do by the young. But when days and weeks passed by and no letter

came to la Rue Jean Jacques Rousseau, as she had appointed, with the offer of a small fortune in return for the two girls—her disappointment soured her temper, and the poor children had a hard time of it—so hard indeed that there seemed some danger of one or both sinking under the trial, and relieving madame's pocket by the awkward alternative of death. Upon which she prescribed them tisanes by the quart; and for Julia, who had a cough and who had grown as thin as a grasshopper, a "sinapism" on her back by way of strengthening her; and she gave Madame Amadée permission to carry them to the Tuileries Gardens once a week "for a petite promenade of about half-an-hour;" which she thought was doing all that could be demanded of her by the most anxious mother, and that more would be "excessive and inconvenant."

After she overheard the two girls planning together how they could give Madame Amadée the slip and run away, she retracted her permission, and called them a couple of vipers whom no kindness could endear, and no affection

reclaim. So they lost the chance of meeting Harry Grant on the Boulevard, by not foreseeing that Madame Louise might listen, and that if she did she would understand what they said.

Harry was now in Paris. With much trouble he had tracked madame in her cometic flight through London, falling at last on her traces at Legrand's: to that worthy man's infinite disgust that an Englishman should have the audacity to ask disagreeable questions about so charming a little woman—especially an English lawyer, hunting in couples with the police. For feeling his own inability to cope single-handed with so wily an old stager as Madame Louise, Harry had wisely put himself under the wing of Scotland Yard; and Scotland Yard saw him handsomely through.

Legrand's indignation nearly brought him into difficulties with "ze bobies," as he irreverently styled the police who visited him. "Why should they come asking things compromising and so suspicious? He had no cause to suspect Madame

de Chantreau in anything. Her little accommodation of bill and advance—a mere bagatelle at the worst” (but Madame Legrand pursed up her lips at this and said, “*Doucement, mon ami!*”) “had been duly repaid;” (he did not at first say by her brother, M. Désir, but when questioned again, that little fact too came out, as well as some other things from both sides); “and he could not understand why *ces messieurs* should be asking of her *nouvelles* at all, a stranger as she was in the land—not knowing its customs, nor speaking its tongue:”—

“Not speaking its tongue!” cried Harry; “why, she is an Englishwoman by birth, and talks as well as I do; so does her brother, Mr. Dysart!”

But Legrand, shaking his bald head, said: “*Pardon, monsieur!* I know my world!” And not Harry’s oath taken before judge and jury would have convinced him at that moment of Madame de Chantreau’s ability to speak English.

However, having nothing really to conceal he told at last all he knew; which amounted simply to the fact of her having gone to Paris by the

“long cross” on such and such a day, taking her sister’s two little girls with her. And when Harry impulsively cried out that she had stolen the children from a rich family in the neighbourhood, and that they were in no sense belonging to her, Legrand measuring him with his eyes from head to foot somewhat too disdainfully, answered coldly,—

“Pardon, monsieur, if I am again of another advice to yourself. La physiologie teaches differently; one has but to regard in their visages of these young miss, to see that they were of the same type as madame. Had she said they had been her own children I had believed her; save for her age, which rendered it impossible.”

And turning his back on him he ceased to pay him any further attention, as being un imbécile whose opinion went for nothing. But Madame Legrand told him he was un imbécile himself, and it was easy to see that cette madame, whom she had never too well loved, was only a fine traitress, and of the value of nothing. Whereupon they had a “chamaillage,” and Legrand sulked for a

week at least. So Harry went off to Paris looking for Madame de Chantreau with the two little English girls in her train.

He might have looked long enough had it not been for M. Delaperrière; for the police knew nothing of Madame de Chantreau, they said, and did not seem inclined to give themselves over much trouble to find out. There might have been an epidemical indigestion among them at this time, but whether or no, Harry was particularly impressed by their surliness and the kind of "go to Bath" manner they put on; and the quick suspicion which he himself rather than his story roused was a little trying to hot and honest British blood. But when he delivered his credentials to the banker, and told his story and the object of his search, the open sesamé had been pronounced, the trapdoor flew up, and the young lawyer saw the end of his mission.

"Madame de Chantreau?" said M. Delaperrière with a peculiar smile on his face; "with two little girls like her in type, said to be her sister's children, by name Trelawney and living at Clive

Vale? Eh bien! I think I can introduce you to this lady without much trouble. I know her well; but you will find her as Madame Trébuchet here; so no wonder the police gave you the cold shoulder with your unknown Madame de Chantreau. They are like dogs, and can smell a fault without being shown it."

"Madame Trébuchet!" said Harry in a surprised tone of voice. He had not thought of a change of name as a possibility.

"Yes," said M. Delaperrière complacently; "Madame Trébuchet; a charming little woman one must confess, with the most delicate foot and mignonne waist, ah!" crushing the tips of his fingers into a compact circle, kissing them, and then flinging them all abroad; "but a petite scélérate tout de même! belonging to a family of swindlers all more or less known to the police."

"I was sure she was bad!" exclaimed Harry; "and I could not understand how any one could be deceived by her."

"What! she took in the virtuous people of your Vale?" shouted the banker, using much gesticulation.

“Some of them,” replied Harry; “but her brother, if he is her brother as I suppose, has taken in more.”

The banker started up from his chair. “Her brother?” he cried; “tell me then—tell me quickly—what about him?”

“Do you know him, M. Delaperrière?” asked Harry.

“Yes in truth! to my sorrow.”

“Mr. Dysart?”

“No, no! that is not the name! Gregory Field—these people were all Fields; one of the most plausible and skilful escrocs in Paris. The scoundrel! he forged a bill upon me, but he got away so cleverly there was no tracing him; and though I have been hunting him ever since, he has escaped me entirely. I would give a thousand francs to find him; for I owe him a grudge of long standing—never mind what the occasion—but some grudges do not lose in flavour by keeping, eh, Mr. Grant?”

“No,” said Harry flushing up.

“And he is at Clive Vale, you say?”

“A Mr. Gregory Dysart is—who is very like this Madame Trébuchet as you call her; and every one who is not blind and prejudiced can see there is some near relationship between them.”

“Yes, blood will out,” said the banker. “The father was partly East Indian, and the taint runs through the family. But tell me about this scoundrel, what is he doing in your remote place? how did he find his way there? why did his sister follow him? and how are these children, that you say are stolen, so like to her in type? How does he live? come, bring your chair nearer, and—do you smoke?—*débitez votre chapelet, s’il vous plait.*”

Then Harry told him all the story—of how he first came; of how Mr. Grainger adopted him and introduced him to the Vale society; of his insinuations against Mr. Trelawney—though indeed neither he nor any one else knew exactly what these insinuations were, though of late, on Madame Trébuchet’s side, they had been definite enough; of his flourishing about with money; and final establishment as one of the wealthy residents; then the arrival of Madame Louise; their secret

meeting by night in a lonely lane; his publicly denying all knowledge of her; her giving herself out as Mr. Trelawney's real wife and Mr. Trelawney himself as Mr. Carthew; and now this abduction of the children. To all of which M. Delaperrière listened attentively, smoking his cigar, and sipping a bava-rose de chocolat in between, but understanding the meaning of all told him better than Harry himself.

For he remembered the Carthew affair in Paris, and he had long known all about the Fields, partly because his father had once been acquainted with old Field before the days of his last degradation; and the whole mystery unrolled itself before him, leaving nothing undetermined.

Only it seemed to him, as to Harry, a piece of consummate impudence, scarcely intelligible, that Madame Louise should have dared to personate the wife; M. Delaperrière happening to remember quite distinctly that Mrs. Carthew's name was Lavinia, partly because the *Charivari* got hold of it, and called attention to the Pantagruelistic fitness of name and nature in the young English shop-

lifter just convicted. However, there the story was, and a pleasant little romance too, to be told of a place the name of which was synonymous with dulness; and Harry must positively come this evening, which was Madame Delaperrière's "night," and tell her the story as he had told it now—Madame naturally having even more interest in it than himself. And to-morrow they would go to Madame Trébuchet's, and in all probability secure the children before ten minutes had elapsed.

Then the banker went over the legal forms that would be necessary before the children could be taken from madame; the law being very strict on the rightful guardianship of the young; also what must be sworn to and arranged for the extradition, as he called it, of Gregory, during which time he might promise that his wife would take care of les petites demoiselles, and he would undertake that Madame Louise should be kept in safe custody until the moment of departure; when Harry must take her with him (he had the right to do that by his warrant on the charge of abduction), and so

the whole thing would be satisfactorily settled, and the law would give "ce gredin," a berth at Toulon for twenty years or so, and keep la petite scélérate safe from farther mischief for a couple at la Maison Centrale perhaps.

M. Delaperrière was wildly excited at the prospect of thus securing his slippery enemy; and at that moment the man he crowned king in the capitol of his esteem was young Harry Grant—that honest and perspicacious young man as he called him to his wife, who had listened to his story as if it had been a dream or a fairy-tale.

In the evening, Harry presented himself as invited; and Madame Delaperrière paid him special attention, partly for pleasure at seeing some one from the old place, and partly for womanly sympathy with his strangeness. For it was all very strange to the light-haired, broad-shouldered, blue-eyed young Englishman; almost as novel as a masquerade or a fancy-ball, and as bewildering.

Ladies in walking costume—shawls and bonnets and high-heeled boots, or in dazzling ball-dresses

on their way to some more splendid reception, perhaps at the Tuileries, or in ordinary morning gowns and caps, or in quiet evening dresses, just as it suited ; etherial Polish countesses, generally beautiful and wonderfully clothed, looking like painters' pictures or poets' visions ; young girls just marriageable, in the highest and simplest of school-girl frocks, speaking in monosyllables and not raising their eyes — colourless creatures to whom the ingénue of the theatre is a hoyden ; free-mannered, loud-voiced young Americans, as much too widely emancipated as the French girl was too strictly trammelled ; straw-coloured men with goats' beards ; little black-haired men with scrubbing-brush heads ; wits by profession, small writers, and theatrical critics, much courted but not of cosmopolitan repute ; one or two of the *jeunesse dorée* ; one or two Bohémiens ; tea and a few cakes the only refreshment ; the uncarpeted room, with its slippery floor and gorgeous mats and cushions and luxurious chairs and sofas ; a babel of tongues ; a medley of social circumstance ; an incessant coming and going without form and without long

tarrying; these were the elements of the "evening" at which Harry assisted as a contrast to the set parties of the Vale, where, for the amusement of half-a-dozen intimate friends, twenty times more trouble was taken and expense incurred than here to-night for the reception of perhaps a hundred.

Madame Delaperrière was, as her husband said she would be, much interested in the story; quite well remembering Aura as a child, though she had never been to the Vale since her own marriage, and knew nothing of the generation that had risen up since. But she laughed at Patrick's infatuation merrily, and told two or three intimate friends sitting near how "*figurez-vous, mesdames, mon frère,*" who was the most cautious and suspicious of human beings, had been taken in by a Parisian swindler whom he presented to society as "*un homme de bien.*"

And then the mesdames lifted up their hands and eyes, and shrugged their shoulders, and spoke in shrill voices with wonderfully neat enunciation, and looked at Harry amiably, and

made him wish that he could talk French like Patrick Grainger's sister.

But one doubt was started before the evening was out—"if Patrick and this Mr. Gregory Dysart were such good friends, how should he not know of Harry's letter of introduction to the Delaperrières?"

"Perhaps he will be told," said Harry, knowing nothing of the coolness and reserve that had sprung up between the former confidants. "But even if he leaves Clive Vale before we get there, we can track him better in England than in France, and we shall soon lay hold of him again."

To which both the banker and his wife, and all to whom this speech was translated, cried out in vehement opposition, maintaining that England was without police rule or the power of tracking any one whatever; how possible, seeing that no papers are necessary, no passports needed, no domiciliary visits allowed, no surveillance over les suspects, in a word, no individual watching or protection at all? Were not murders committed daily in England and the murderer never

discovered? The thing was a simple necessity of logic, and Gregory Field, once escaped from Clive Vale, was lost until a happy hazard should restore him: a thought which caused M. Delaperrière's handsome face to settle into fixed gloom for the space of five minutes or so; and then he brightened up again, and talked as gaily as before.

Harry let the question go, being too weak to stem the torrent of ignorance alone, and thinking—being a candid fellow and not quite eaten up with John Bullism—that perhaps many depreciatory things which he and others had been accustomed to think of French life and manners were as little true as this fantasy of theirs that we have no law for securing individual safety in England, and no private surveillance or means of detection by the police; so he refrained from any great show of indignation, and laughed instead. Whereupon all concerned held him to be beaten, and that he thus tacitly acknowledged his defeat; and they said that he was gentil and charmant, and vraiment très gracieux pour un Anglais.

The next day Harry, M. Delaperrière, and a French lawyer, accompanied by a stately sergent de ville, and with all the legal forms en règle, went to the Rue Saint Antoine, and up the broad stone staircase to the door of the doll's apartment.

It was early in the day—long before the hour of the second déjeuner and visitors; at the time when all French women are in déshabille no matter what their rank, before the paint and the powder and the patches have been administered to those who build up their beauty as a daily edifice, and when good managers are to be found in old skirts and charitable jackets, in unbrushed hair, unwashed hands, without stays, in slippers, and generally in their nightgowns for their body linen, “tripoting like little dogs” about their domestic concerns; the time of Mélusine's disenchantment, when beauty and grace and womanly niceness have disappeared, and only an unsavoury little animal remains behind.

Madame Louise was no exception to the rest of her countrywomen by adoption. When the

femme de journée opened the door and admitted "ces messieurs," M. Delaperrière, accustomed as he was to the same kind of thing in Patrick Grainger's sister (for it is an ill habit soon learnt) scarcely recognized the charming little woman whose airs and graces when made up and well-dressed had fascinated him as much as was righteous, and perhaps a little more than was righteous in an honest père de famille. Her face au naturel, with no blanc de perle or rouge de Vénus to soften and smooth away the footprints of time, looked the face of a woman almost double her age, so worn and withered was it, so deeply marked with the terrible impress of her life; her glossy black hair of which so much account was made in the hierarchy of her beauties, now ruffled and lustreless and with the undyed grey on the temples showing, was tucked away beneath a nightcap not of the freshest; her trim little figure was hidden under a coarse black casaque, frayed and stained; her feet in slipshod shoes and wrinkled stockings, and her unwashed hands with the soiled frills round her throat

and wrists, were by no means so seductive as they were after eleven o'clock; in a word, it was the hour of her disenchantment like a small Mélusine as she was, and where you read, what you very seldom did read with Madame Louise, the Truth in letters four feet and ten inches high.

As the party entered the little woman stood aghast—her first thought given to her condition, the second to the meaning of the inroad. Her dismay lasted only a moment. Smiling, gracious, all her artificial self flowing like a waxen surface over this unlovely revelation of nature, she affected a pretty little movement of shame at being thus untimely taken; then she heroically effaced herself, and begged the gentlemen to give themselves the trouble of reposing themselves—which was rather difficult considering the number of square inches contained in the apartment, and those to be accommodated.

To Harry the whole thing was simply amazing. The untidy state of the room; the bed in the alcove; madame's own personal uncleanliness and

disorder, as well as her downright ugliness—she who had been in a manner so pretty—a bad manner, but still pretty; the smallness of the apartment; and the unconcern with which his companions viewed these, to him, so embarrassing matters, a little bewildered him and a good deal disgusted; and he felt very pharisaical and excessively English, and disposed to thank God that he was born on the right side of the British Channel, and that Ellen Campbell was not a Parisian who lived in her bedroom and looked like an old witch in the morning. But he was ashamed too as well as disgusted; being a modest, well-conducted youth, and unacquainted with things “queer.”

Then the business on hand was entered into, and M. Delaperrière as spokesman said gravely: “Madame, we have come for two young English ladies whom it seems you have surreptitiously taken from the custody of their parents. Would you have the kindness to produce them?”

“This is Gregory’s doing,” thought the little woman; “and yet how is M. Delaperrière involved

in the affair? . . . I have had my two nieces staying with me for a short time, monsieur," she replied aloud; "but they have returned to England for some days." She spoke in French, but she spoke so clearly that Harry could follow her easily.

"They were not in England yesterday," said Harry in English; and M. Delaperrière translated for the benefit of the lawyer and the sergent de ville.

"No? that surprises me!" she answered; and her face took an expression of concern which would have been more effective if she had had her rouge on: "I have sent them home nevertheless, and I cannot understand how they have not arrived."

Harry turned to M. Delaperrière, and M. Delaperrière shrugged his shoulders.

"Search the apartment, gentlemen," continued Madame Louise, "and assure yourselves that they are not concealed in any part; for the rest, it is not so large that I could conceal them; but satisfy yourselves, and search."

The sergent de ville stood by the door, impassive

not to say grim ; but he smiled with a peculiar twist of his spiral moustaches when la petite madame said this, and shifted his feet as the sole relief to his feelings permissible at the moment.

“ They never did live here as far as I understood,” said M. Delaperrière. “ Where is Madame Amadée ? ”

“ Plait-il ? ” said Madame Louise.

“ You know her ; Madame Amadée, au septième ; she who lodged these demoiselles,” returned M. Delaperrière.

“ Monsieur knows the internal economy of the house well,” said Madame Louise levelling her eyes at him. They were not so dark or so expressive without their antimony, and had a harder and more hungry look somehow than usual. Decidedly this hour of disenchantment was very fatal to Madame Trébuchet !

“ A little ! ” said M. Delaperrière carelessly ; “ I know so much as this, but this gentleman,” pointing to the sergent de ville, “ knows more than I.”

“Madame Amadée and the two young English ladies are in the Rue Blanche au Marais, numéro 97,” said the man in a cold mechanical voice.

“Ah!” said Harry, fetching his breath almost with a sob as the thought of Aura and her delight at the restitution of her children, and his own pride in being the means by which she would regain them, rushed over him in the one delicious throb of the young man’s first public work well accomplished.

Madame’s face grew dark: “If this gentleman knew so well where to find the little girls, of what good to come to me at a moment so unusual and improper?” she asked fiercely.

But fierceness was not her rôle. Suavity, graciousness, and bending with the storm, slipping from under a disagreeable rather than fighting against it, and the merit of frankness when the game was up—these were her weapons, or rather her means of salvation; and hitherto she had found them efficacious enough. “Ah well!” she said laughing, “I confess I have been guilty of a little falsehood, pardonable in an aunt

loving the children of her dear sister; I have not sent my dearest little girls back to that cold triste English home of theirs, whence I withdrew them from the cruelties and oppressions of a step-mother who made their lives miserable, who educated them ill, and who let them run to the right and to the left, keeping no kind of care over them. It was my duty to withdraw them from these pernicious influences—the duty of love and affinity if against the law,” she continued solemnly; “and I cannot repent even if I suffer.”

“I am afraid madame will have to suffer,” said the lawyer sententiously.

They all agreed in treating the little thief with outside respect. That was because she was “charming,” and understood the proprieties of society. A more vulgar criminal would have had scantier measure of politeness, fewer “madames” if any, and would very probably have been tutoied rudely.

“And now,” said M. Delaperrière, “if madame will be good enough to arrange herself, we will all proceed to this Rue Blanche au Marais, and

satisfy ourselves as to the condition of the nieces."

There was no help for it, and Madame Louise did the only thing left to her—yielded with a good grace. Pleasantly bidding the gentlemen amuse themselves while she "*se débarbouillait*" she slipped into her doll's dressing closet; and in due time if long, emerged therefrom dressed, powdered, painted to perfection, in her well-fitting black silk, her cashmere, her ravishing bonnet, and her miraculous chaussure, looking the very Venus of Parisiennes—a Boulevard goddess, the mother of innumerable Loves. And, tripping down stairs and past the concierge and into the street, she had the art to make her cortège bear the appearance of a triumph, and to make her captors appear her escort. The which roused Harry into scarce repressible wrath; but imbued M. Delaperrière, the lawyer, and the sergent de ville with respect and admiration commingled.

While they were walking on the look-out for a *rémise*, Madame Louise said softly to the banker, "Monsieur, I have lately heard from my brother

Gregory, with his address. Shall I give it you now?"

"*Merci, ma belle,*" he answered in the same key; "*tu es trop tard!*"

Louise shrugged her shoulders. "Do you mean to say he has sacrificed himself to be revenged on me?" she said.

"Wait; have a little patience, and in a short time all will be revealed," replied the banker, handing her gallantly into the carriage. And away they all drove to number ninety-seven, and Madame Amadée's poor little drooping prisoners.

Into a stifling dirty court, where two hideous women were beating the wool of a dilapidated mattress, up a narrow winding staircase—what would have been the *escalier de service* in a decent house—with rents in the stairs and unwholesome stains and blisters like plague spots on the walls, dirty, impure, and squalid with the squalor of vice and poverty together; a few miserable children in brioche caps and without waists, pale, unwashed, and dwarfed, clinging to the skirts of women with coloured handkerchiefs knotted round their heads;

one or two villanous-looking men not in blouses, and some that were, tattered and unkempt and but little like the honest ouvriers of France; through such a population, and into such a den, did the party accompanying Madame Louise penetrate, bringing out all the inhabitants to stare at them—so rare a sight was it to see a respectable person among them. The sergent de ville led the way, and after mounting till Harry thought surely the stairs were endless and had lost the top altogether, he stopped before a low, stained, worm-eaten garret door, and knocking, said gruffly: “Ouvre.”

There was a shuffling noise, a woman's voice speaking hastily and harshly, and then Madame Amadée, tall, gaunt, disturbed, appeared at the door and asked, “what was wanted?”

“The young English ladies,” said the sergent de ville; and they all walked forward into the low, dark, unfurnished garret, where Jasper Trelawney's children were concealed—Madame Louise saying amiably; “Good day, my good Madame Amadée, and how are you and my dearest little girls this

morning?" making her a sign to accept her cue, and to speak as if nothing particular was the matter.

"But where are they?" said Harry, looking uneasily round the miserable room.

"Oh! it is Mr. Grant!" exclaimed a young voice; and Julia and Mabel rushed towards him, and bursting into loud childish sobs flung themselves into his arms. He had seen two creatures huddled together in the corner; but he thought they were Madame Amadée's own children, so pale, so dirty, so scantily clothed, so changed in every respect as they were from the graceful Croft girls he had formerly known.

"My poor girls!" he cried, and put an arm round each, hugging them up to him as an elder brother would have done; and as he did so, Louise said in her sharpest voice: "I appeal to you, gentlemen, fathers of families yourselves, is this the kind of personal familiarity you would approve of in daughters of your own? And this is the shameful kind of life I would have freed them from!"

“ Oh, Mr. Grant ! take us away ! take us away ! ” was all the children could say, shrieking with hysterical sobs while they clung to him desperately, as if afraid that he would escape them again unless they held him tight.

“ I have come for you, ” he said with a pleasant smile ; though indeed the poor fellow’s heart was very full. “ Come, cheer up, little ones ! I have come to take you home. ”

“ Home to mamma ? ” they said.

“ Yes, to mamma and papa and Clive Vale. Will that do ? ”

“ Oh Mabel ! I feel so strange ! ” said Julia ; and fell in a dead faint against his breast.

“ Wretch ! ” cried Harry glaring at Madame Louise ; “ if I could hang you for this I would ! ”

And for just a moment Madame Louise felt strange too, and wondered what the law would give her if this little idiot was really dead.

But when they had taken off the close skull-cap which both the children wore, and dashed water into her face, and given her a little eau sucrée, she came round again ; and Madame Louise told

her in a whisper she was a little hypocrite, and had done it only to attract the gentlemen's attention. Apparently she acted her part of the tender aunt to perfection ; with consummate skill affecting so much womanly concern, and displaying such a readiness of womanly resources, that both the banker and the lawyer thought her not so bad after all, and really a very charming person *quand même*.

As soon as the two girls had fully realized that their Paris captivity was at an end, they left off crying and began to laugh instead ; but they would not leave hold of Harry—not even to go to M. Delaperrière ; though he told them he was their friend, and the husband of Mr. Grainger's sister. They only stared at him with their large dark eyes suspiciously, and when they put their hands in his kept tight hold of Harry on the other side ; saying, when they were asked, “ Yes, we know Mr. Grainger very well ; ” but not looking wonderfully reassured by that fact, certainly not to the length of trusting themselves out of Harry's grasp.

“ Ah, indeed ! ” cried Madame Louise who now saw it all. “ And so monsieur is the brother-in-

law of Mr. Grainger?—that truly good and pleasant gentleman!” She spoke graciously, but she had turned ashen pale; and she bit her lips spitefully.

Then they all went to Madame Delaperrière—but Madame Louise was left in the charge of the sergent de ville until wanted: and when the legal forms were completed they set off in a body to England—the fascinating little owner of the doll’s apartment under arrest on a charge of conspiracy and unlawful abduction. Yet though her liberty and social existence were trembling in the scale, not once did she forget herself; not once was she other than the well-bred, flattering, complaisante, simple, and seductive little woman who made the marvel, though not the despair, of the other sex, and the envy of her own. Only when taken to Legrand’s and forced there to declare her cheat, did she lose the reins for just an instant; and this was when Madame Legrand said in a high, shrill voice: “*Voyons donc, mon ami!* who was right about your marvellous Parisienne?—who is nothing, but a daughter of *la perfide* after all, and *voleuse par dessus le marché!*”

CHAPTER XI.



MR. GRAINGER had not a noticeably confused brain ; on the contrary, he was usually quite undisturbed by difficulties on any subject whatever ; a small head running up into a cone at the top, and narrow at the sides, not being of the kind distracted by doubts or hesitations ; but for almost the first time in his life he was at sea, and with rudder and anchor both cast away.

Mr. Dysart had remended his damaged net, and the old graces and flatteries and skilful manipulation of weak places had worked something of their former influence, and fascinated if not taken captive both heart and judgment. And yet he was not wholly satisfied, and not at one with himself or sure of his friend ; between Aura and Mr. Dysart, the scale hung very uncertainly ; and

more than once Patrick Grainger wished that Mr. Dysart had broken his neck before ever he set foot in Clive Vale—which is the general wish of those who have blundered.

Mr. Dysart had no such perplexities. He was clear enough as to what he wished and intended. He understood the importance of keeping friend Grainger friend Grainger as long as he remained at the Vale; and after deep study of the chances still open to him, he determined to remain there as long as he could, and to make the best of the remnant of his plot. Any way it would not do for Patrick, as he sometimes called him, to turn a cold shoulder to him, or to be other than his follower and disciple. In counting up his dangers he put out of court his friend's awkward relationship with Madame Delaperrière—the coolness between them, amounting to almost cessation of intercourse, reducing the relationship to a mere name, and the danger resulting to a minimum in his calculations. Yet it existed; and it would be worse than impolitic—it would be foolish—to rouse it into active force by suffering Mr. Grainger

to have any grave doubt of his truth or integrity. Wherefore he made a merit of necessity, and frankly threw himself on his friend's mercy and magnanimity.

He confessed that he had been guilty of a falsehood respecting this Madame de Chantreau who had set the whole place by the ears. She *was* his sister, as some of them had said; and now he would tell the whole story. She was a simple-natured half-imbecile married to a villain—a scamp entirely beneath the family in social circumstance, and of a character best not spoken of. He, Gregory, paid his sister an annuity to keep her and her husband from the need of committing offences; for she was one of those weakly indulgent wives, and so inconsequent and foolish as a woman, that she could be induced to do anything to which a stronger mind might choose to set her. And with his last remittance sent from Clive Vale, he had incautiously mentioned the fact of having found Jasper Carthew again. For it might all come out now; Jasper Trelawney was really Carthew, and his brother-in-law. His

wife was a Dysart, their sister, and the mother of the two little girls lately lost. On hearing of this turning up of Jasper again, Louise, being very like the wife, was put up by de Chantreau—the unchanged scoundrel!—to the trick of personating her; the object being to extort money, and to steal the children also for money—in fact just what had been done.

Now his friend Grainger could judge of the awkward position in which he, Dysart, found himself when he came home and heard how Louise had played the deuce with the place. He met her in the lane, not wishing to have the pain of publicly denouncing her, as he must do if forced into public rencontre at all; he commanded her to leave the Vale at once, else for the sake of truth and justice the mask must be stripped from her face; he gave her a large sum of money for her journey, so that she need not be detained for any humiliation of a pecuniary nature; and he obtained from her a solemn promise that she would leave next day. But he had reason to believe that de Chantreau was lurking near the

place; and guided by his evil counsel she delayed yet another day, and then carried off the children—as they all knew. This was the story—the unvarnished truth; and if he had not been as candid as he might have been to his friend Grainger regarding all that had happened, it was not difficult to understand the natural hesitation of a brother in so delicate a coil; was it?

All this the swindler told to Patrick Grainger with the air of a man confessing his sins indeed, but manly still, and even if he had stooped to subterfuge, honest still, while they sat together over their wine at Lea Cottage—Grainger having yielded to his entreaties and gone over there to dine; partly on the promise of having all the late mystery explained.

“But why did Trelawney change his name?” asked Mr. Grainger anxiously. “Is that your hold over him?”

Mr. Dysart shook his head.

“All but that I will tell you,” he said; “but *that* is sacred.”

“It is all mightily confusing!” returned Patrick

Grainger rubbing up his hair: "and so you are his brother-in-law, and his name is Carthew?"

"Exactly so," replied Dysart.

Then said Mr. Grainger, as being suddenly enlightened—

"But how the deuce could this sister of yours personate the wife, if there was no wife to personate? Is then the true Mrs. Trelawney, or Carthew rather—this other sister of yours—is she really alive?"

"Ask Mrs. Trelawney up at Croft," Gregory replied. "She and I have talked over that too, among other matters, when I have been to see her. Ask her what I have told her, and what I have advised her to do."

"Good God!" said Patrick Grainger, "then it is true!"

Mr. Dysart was silent.

"If she will not buy my secret I will force her to buy my information," he thought; "she still answers my letters with her eternal 'I will buy off no dangerous witnesses. I will face the truth at all costs;' she will think differently when the

whole Vale knows this second fact, and when she can silence them and secure herself only through me. What Jasper did for pride and fear of the truth, she may be made to do for love and the sake of the truth: one pulls one's puppets by various strings. We shall see. In the meantime I have fired my first mine in letting this old fool so far into my confidence. He means half the Vale, at least, by noon to-morrow."

"It is a strange story!" said Mr. Grainger; "it reads more like a novel than anything happening in a quiet country place."

"Yes," returned Mr. Dysart quietly; "it is an odd romance enough."

"Where are the children now?" asked Mr. Grainger; "with their mother?"

Mr. Dysart shrugged his shoulders, "I do not know what that villain de Chantreau has done with them," he said. "He will not dare to harm them, because you see he wishes to make them profitable."

"Do you think that young Grant will be able to track them?"

“ He ?—that boy ?—a mere lout, a bumpkin—he destroy the combination of one of the subtlest intelligences in Paris ?—certainly not ! ” exclaimed Mr. Dysart excitedly. “ I did not know indeed, that he had gone ; though I suspected it. Whose folly was it to send him ? ”

“ Mrs. Trelawney commissioned him, and I gave him a letter of introduction to my brother-in-law the banker, to help him through ; so perhaps we will manage among us after all.”

Mr. Grainger said this very complacently, and with a desire to show Mr. Dysart that he was not the only good diplomatist and clever man of the world in the Vale, but that others could manage delicate matters as well as himself ; and it might be better.

“ You did ?—you gave him a letter to Delaperrière ? curse you for a damned fool ! ” shouted Mr. Dysart, starting up from his chair, and bending over his startled guest like a wild beast in the spring. For a moment he lost the semblance of a human being. His dark face blackened and distorted, the forehead flat-

tened and the skin drawn back, the nostrils dilated, the lips widened and partially open so that the white teeth, set and shining, could be seen between, the red-brown eyes flaming beneath the level brow, the hands and fingers curved rather than clenched, the lithe body arched and poised—just for that brief instant of irrepressible rage it was the face of a wild beast and of a fiend at once, that glared into Patrick Grainger's; something of such potency of hate and evil that he shrank before it, cowering, stunned, and terrified.

Then Mr. Dysart flinging himself back in his chair said with a harsh, ringing laugh: "Well acted, was it not? I saw the great Frédéric do that once, and by George, sir, the fellow playing with him shrunk as you did! Come! fill up your glass, man! I swear I startled you!" at the same time pouring out a glass of brandy for himself, which he drank at a draught.

After which, as if forgetting that Mr. Grainger was there, he sank into a deep reverie, his eyes fixed on the fire, and tapping his thumb nail against his teeth; while Patrick honestly believed

that he was tipsy or insane, and made many promises to himself of what he would do if he attempted the same thing again.

It was a wild autumn night. The wind was howling through the shivering trees bringing down clouds of dead and dying leaves, the rain fell fast, and the swinging branches of the trailing creepers struck with shrill sharp cries against the window panes; it was a night which kills in an hour the beauty of months, destroying the flowers and gardens, and stripping the woods and hedges, so that winter seems to have advanced by the stride of many weeks between sunset and morning.

Silently the two men sat by the fire—the one too much scared, the other too much absorbed to speak—and silently the shadow of the Nemesis came near; for louder than the wind or the falling leaves, than the rain or the shrieking fibres struck against the panes, came the noise of a carriage dashing up to the door:—and then the tramp and tread of men's feet in the hall.

Gregory sprang to his feet with his back against

the wall, just as the door was flung open, and Harry, followed by M. Delaperrière, came quickly in; a French sergent de ville and an English policeman standing quietly by the door.

“Your game is up, Mr. Field,” said Harry with an emphasis on the name, advancing to the table.

“Ha! the bumpkin!” cried Gregory with contemptuous affability, waving his hand to him jauntily. “So the luck has turned, has it, and the bumpkin holds the ace?”

“Parbleu, Field! tu es plus philosophe que ton père!” cried M. Delaperrière with an accent of admiration in his voice. He was a Frenchman remember, and wit and intelligence went a long way with him.

“Oh! he was a novice to me!” laughed Gregory, putting on his gay galliard manner, but tainted now with the insolence of the desperate man determined to die game to the last. “What is it for, mon ami? the old affair or the new?”

“For the forgery, in chief; and anything else

we can find," said M. Delaperrière looking round to the men at the door, who came a few steps nearer. "Toulon for twenty years at the least, mon brave !"

"Merci ! pas trop gai ça !" he laughed. Then, quite steadily filling some glasses to the brim, he said : "Toulon can wait until you have drunk me bon voyage ! Which for you, my virtuous bumpkin ? I know your taste of old, monsieur," to the banker, "and here I fit it to a hair ;" pushing towards him a glass of Lafitte—worth drinking.

And which he did drink too, taking the capture, now that it was made, with greater coolness than Harry ; to whom the swindler's levity was little short of blasphemy, and M. Delaperrière's good fellowship with him an awful handling of pitch.

"A votre santé, monsieur !" then said Gregory, lifting a glass to his lips and looking across the room to the banker ; "à toi, mon ami !" to Grainger, who pale and horror-struck looked the more guilty of the two ; then turning his eyes to Harry, he said insolently : "To the health of my poor little fiancée, Miss Ellen, whom I must now

leave to you, my bumpkin, to console if you can. Treat her well; she is a little coquette, but she has a pleasantly plump waist enough, and lips which only need well educating to become divine. Poor little Ellen! She has lost her grand alliance now, and her education will never be completed!"

"Silence, scoundrel!" thundered Harry, striding towards him with his fists clenched; while M. Delaperrière gently touched his shoulder.

But Gregory, laughing at his anger, said, when he had drained the glass: "Accept a word of advice from an old stager, my bumpkin; never show when you are hit. Half the success in life comes from keeping one's own counsel respecting the foxes under one's cloak, and making no wry faces over one's physic!"

All this time he was standing quite apart from the rest—the table between him and the new comers. The wax lights were flaring in the wind that rushed through the open door; the fire was crackling and blazing in the hearth; the silver and glass on the table sparkled and shone; the

wine and fruit were gorgeous in their painting, and the atmosphere was penetrated with their subtle odours ; but out of doors the wind howled, and the rain fell, and the swinging branches of the climbing plants whipped and stung as they were lashed to and fro in the blast. The game was up in truth, and the desolation of that autumn night expressed the ruin of the future. Twenty years at the gallies—and then the sequel ?

Suddenly putting his hand into his breast-pocket, Gregory, saying in the old gay voice—“ Adieu, mes amis—je m’efface,” pulled out a small pistol he always carried with him, and put the shining barrel into his mouth. A click—a sharp ringing sound—a rush of men forward—a heavy fall—and the swindler’s lifeless body lay in a bleeding heap on the ground, his blood dashed up against the wall and splashed in thick warm gouts over Mr. Grainger’s face and hands.

CHAPTER XII.



JASPER and Aura were sitting together in the drawing-room this wild autumn evening ; tea had just been removed, and it was getting late into the evening. Aura had been dispirited and dejected all the day, looking as if she had something to say which she was deferring as long as she could, but unhappy until she had got it said. Indeed she was seldom anything but unhappy now. No one ever saw a smile on her lips, and there was a certain fixity of manner about her which showed a fixity of inner purpose—a certain reserve and coldness, as if she had killed something of her spiritual self, and bore the death about with her. Accepting Gregory's new revelation as the truth, without hope now of refutation, how could she

be joyous or plastic? Whichever way she went she must stiffen herself to bear some pain, and harden herself so that she should not break down under it. Besides, with her as with us all, thoughts ever present become at last gigantic; and her one unvarying thought, "I am not his wife," seemed to hold her very soul—hovering like a spectre always over her, till the whole of her being was given up to despair—her love without hope, and her life without honour.

The only brightness in her present fortunes was the recovery of Jasper, who was now out of the doctor's hands, and waiting only for time and nature to perfect the work of healing. He was still paler and weaker than was usual to him; but he was gradually knitting up into his proper fibrous self, and was well enough now—to bear fresh sorrow.

While sitting near him this evening—and yet not so near as usual, for the small table stood between them—she said suddenly, "When you were ill, Jasper, Mr. Dysart came up one day to see me."

“ Ah ! ” said Jasper changing colour. “ Why was that, wife ? what was his business ? ”

“ He first offered to get back the children, if I would authorize him ; but I did not like to have anything to do with him, and I thought we had better trust to young Mr. Grant and what he could do. One does not like to touch unclean things,” she said with an instinctive movement of her hand.

“ Quite right, wife,” said Jasper, interrupting her to take her hand in his across the table. “ And then ? ”

“ And then he told me,” said Aura in a low voice, her face rigid and her cheeks deadly pale—“ at least he did not tell me in so many words, but he inferred, and left me to believe, that your wife ” — this was said with some unconscious bitterness—“ was living at Auteuil, but married again, and with a family of little ones ; and that this other woman, this Madame de Chantreau, was only the sister—Louise he called her—personating Lavinia to extort money from you and to get hold of the children.”

“ Louise ! I thought so ! I thought I recognized the old touches ! The whole thing was like her, not her sister, who had neither the courage nor the self-command necessary. And he said that *she* was married again, living at Auteuil and with children ? ” he repeated ; he had never mentioned his wife’s name since the day of her disgrace, and would not now.

“ Yes,” said Aura.

“ The story he told me : I do not believe it, wife ! What more ? ”

“ He offered to get me the certificate of her death, if I would give him money enough ‘ to buy off an obstructive witness,’ as he phrased it.”

“ Always the same cuckoo-cry,” said Jasper. “ Always money !—something to be sold—silence, certainty, an obstructive witness, or a dangerous fact—always something in the market by which to make his day’s work profitable ! I will believe nothing from him now, my Aura, which has for its background this one eternal theme. When Gregory Field or his sister can speak to me without endeavouring to make me buy their words,

then I may be inclined to credit them; and not till then. He has repeated this Auteuil story of course; I know him too well to expect he would be satisfied with only one attempt."

"Often! often!" said Aura. "He has constantly written to me offering the same thing. Almost every day I have had one of his strangely expressed notes, always on the same theme."

"I need scarcely ask what you have done?" said Jasper fondly.

"Of late I have not answered at all; but when and while I did I steadily refused to buy anything," Aura answered looking up. "If she is alive, let us know it; if she wants anything of you—help or money or counsel, she ought to have it—all, save the children. And then the question of our own continued union"—she could not say marriage; the word would not come—"must be decided between us."

"It is decided," said Jasper leaning forward. "We are married by holier laws than those of man; and to break our marriage for no better reason than because of the existence of

a woman, morally and virtually divorced, would be a crime."

"There are the children," said Aura in a low voice.

"The children must suffer for the misfortunes of their parents," he replied gravely. "Disease, an evil ancestry, a sullied name, poverty, vice, we bequeath them all, as we have inherited. So in this case, my wife; if this unhappy creature is still alive our children must suffer for the misfortune of our ignorance. There is no help for it!"

"That is not a mother's speech," said Aura hastily.

"No, my wife, it is a father's and a man's; it is reason against feeling, and logic instead of instinct." And as he said this he smiled tenderly, and carried her hand to his lips.

"She must be sought out," then said Aura hastily; "one way or other the thing must be settled. All this uncertainty is degrading to us both, and destructive to the worth of our lives. It is living in an atmosphere of falsehood, however it may be; and these weak half-hearted deceptions are so terrible!"

“She shall be sought out (if alive) if I spend my last farthing in the search,” said Jasper earnestly; “I can work when I have come to the last, and I shall be rich if the dear wealth of your love still remains to me. But has your love suffered no loss in the trial?” he asked a little anxiously, though he tried to smile. “Are you in very truth the same as before, my Aura?”

She turned towards him, and looked straight and plaintively into his face; then, with a deep sob, she flung herself on her knees beside him, and pressed her arms round him.

“Yet you hint at leaving me,” said Jasper kissing her hair, and keeping his face calm and his voice steady though his heart was throbbing as he spoke.

“That would not be for want of love of you,” she said with a yearning tender voice.

At that moment they too heard the rattle of carriage wheels and the clatter of horses' hoofs above all the gusty tumult of the night; then the deep voices of men and the shriller cries

of the girls; and in another instant Julia and Mabel had rushed into the room, and were both in their mother's arms, weeping, sobbing, laughing in a breath.

“My children!” cried Aura kissing them with wild delight; “thank God that I have you once again! My poor pets! my own children! why! you are not like the same girls! how thin and pale you are! and oh! where is all your hair?”

“Madame cut it off,” said Julia from the depths of her father's embrace. And Aura was woman enough to feel more indignant at this little act of spiteful disfigurement than at even graver wrongs. They had had such lovely hair!—and she had been so proud of it; and had always taken care that it should be dressed so as to show the bright tips and little tender undergrowth naturally curling, and all its luxuriance; and now it was cut short round the head like charity-school children, making them look as Madame Louise herself said “*comme les petites échappées*,” or as if they had had a fever, or worse. So

no wonder she was disgusted and angry; and, womanlike, longed to retaliate on madame in kind.

In the doorway, watching this scene with her blandest smile, stood the little woman herself; Harry and M. Delaperrière looking over her head, and the inevitable policeman in the rear.

When the first excited moments were over she came trippingly forward, making a profound courtesy to Aura as she passed her, and going up to Jasper said in a clear, caressing voice: "Ah! c'est toi donc! embrasse-moi, mon frère;" bending forward as she spoke that he might kiss her forehead.

But Jasper putting her away with his hand said sternly: "I am no Judas, Louise, to kiss and betray."

"Toujours le même!" she laughed. "Always the savage and the original! Ah well, madame!" turning to Aura; "you see I have brought back your little girls again. I hope they have enjoyed their trip to Paris; though they were troublesome at times, and their chère maman

Louise was obliged to be un peu severe with them. It has been an expensive treat to me, madame, but I hope you will indemnify me for the charge of your children"—with a profound courtesy.

Aura did not answer, but turned away in disgust; and Harry, introducing M. Delaperrière, then came forward and spoke to Jasper and to her.

After the first greetings they took Jasper aside and told him of the ghastly thing they had just seen. They had been silent on the subject of course, to Madame Louise and the children; and they had seen that poor Grainger was taken care of—putting him into the hands of Dr. Hale for whom they had sent at once; for he was terribly cut up at the whole affair, said Harry, and seemed to look on himself as in some way responsible for all that had happened. But now, M. Delaperrière's business being ended by the suicide, Mr. Trelawney must take the management of the rest on himself, and order what he wished should be done. He was the principal, and they could only be his agents.

So the reins were once more in his own hands. Gregory dead, Louise confronted with him and proved an impostor, his children restored—the nettle which had threatened to poison the juices of his life and to destroy his very being, was cut down and lay withered at his feet. Only one leaf remained, and that must be grasped—whether it stung or not.

“Well, Louise!” he said, coming back to the fireplace where Louise was standing with her dainty little foot on the fender, displaying her bronzed boot, trim ankle, and worked flounced petticoat, generally found to be an irresistible combination.

As he spoke she turned sweetly towards him, bending her head and saying in the meekest little voice: “Ton plaisir, mon frère?”

“What induced you to attempt this absurd trick of yours here?” continued Jasper speaking sternly.

“I have attempted no absurd trick, my brother,” said Madame Louise with almost infantile simplicity.

“No!—not in coming here as you did and stealing the children?”

“Coming here as I did, Jaspaire!” with arched eyebrows: “how did I come here? I was surely not ridicule in any way; and carried myself as an honest lady. I came because Gregory wished me to do so; it was his proposal not my own. I certainly took away my nieces to give them some idea of Paris life. I thought them too rude and gauche here; and for poor Lavinia’s sake wished to do them a service. I had not the least desire to keep them, I do assure you, mon frère: they were far too much on my back for that!—and life in Paris is too dear for the luxury of children. This is all I have done; and I do not see the absurd trick you speak of.”

“What! passing yourself off as my wife no trick?” said Jasper.

She crisped her lips smiling. “It was not I who said so, mon frère. Ask any one—Madame Price, Monsieur Bennet, any of my friends you will—they cannot say I ever called myself your wife, not even to you, madame,” to Aura. “No!”

she cried, holding up her forefinger as Aura was about to speak; "never, madame! I was Madame de Chantreau tout bonnement, not Mrs. Carthew, nor Mrs. Trelawney either; and I challenge you to repeat one assertion to the contrary."

"Your complaints of being deserted by my husband," put in Aura.

"Pardon, madame! by *my* husband not by yours. Is yours the only husband in the world, so that I must have meant him when I spoke of my own? Trébuchet did desert me, the rascal!—he is now in Algeria—I wish he was in Cayenne!—so that when I spoke of this trouble I told no falsehood, and it was not my fault if you made your own interpretations. I have told no falsehoods from first to last," she added firmly.

"Madame!" cried Aura.

"Vrai, madame!" she said tossing her head. "It was you stupid country ignorants that chose to accept your own absurd inferences as my statements. You opened your foolish mouths, and swallowed the flies of your own making; and now you

turn against me because you were gobemouches, and your maggots—don't you call them in your barbarous tongue?—have disagreed with you."

"And your lockets to the children with your hair—their mother's? and the initials? and your calling them your children, and yourself their mamma? Was no inference to be fairly drawn there? no falsehood both told and enacted?" said Jasper.

"*Fi donc, mon frère!*" she said prettily, "you too against me thus? The hair *is* their mother's; it is not mine and I never said it was; and really I do not see why L. C. should not stand for Louise de Chantreau as well as for Lavinia Carthew; so where was the falsehood in saying that they were my initials, and their mother's hair?" laughing shrilly. "It was you, not I, who consolidated those two facts, and made them into one; and a *bonne pâte* you made of them!" laughing again. "And as for calling them my children—why," shrugging her shoulders, "that is surely an every-day expression, both in French and in English!"

“And an every-day expression for an aunt to call herself a mother?” said Aura.

“I never did that, madame,” said Louise with a graceful inclination of her head; “I called myself their *maman*, which is quite a usual term of endearment in France. I used always to call my *bonne*, *Maman Adèle*, and it certainly does not express mother by necessity. You see, *ma sœur*, it was you who were a bad French scholar, not I who asserted falsely,” and she laughed again with enchanting gaiety and *enfantillage de cœur*, as she used to say of herself. “The fact is, *Jaspaire*,” she then said, warming her other foot, “you and the people here are a nest of cowards and *gobemouches* from first to last; forgive me if I say things wounding,” here she took up a strong French accent, “but I really know not all the niceties of your horse-tongue. *Ma sœur* here,” pointing to Aura, “was the sole who had courage or intelligence among you; and even she chose to deceive herself at the last, as I judge by her questions. *Dieu de Dieu!* how *could* I say I was your wife, when *Lavinia*, *pauvre chérie*, died at

Funchal seven years ago ? ” she continued, lifting up her eyebrows as one repeating an impossibility. “ How could I say such a foolishness ? If you had not been stupid as a snipe, Jaspaire, you could not have accepted such nonsense for an instant. ”

Jasper drew a deep breath ; and Aura, going over to him, put her hand in his.

“ Why did you not bury her under her own name then ? ” he asked.

She shook her head. “ Again Gregory’s idea, ” she said : “ we always obeyed Gregory ; since poor papa died he was chef de famille, and we did as he liked without question. But if you had not been a stupid man you would have looked into anything that Gregory told you, very well before you believed him. As you did not take pains for yourself, of course you were in his power when he found you here, married ; and so he built up a few stone walls, and you ran at them, and knocked your head against them, and I should think have had a *joli mal de tête* ever since ! You were so proud and so anxious to wash your fine aristocratic hands of us altogether, that you did not condescend

even to get what good from us you could. You were very cowardly to drop your name, to begin with; if you had not done that, Gregory would not have thought of trying to make money out of you. He was afraid of you, till you see your own pride and stupidity made him the strongest, and then you had to march as he played."

"You among others had dishonoured that name too much for me to bear it again," said Jasper.

"So we thought too," answered Madame Louise indifferently; "and so poor Lavinia thought. She was not so fond of the name of Carthew that she wished to go to heaven with it, I assure you, Jaspaire; so we made her little packets as Lucille Lane, which Gregory said was not unlike Field; and there she lies," wiping her eyes, "by the east end of the English churchyard—Lucille Lane," sighing. "See, how good-natured I am to give you the *mot d'énigme*!" she added; "for I know that you went to Funchal, when you disappeared from here; and I know too that you found nothing, not having the key. But I shall

expect to be paid for this," she said sharply; thinking that now Gregory was arrested and certain of the galleys for twenty years, she might be able to make a better market for herself by candour than by carrying on another person's intrigue single-handed, and not knowing all the snares set and pitfalls digged or marked out.

"Then the wife at Auteuil is a lie like all the rest?" said Jasper.

"What wife at Auteuil?" she asked, with genuine surprise this time, quite unlike her make-believe. "I do not know how many wives you may have, Jaspaire, but if you mean Lavinia, do I not tell you that she is dead, poor dear? for I saw her die myself, and wore black for her for two years! And now, *mon frère*, if you please I will retire to my chamber. I am fatigued; for these gentlemen have travelled—ah!" shivering, "without compassion. I have done nothing wrong, and I have not to reproach myself that the ladies and gentlemen of Clive Vale do not understand French; that they are *gobemouches* and chatterers, and that I myself at times stumble in your

tongue. I have done nothing illegal, I repeat, and I laugh to the nose of your warrants and arrests. If you want the commandante, take Gregory.

“Some one more powerful than the law has already taken him,” said Jasper slowly.

“What do you mean, Jasper?” she said hurriedly, forgetting her French accent.

“Death. He is dead.”

“Dead!” she put her hands before her face; “poor Gregory! he was a bad fellow, and would have betrayed me; but he was my brother all the same!”

Then, as the full consequences of his loss and her own acts came upon her, her false bravado gave way and the despair of her situation fell on her. Violently shivering she grasped Jasper’s hand convulsively between her own.

“Jasper, forgive me what I have done!” she said, her voice raised almost to a shriek. “Do not give me up to the police! have mercy on me! I am your wife’s sister after all, and whatever evil I have done I am of her blood, and the same blood as your children! Jasper! forgive me! I am

alone now in the world and so destitute! Without Gregory I shall go into ruin, for he helped me often. Oh Jasper! do not punish me more than I shall be punished. Rich and honourable you do not know what it is to be ill-educated—to be born into vice and poverty and suspicion—with the whole world for your enemy and you the enemy of the whole world; to be hungry and ill, and no one to care if you died of starvation at their doors; and to see others caressed and fêted, while you with the same heart in you and the same body are left to be destroyed! Madame, pray him for me—I am so destitute! Go where I will I have only vice and crime and a prison before me. Ah madame!” she said, not knowing the terrible depth of her own words, “is it not pitiable enough to be a criminal? need one be punished more?”

Her false gaiety gone, her insolence of spirit broken, her mask stripped off, she sank in a grovelling mass of tears and wretchedness at Jasper's feet, a helpless, impotent heap of fear and degradation. Her tears washed the paint from off

her face, making furrows through which the withered skin was seen; and her anguish, this time genuine, disordered all her careful arrangements of dress and person into utter unsightliness. She entered the house a bold, pretty, dangerous conspirator; she lay there a haggard, terrified, detected liar; no longer formidable only contemptible; a thing to crush which would have been cowardly, because of its impotence.

“Get up from your knees, Louise,” said Jasper sternly. “I will not have you at my feet—you degrade me!”

“Forgive me then! do not give me to the police! do not destroy me, Jasper!” she cried lifting up her terrible face.

“Had you mercy on me or mine?” said Jasper in a low voice. “When you would have destroyed my home and ruined my life, did *you* think of mercy?”

Sobbing, writhing, crushed up together in a formless mass, she only answered, “Do not punish me! do not send me to prison, Jasper! Forgive me! forgive me!”

“Forgive her, husband!” said Aura softly, the tears in her eyes as she knelt to lift the wretched creature from the ground. And as she knelt she looked up into his eyes, and taking his hand kissed it saying, “For my sake!”

“For your sake, Aura?” Jasper answered. “For your sake then, let it be! Get up, Louise; I tell you I will not have you there. There—give me your hand; I will not hurt you, and I will not give you up to the police. Your own conscience shall be your only condemnation for me, and may God forgive you!”

She pressed his hand in unaffected gratitude, as she rose sobbing to her feet; and saying, “Merci, Jasper! you have been better to me than I deserve,” would have gone out humbly into the stormy night, but that Aura stopped her, and told her “no, she must sleep here; she would not let her brave such weather.”

And when she said this, speaking in the gentle voice of womanly tenderness so peculiarly her own, Madame Louise looked at her fixedly for a moment, then again burst into tears, and said in

quite a natural tone and manner : “ Madame, forgive me all my wickedness to you ! Le bon Dieu knows I am penitent for having caused you so much pain, and for having been so evil ! Madame, I will try to lead a better life, if God and the holy saints will help me ; and if I repent, will you forgive me then ? ”

“ I forgive you now freely,” said Aura holding out her hand ; “ as I hope to be forgiven for my own sins.”

And Madame Louise, bending her head kissed the gentle hand in hers as she might have kissed a saintly relic.

“ My wife ! Aura della vita mia ! at last the long trial is at an end ! ” cried Jasper, holding out his arms to her when they were alone.

“ Now I may love you again, without fear or shame, my husband ! ” said Aura, passing her arms round him and pressing herself to his heart.

CONCLUSION.



WHATEVER the Vale had been in times past, it never knew before nor since the wild excitement of the day following these events. Not that it was very certain at the first, as to what had really happened; for some said that Gregory had been murdered by Mr. Trelawney; others, that he had tried to murder Mr. Grainger and Harry Grant; some, that Madame de Chantreau had claimed Jasper; and others that she had been confronted with him by her own husband, with the very deuce to pay—M. Delaperrière standing as lay-figure for the husband which he could do as well as another; some, that Julia was dying of some mysterious injury done to her; and all that her children were frightfully disfigured—“mutilated”

Miss Mason said, not knowing exactly what she meant.

It was only by slow degrees that the truth came out—that Gregory was known to have been a swindler of the name of Field; that Madame Louise was his sister personating Jasper's former wife—but how she could do that if the wife was fairly dead, they never could understand!—and that Jasper had dropped his real name of Carthew because of its degradation by his association with them. At which some said that he had acted like a high-minded gentleman, and others like a coward; but all agreed on this too, that “it had been an insult to the Vale at large to have had any mystery at all not imparted to them.” However on consideration they would forgive him; but they would never like him, they were sure of that! And they never did to the last day of his life; which was a pretty long one, and spent in the Vale.

For there was no need to leave Croft now—no other nettle being likely to spring up; so he and Aura remained and were always more or less

subject-matter for talk and gossip in the old way. They did a good deal of good though in the place, no one could deny that; and among other things pensioned off Louise, so that she might not be driven by necessity into crime again. But they never saw her, and she lived and died in Paris, where alone she was at home, under no farther fear of the police though always under their surveillance; to which however she had been too long used to object, when not obtrusive and outwardly respectful.

The Vale people gradually shifted their places a little, though not enacting any very tremendous revolutions. Harry Grant got a world of praise for the part he had taken in the matter, and was quite a hero among them; and Mr. Campbell was not sorry to make his engagement with Ellen very public indeed, hoping that the Vale might thus forget the awkward report which went about concerning her and Mr. Dysart. Not that they did, but they had so many things to talk about that Miss Ellen's mistake, as they called it, got but little attention. So the engagement was

not only allowed but paraded; and Harry, swallowing his jealousy like a man once and for ever and never alluding to the Dysart affair again, was as happy as any one need wish to be. He did not know all that had actually been, and he wisely never inquired; so it soon became to him as if it never was, and he was not the man to unbury his corpses for the sake of terrifying himself with their ghosts. And in time he married his bright-eyed coquette who left off flirting when she took to matrimony; and they got on together as well as most young people who love each other, and who begin the battle of life with unwearied sinews.

Within the week Mr. Bennet—in the same frame of mind as leads some men to cyanide of potassium or a convenient length of rope—made Zillah Price the long-expected offer; and it is scarcely necessary to say was accepted without much demur. He gave up his curacy, to the Rector's undisguised satisfaction, and he and the Prices quitted the neighbourhood entirely. When last seen he looked thin and depressed,

they said, with all the appearance of undergoing a severe course of moral discipline: which it is probable he did, seeing that his mother-in-law kept house for him, and that matrimony had not improved Zillah's looks or temper. Mr. Grainger made large public demonstrations when he left, and danced a perfect war-dance of his own composing for joy. He though, was not a little abashed and crest-fallen at all that had happened, and for some weeks after the painful discovery of his friend's true character, and that awful sight in the cottage dining-room, kept himself studiously out of sight. Many said he was in bed all the time; but that was an exaggeration.

As for poor little Hannah Marks, after passing through a sharp illness, when she was more than once nearly gone, she came out again into the world a withered, faded, stiffened old maid. No one ever knew her secret, but all could read its influence. She did not die, and she did not become hard or snappish or scandal-loving; she simply dried up and withered. She had passed

through the fire, and it had burnt all the youth out of her. In this she was quite different to aunt Dess who had never loved—who had never unfolded, so to speak—and who kept her possibility of love to the end. Hannah had had her initiation, and her initiation had been unto death not life.

On the whole, when Herbert arrived full of fiery wrath and prepared to run Jasper through the body for the dishonour he had brought on their house, he found everything as smooth and calm as a halcyon-day; and wondered how they could all have been such a set of griffs as not to see through the plot at a glance. Kate Campbell agreed so well with him on this, as on some other matters, that they made up their minds to go on agreeing to the end of the chapter, and never by any chance to fall out. And on the whole they stuck to their resolution pretty well, though Herbert had a high temper and Kate was dangerously popular among the gentlemen at his station.

Mrs. Escott only was not content with the

aspect of affairs ; but then she never was content with anything ; and before Herbert had been five minutes in the house, she had detailed to him her doubts and difficulties.

“ My goodness, Herbert ! I never saw anything so queer as it has all been in my whole life ! No one knows who’s who in the place. Here, Jasper’s one thing, and poor Mr. Dysart was another, and that little French hussy was nothing at all that I could ever understand ; and what Aura is I’m sure I don’t know—whether she’s Trelawney, Carthew, or Escott, or what. I only know if I was her I would be married over again, that I would ! It is not very pleasant to have a dead woman turning up like this, and claiming one’s husband before one’s very eyes, and Dotty quite a boy now, and that precious Tiny screaming in the corner because Julia and Mabel wanted to kiss her, and she didn’t know them with all their hair cut off like charity-school boys. How should she, pretty dear, when she won’t even come to me if I’ve got a new cap on ? It is very indelicate of your sister,

Herbert, and so I tell her; but of course she doesn't mind what her mother says to her. She never did when she was in frocks and trousers, and it isn't likely she would now! But all I know is, *I* should not consider myself a lawful married woman if I was in her place, and my husband had two names and as good as three wives by all accounts, and one didn't know one-self any more than the old woman with her petticoats cut shorter. I hate all plots and muddles—I do, Herbert! and Aura's marriage has been a muddle from first to last, and if I was her I'd put it straight and be married again by your papa,—that I would! Only it would be very awkward, now I come to think of it; for what could she be called in *The Times*?—for if she's Miss Escott, what are those precious babes?—and if she's Trelawney, how could she marry her own husband? It's a muddle, Herbert, from first to last, as I said before, and so it must remain now to the end."

THE END.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY SMITH, ELDER AND CO.,
OLD BAILEY, E.C.

