



LOVE: the Pilgrim



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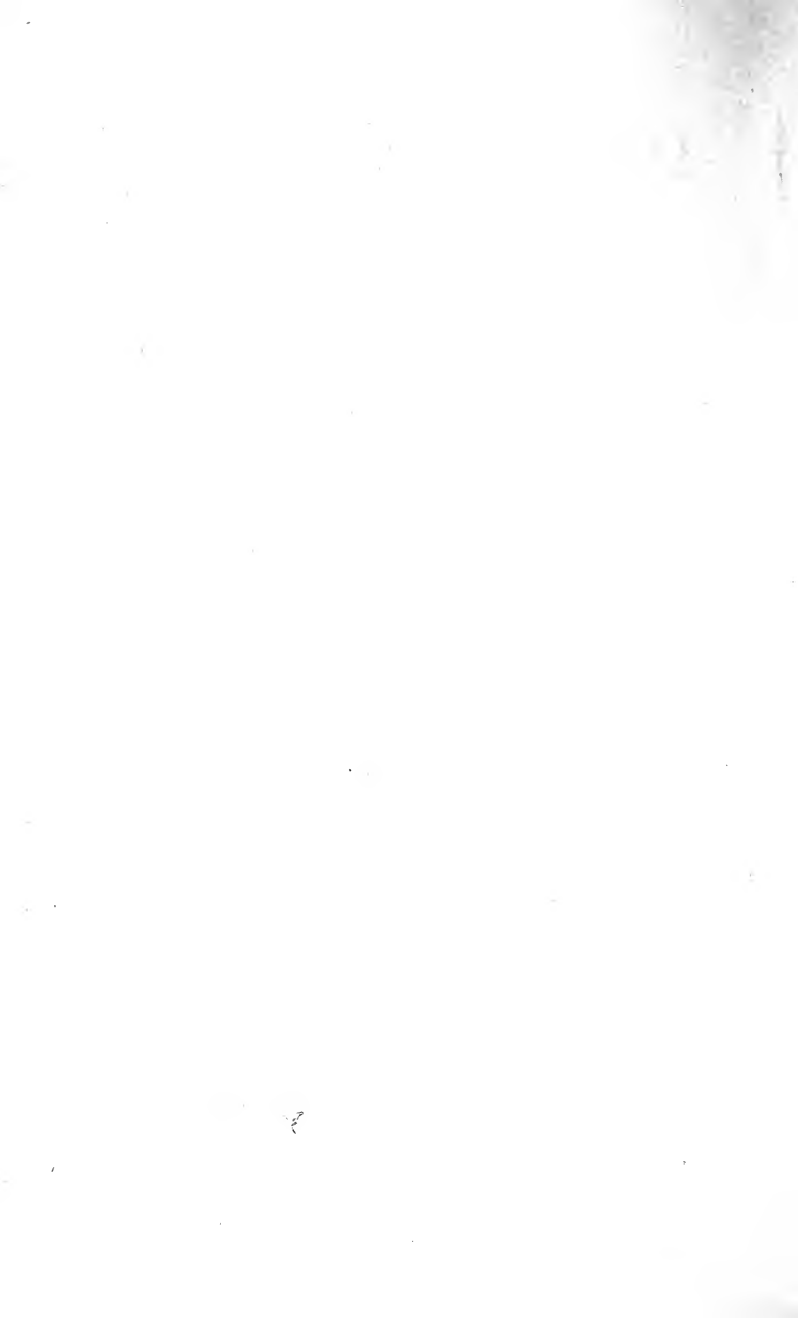
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LOVE, THE PILGRIM.

VOL. III.



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LOVE, THE PILGRIM

BY

MAY CROMMELIN

AUTHOR OF

“QUEENIE,” “ORANGE LILY,” “A JEWEL OF A GIRL,”

“MY LOVE, SHE’S BUT A LASSIE,”

&c., &c.

“Every day a pilgrim blindfold,
When the night and morning meet,
Entereth the slumbering city,
Stealeth down the silent street;
Ling’reth round some battered doorway,
Leaves, unblest, some portal grand,
And the walls where sleep the children
Touched with his warm young hand.
Love is passing! love is passing!
Passing while ye lie asleep.”

HAMILTON AIDE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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

1886.

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LOVE, THE PILGRIM.

CHAPTER I.

‘HUNGRY HALL.’

Two years had slowly passed since Hester's death. The seasons had brought their revolving changes with each month. In the busy world great wars had happened; history had been made. And while it was making, with victories and defeats, disasters by sea here, famine there, good harvests elsewhere, the small clusters of families which make up nations had had their own private, individual happinesses and sorrows, like drops in the great ocean.

In the group with which we have dealt

in this story, many little events had daily brought their 'petty dust' to cover up the memory of Hester's untimely fate. She was not quite forgotten; at times she was still mentioned regretfully as 'poor Hester.' That was all which remained, it seemed, of her life devoted to duty and her untimely fate.

Not quite all!

Once more, this second year, the April buds were swelling on the bushy twigs of the elm-tree boles in Helston Priory. Here and there, through the rank grass of the neglected demesne, daffodils nodded their yellow heads in serried masses. Over the crumbling garden walls, almond flower hung in pink blossom against a brown-netted background of bare apple and pear branches. The spring was pale still, but brilliant colours and warmer sunshine were daily stealing nearer.

Helston, which was apparently a corruption of Holystone Priory, lay in a

wooded valley, by a winding, sullen river. The demesne itself included the whole of the narrowest part of the gorge for a mile and more. And here, in an open space of grassy land, the present dwelling-house, which had been in long bygone days the priory, was situated.

This old house was all closed now. The grass grew thick on the gravelled approach; dust, rust, and mildew doubtless reigned within doors, for no caretaker lived inside there. Only at times Russ, the former butler, who had settled down with a wife in a cottage belonging to the demesne, came, on fine days, to let in light and air.

Beyond the house itself, the garden lay, running to waste between its walls, on which the fruit-trees were never pruned. The shrubberies and lawns were fast reverting to a state of nature. The fish-pond, made by the old abbots in former days, was almost stagnant from weeds, its

conduit-pipes choked. The woods were sadly in want of thinning. The iron gates between the grinning stone leopards down at the entrance to the Priory were rusty, and fastened by an iron chain and strong padlock, in additional security to their own lock and bolts. They had not been opened since the week after Hester's funeral, when Mark Hungerford had left his country seat, and never been known to return there since.

The whole gloomy aspect of Helston spoke of isolation, neglect, and one might have even fancied of a place under a curse for some sin of man. And the name given it by the country-people once in sport, but now as a by-word, was *Hungry Hall!*

So thought a fisherman slowly taking his sport up the river's side on this April day, pausing to look round at the shaggy woods, the swift turbid waters of the Stoure, as the river was called, and at the decaying mansion, of which his path

allowed a peep. He murmured to himself,
'It looks God-forsaken.'

The speaker was Christopher Kenyon. He appeared much older than the two years warranted, which had passed since we last saw him. The elasticity of youth and spirits had now apparently silently stolen away for evermore from him. He was indeed stronger than in former days when invalided home at Westcliff; was still as upright and no stouter. But his hair was now thickly grizzled with white; his step no more knew sudden changes as of old. They were then rapid, if his mind was excited with any thought of stirring action; again aggravatingly slow to common-sense persons when he mused on deeper things; tried to unravel some knotty point of science; or recalled past pleasant days; or simply revelled in nature. At such times he would have sauntered with Charles II. 'against any man in England.'

Kenyon had ceased fishing, and reeled up his line as he entered the Priory demesne, by a small swing-gate abutting on the public path. It was now growing somewhat late in the mild afternoon, and here he had ended his rights of rod upon the Stoure, for through the Priory the river was strictly preserved. Nevertheless, he still went determinedly on his way, with a slow step, being in no hurry, yet a set manner, as if bound on a duty of some customary kind.

This was indeed the case. Every day during the fishing season last year, he had thus steadily beat up the river from his quarters some two or more miles further down the stream, 'The Three Choughs' inn. Already many days this year the same track had known him never fail. He went for nearly a mile through the Priory beside the rushing brown river, edged by slippery rocks on his right hand, while on the left rose tall, close-set trees pining for

more light and air ; then crumbling banks where foxgloves grew in summer time ; again wet marshy spots rank with water-mints and patches of white garlic. For almost a mile Kenyon pushed steadily on, meeting no living soul. A few water-rats dived into the darksome water ; some rooks passed overhead. But presently the wood grew less gloomy. Larger trees stood more apart, and he came into a pleasant if narrow strip of meadow-land where for centuries the dry turf between the river and rising background of wooded hills had not been broken, perhaps since first the Cistercian monks settled here by the Stoure, and led the lives of austere, book-learned husbandmen. Rabbits frisked into cover as Kenyon approached ; he heard the cheery challenge of a cock-pheasant in the woods answered by another in defiance.

Some sleeky brown Alderneys, graceful almost as deer, were being driven towards the home-farm, and Kenyon, rousing him-

self unusually, absolutely hastened his steps towards the man who was herding them. The latter was only a labourer of a slouching gait, and whose round ruddy face would have looked stupid except for being redeemed by a sly, twinkling pair of eyes.

‘Good-day, Cowgill,’ called out Kenyon, with a sudden effort at cheery greeting. ‘I have not seen you, yet, since I came back this season. How is the rheumatism?’

Zachary Cowgill grinned respectfully and plucked at his cap.

‘Thank ye, colonel. It wur pretty bad in winter . . . and I missed you, too, so I did. Glad to see you back again. Up yonder in that there cottage they put me in, below the old tower, though Mr. Russ and his wife are hard by, never so much as a “How are ye to-day?” do *they* care if a man’s joints was twisted into a crow’s-nest with pain. Lord! up in yonder wil-

derness of ourn *there is no satisfaction in being ill!*

‘It must be very hard upon you,’ said Kenyon, putting all the hearty sympathy he could command into his voice—more than was quite natural, perhaps.

Zachary grumbled his assent, and added, looking away with a sheepish gaze and in a half mutter,

‘Besides, though I baint afraid of no man, I *donnot* care to be so near ghostesses in this here place, if all folks says is true.’

‘Well, Cowgill, come down to see me some evening soon at the “Three Choughs,” and you must drink my health there to help your pains. I shall expect you.’ And with an energetic nod, like his old self when stirred to action, Kit went on his path, whilst cows and their gratified herdsman passed up a cart-road towards the home-farm.

The grassy meadow-land through which

Kenyon now went swelled upwards to a little rocky height, crowned by an old half-ruinous tower overhanging the Stoure. A small wood covered the sides and base of the knoll for the most part, and here a thin blue smoke rose from two cottages half buried in the trees, one of which was Zachary's damp if picturesque abode. Christopher's path wound beneath this wooded hill, through the trees, and past traces of former shrubberies, now only known by evergreen lanky laurels and rhododendrons pushing into the path.

A corner of the old priory-house could be seen at a little distance, half hidden by great cedars, spreading wide their layers of shade. But Kenyon's eyes cared not for beauties of ruins or scenery. They were fixed on the rocky end of the low hill, which his path abruptly rounded. There in the cliff face, framed by bushes and weeping willows, was an old archway of stone, ornamented rudely by some

dog's-tooth moulding, and closed by low, massive old doors, studded with heavy rusty nails. On one side of the porch was a broken holy-water stoup; on the other an ancient stone bench, worn by generations of pilgrims, for this had been a local shrine of repute in former ages. It was the Holystone Chapel, now turned into the Hungerford family vault.

Kenyon stood looking at the doorway some little while. Then, as if obeying a habit so customary it had become mechanical, he moved towards the stone bench and sat down.

Still he kept his dark eyes fixed in sad musing on the decaying, yet thick, old doors. That damp, gloomy cell, overhung with rocks and trees and tangled laurels and bushes, to hold his dear, dead Hester! She should have been laid rather on a grassy, upland slope, speckled with daisies, where the lambs she loved to see in spring-time would have frisked overhead. and the

wild bees flown by with steady hum.

Ah! Hester's gentle spirit was far away in some bright and blessed land. It was folly to think she would now heed where her mere 'house of clay' had been laid to moulder back to dust. And yet, it had been so delicately fashioned and beautiful to look at (and, after all, our temples of the divine spark within us call for such reverence and care in life), that Kenyon could not divest himself of an unreasonable feeling that she—now *his* spirit-Hester—would be better pleased could her earthly body be laid where heaven's dews and sunshine, and even showers, might have fallen gently on the grass above her gentle breast. Had she not once told him so herself? on that high sea-ness where they two had met, and the dead lay around under the pleasant clover-sod by the old, grey Westcliff church. Oh, those lost days!

Kenyon's heart ached, now, even to re-

member the chilliest of those past spring hours, when yet, as he and she had met by the Ladies' Bay, there was ever such sunshine on his love's face! and the pressure of their hands had been warm, and all the salt air had seemed fragrant of love. If he could but have heard her living voice once again speaking so lovingly to him! the voice that had indeed ever been 'soft, gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman.'

Christopher tried to imagine how her coffin might be placed inside there. It would be a satisfaction to call up its position in his mind's eye. Going further, that same inner vision strove to pierce even the ebony and silver casket, which so jealously guarded its secret within. Rumour said the dead lady had been embalmed, and looked so sweet in death, she still seemed to smile as in her life.

Kit longed, with a craving that at moments seemed madness even to himself,

to gaze on those dear features again. He had read and heard of coffins opened after long years by chance, or by sacrilegious hands, when golden hair was found twining in bright masses over the shroud within, and faces of noble, dead ladies smiled out a moment once more on the awed beholders, the next—crumbled gently into dust. Even should Hester's loveliness thus vanish before his eyes, Kenyon had an unspeakable, terrible, longing tearing at his heart-strings *to see her once more*.

Ay! and further—a fiercer passion than that of love had twined itself so closely with the latter that the man hardly knew which had the greater hold upon him. He was thirsting for *revenge!* Who could say what dark secret might not be discovered in yonder coffin, of Hester's sudden and mysterious death, by loving eyes sharpened by such terrible suspicion as his?

Whatever might come of it, the thought had so grown upon him that Christopher.

of late slowly resolved he must try

It may here be said that, on the fatal night of Hester's attempted escape, Kenyon waited anxiously in Nice as she wished. When the carriage arrived from the villa, he eagerly opened its door, and saw—Hester's maid. This woman, whom he knew as a spy on her mistress, said, with an insolent smile, she was desired by Mr. Hungerford to tell him that Mrs. Hungerford was not able that evening to make use of the carriage so kindly placed at her service by Major Kenyon.

After that, Kenyon hardly knew in what a maddened fever of disappointment, rage, and poignant fears for the safety of the woman he had so long loved, he passed that awful night. He remembered vaguely good General Doyle's efforts at soothing, and the latter's kindly companionship. But when, with morning-light, the news of the death up at the villa on Cimiez came down into the town, first as idle

rumour told and doubted in the same breath, Christopher might have lost his reason for a time, blaming himself in wild anguish, but for that kind comrade. Kenyon's grief was intense—terrible to see, as to endure! Its first tortures over, his mind turned with sudden violence to the thought of vengeance. It was insensibly a relief from the awful uselessness of sorrow—when nothing can be *done!* Now, having only too well-founded suspicions of Mark Hungerford, he thirsted for punishment. He demanded to arouse the law; to arraign the madman. If all else failed, he longed to do wild justice himself!

With difficulty, General Doyle, who never quitted him those days, strove to bring him to a quieter frame of mind; persuaded and reasoned. The good general—who was at first inclined to share in Kenyon's fears—accompanied him in all inquiries. But the first staggered him by its results. The doctor had given a cer-

tificate that Mrs. Hungerford's death was a natural one, caused by heart disease.

'How can we go against that?' asked the general. 'It would be difficult; nay, impossible to persuade the authorities to doubt such an opinion.'

'The wretch was paid for his lie,' cried Christopher, in gloomy despair.

Then the unhappy man relapsed into such a paroxysm of hopelessness and dark passion, that only his friend's comforting presence saved his tottering reason.

General Doyle now himself believed that poor Hester had indeed died of sudden fright—many persons suffering from insidious forms of heart disease died thus, he learnt. He deeply deplored her sad fate, acknowledging Mark Hungerford was, indirectly, her murderer, yet that the latter was safe from their hands. However, in his honest sorrow, the general went straight to Mrs. Vignolles, and relieved his mind by roundly telling her of the

suspicious which were beginning to be whispered among their acquaintances. Emma Vignolles was feeling, for once in her life, shocked to dismayed pity by Hester's sudden death. Her own conscience, too, was pricking her with secret terrible whispers, that perhaps she had helped to bring this about by her warning to Mark. Nevertheless, only the general's strong urgings and promise to bear her company could have induced her to go to the villa, where she saw poor Hester's body laid out in state. The little woman returned pale and subdued, but earnestly declaring Mark was—must be—innocent! In death, Hester lay looking so peaceful, so sweet, no one could see her and doubt a moment that her end, however startling, had been painless.

The funeral followed!—After this, Kenyon, who had only waited for it with difficulty, was forced to leave England at once on foreign service.

But he took out with him a resolution

in his heart to return the first hour that was possible. While Hester lived, he would have banished himself evermore at her wish. Now—she, being dead, recalled him. Kenyon sold out of the army with the rank of colonel, and came back to his native shores with a fire smouldering in his heart that would not let him rest. It was partly revenge, but also remorse, for the idea had taken hold on him that he himself was to blame for Hester's unhappy marriage. Even, of late, by brooding his mind had warped itself almost to believe that his plans for her flight were perhaps careless; and that, had he been on the spot, she might have been saved. With it all, the love he had borne the dead woman was by no means dead with her death, or become a merely tender memory, but had grown truly greater, as a thought he now could face without self-doubts or condemnation—was deepened, intensified by melancholy.

Soon after landing in England, Kenyon made his way down here. And, in spite of wonderment and protests from friends, here he had since remained all the past summer and autumn, on the pretexts of fishing and sketching.

His daily visit to Hester paid—so he now thought of his regular walks to the chapel—Kenyon rose. Passing his hand over his brow with an unconscious sigh, he gazed idly up at the square old tower, which from its wooded hill-top looked down on the chapel below.

This tower had a vague fascination for him: perhaps because it, too, was reported to have had its secrets in bygone days. It was now said to be half-ruinous. But Kit had heard legends from some of the country-people, with whom he talked as he fished, that the old monks had once used the tower as a kind of prison. 'There were old people' could rightly tell tales of dark deeds done there; so the speakers

said. But the chief victim of the tower was apparently a lady whose adjacent lands had been willed to the priory should she die without leaving other heirs. Some said she was a young heiress, others a widow whose husband died 'in the wars.' She, rowing down the river one summer's day, was said to have been enticed hither by the monks, and then walled up alive. Certainly, she disappeared mysteriously; and her estate became part of the Helstone Priory.

With one last glance around, Christopher Kenyon turned his back, for that day, on 'Hungry Hall,' which well seemed to deserve its significant name. A sad man, slow and solitary, he went back to his only home—an inn.

CHAPTER II.

OLD FRIENDS WITH NEW FACES.

WHEN Kenyon had gone some distance through the Helstone demesne, on his homeward way, he met its present steward. This caretaker was a stout, burly man, dressed in a rough tweed suit, with a round hat, a big stick, and leather leggings. Yet his sandy hair, aggressively red beard, and florid face betrayed him as our old acquaintance, the once solemnly black-coated butler of the Villa Beausite.

‘Good evening, Russ. How are you?’ said Kenyon. He tingled with dislike of the man to the tips of his fingers on seeing him; and yet he greeted him with a cordial

air that did not betray itself as forced. How was the handsome Colonel Kenyon changed! He to lie, to flatter a coarsely overbearing, upstart menial like this one. He said to himself, even that moment, in self-excuse,

‘It is because, though I dislike so few people on earth, I hate this fellow—for his master’s sake!’

A strange reason.

‘Good-evening, sir,’ responded Russ, slowly and very surlily. ‘We did not expect to see you back again in this part of the country. There is not much attraction here for a gentleman like you.’

‘There is the fishing, Russ—the fishing. And then I like sketching here.’

If ever a face expressed dogged disbelief, then that of Russ now showed it.

‘Oh, the fishing!—*such as that is!*’ he uttered, with slow contempt, keeping his eyes fixed on Kenyon with a beery stare which strove to be searching. Our fisherman

moved his basket uneasily, with an air which apparently assumed it heavy.

‘Any news of your master, Russ?’ he went on, lightly, but with directness. ‘Where is he, now—travelling, eh?’

‘That I *cannot* tell you, sir,’ replied Russ, more truthfully than his interlocutor had spoken through their interview.

And, closing his mouth with a snap, the man turned abruptly towards the Priory.

‘Brute!’ thought Kenyon to himself. ‘Yet he holds that secret, I am convinced. If he could but be got at—bribed, if it cost me two-thirds of my income, or beguiled to tell it in drink, *then*——’

So, musing, he went onwards.

The valley debouched suddenly, after leaving Helston demesne, into wide, flat, dull meadows, through which the Stoure flowed always brown, deep, and rapid, but with little picturesqueness or none.

Here and there, stumpy pollards edged the flood. Now and again came a bridge.

That, with some stray cows, was all to be seen for two miles. And yet, along this fisherman's track, Kenyon had faithfully come like a pilgrim of love day after day last year. So, day by day, he meant to come this year; and so on, it might well be for many years, till he had either accomplished his wish, or his end came!

Kenyon mused so intently as he now went that he hardly noticed the sunset, striking red on the ripples of the brown water here and there; saw, without heeding them, many signs of the coming spring and small secrets of Nature's beautiful machinery which formerly would have delighted him. He was now a true disciple of Melancholy. As saith Burton thereof—Kenyon, in former happier days, had found it true, that: 'Most pleasant it is, to such as are melancholy given, to walk alone in some solitary grove, betwixt wood and water, by some brook-side . . . to build castles in the air, to go smiling to themselves acting a variety

of parts, which they suppose, and strongly imagine, they act, or that they see done . . . until at the last *the scene turns upon a sudden*, and they, being now habituated to such meditations and solitary places, can endure no company, can think of nothing but harsh and distasteful subjects.'

And again, this passage was true of the gloomy passion for revenge which now possessed him—'continually suspecting, no sooner are their eyes open but this infernal plague of melancholy seizeth on them . . . which now, by no means, no labour, no persuasions they can avoid, they cannot be rid of, they cannot resist.'

So, gloating on his bitter thoughts, which yet were in a manner sweet to the man, Kenyon went musing on his way. His walk ended at a so-called village: in reality a cluster of small houses, white-washed and comfortable, but far from picturesque, surrounding three cross-lanes. There were also a small old church and a

large modern rectory: the latter, indeed, quite a handsome country-house, rearing its head with assurance above a high wall, suggestive of peach and cherry-trees.

The young clergyman of this fat living was just then crossing the small village green, among the geese and children, when he caught sight of Kenyon rather wearily returning. His face brightened, his strides turned, and, with his black skirts flapping round his lanky, big-boned figure, he exclaimed, with urgency,

‘Good-evening, Colonel Kenyon; how are you? Pray come up to the rectory—I was just going home, and it will be quite a boon if you will enliven my solitude. You will stay for dinner?’ (persuasively). ‘Really, in this great house you were kind enough to exalt me to, I feel sometimes like—like a mouse alone in St. Paul’s.’

‘A very clerical comparison, my dear Armytage,’ smiled Kenyon, feebly, as if

only rousing from his dreams to the waking world around him.

He said neither yea nor nay to the invitation. However, Edward Armytage (for this was the former collegian he had first met at Westcliff) took cheerful possession of his arm and led him off, a not unwilling captive. Kit had indeed obtained this excellent living for the young man last year, with infinite trouble. He had begged the presentation from a county magnate of those parts, a former comrade in the regiment, and one of Kenyon's own few men-friends (Kit had never had but two or three in life, but these had been very closely knit in soul to him). This friend was now supposed to be dying in a foreign health resort: 'Just my luck,' regretted our colonel, mournfully, and then chid himself, remembering, 'Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither: ripeness is all.' However, his Jonathan, 'willing to pleasure' Kit, as the

old saying goes, before he should lose the power thereof, gave young Armytage the living, thereby incensing Mark Hungerford into a day or two of fierce frenzy. Kenyon had reckoned on thus angering his enemy, with a secret gloomy joy: but also he had exerted himself for Hester's sake, knowing she had been fond of this formerly raw young cousin,

All he now did, indeed, was done 'for Hester's sake.'

They reached the rectory; and entered a large and bright but barely-furnished drawing-room, where on a desert of boarded floor was a small island of a Turkey rug, a table littered with writing materials, and two arm-chairs. A modest set of book-shelves was filled with works of theology, and college prizes.

'Just my college-room furniture, you see,' apologised Edward; adding heartily, 'Doesn't it all look desolate? Why, the house is so still sometimes—when my old

cook is nearly a mile off in her scullery—that I have shouted aloud here, to make the ceiling ring, just to give myself the feeling of having company.’

‘You will have to marry,’ said Kenyon, slightly amused, and watching him almost affectionately, as he moved noisily about, trying to tidy the general confusion with shoves, and pushes, and bangs. No matter: was he not an Armytage?

‘Marry! not I—I have a better plan than that,’ cried the young man, joyously. ‘Who do you think is coming to spend the summer with me? Aunt Bessie! (Mrs. Armytage, you know)—Yes, she has signed and sealed the agreement, as her husband has just got an order from the Spanish government to go and do some great works out there. So, meanwhile, she is really coming here with all her family—the whole tribe.’

‘You don’t say so,’ uttered Kenyon, almost too taken aback to be glad. ‘She

was a great friend of mine ; but I have not seen her since—since Westcliff days.’

Edward Armytage could hardly forbear looking at him a little inquisitively. He knew of his guest’s daily journey to the Priory ; yes, even to the chapel (as the mausoleum was still often called). In his frequent visiting among the poor, he could not stop his ears to scraps of gossip which they *would* tell. And he was sorry, very sorry for Colonel Kenyon’s growing melancholic mania, as he termed it. Certainly this man, so changed, reserved, and shunning society, must have loved Hester very deeply in bygone days ; but time should heal these wounds, or else one’s mind is not in a sound and right state, thought the young caretaker of souls. So he had resolved some time ago to do what he could in rousing his friend, in return for the good offices done to himself by Kenyon.

They two now dined together ; and after dinner, when men’s tongues are unloosed

and bodily satisfaction makes minds less guarded, they began to talk of bygone days—of Westcliff.

Now and again Kit sighed heavily. It must be owned that Edward drew him on to talk with all the kind cunning in his power, thinking it might ease his guest's mind. This had at last the desired effect. For, as Armytage spoke of poor Hester frequently, with as natural an air as possible, his affectionate remembrance of her, by its sympathy, thawed Kit's frozen reserve. Like a long ice-bound stream when spring suns come, at last his heart found passionate utterance; and he could no more check his natural affection than the rushing of a rapid river. Though his words were few, they told much!

He spoke openly of Hester's martyrdom of marriage; the affronts, hidden sufferings, and fears she had endured bravely, smiling with a light upon her face as from another and heavenly sphere.

Edward was startled. He had never before heard such an authentic account of Mark Hungerford and his madness. The young man's indignation and pity so grew, as he heard the little details of poor Hester's sufferings in the 'glistening grief' the world called a splendid match, that Kenyon, carried away by this rush of fellow-feeling, thankful to share the load on his heart with another at last, told him all he suspected. And more——

He confided in Armytage something (not yet the actual whole) of the revengeful passion in his heart: the longing to *know* whether Hester's embalmed body might not still show traces of foul play.

'It might be done—we might contrive somehow to *see it!* to get into the chapel,' he ended, sinking his voice almost to a whisper at the suggestion, and eyeing his companion to see how he took it.

'But . . . but——' Armytage replied, staggered at the idea, and temporising so as

to gain more time for reflection. 'Even if you—if one did succeed (which, mind you! is monstrously improbable, if you think of doing such a thing secretly)——'

'It must be done secretly,' burst in Kenyon, impatiently. 'What right have we to get the vault opened, you or I? Oh, one knows enough of "the law's delay!"—How could we ever get its machinery put in motion on a private suspicion, after two years? I did try—out at Nice—and failed! The doctor's certificate of a death from heart-disease was against us. He was suborned, no doubt—paid for his work! but it is an enormous obstacle. And the coroner of these parts, I have found out after private inquiries, would be an especially difficult man to deal with. No, no . . . suppose we contrive it in secret, and that our belief is proved groundless, why, silence is golden, and no harm is done. *But if I am right! why, then——*'

‘Yes, what then?’ repeated the younger man, earnestly.

Kenyon remained darkly silent: so Edward went on,

‘I only want to see where this will lead us. There must be a public inquiry, a nine days’ scandal, and this maniac—if so proved—will be locked up.’

‘Where he can harm no more people,’ approved Kenyon.

‘True; that is the one great benefit, if he is really dangerous. Otherwise . . . well, I have never seen Hester’s little girl; but, for the child’s sake, I should think it was better to let the ashes of the past remain unstirred.’

‘Justice is justice!’ cried Kenyon, firing up.

There was a short silence; then Edward said, very gently,

‘Granted! But . . . *would Hester have wished it?*’

Kenyon rested his head on his hand,

and, with his elbow on the table, stared at the blank wall opposite. They were smoking together in the empty drawing-room; and, as the days were not yet sufficiently long to allow them to go out of doors or dispense with light, they had a reading-lamp on the table. The shadowy twilight of the big room affected Kenyon's nerves, keenly susceptible to all impressions, so that what with the subject of their talk, which had stirred all his deepest feelings, the dead silence now between the men, and the semi-darkness around, he could have fancied he saw Hester's own self, like a pale vision, against the opposite darkened wall—looking at him reproachfully. He sighed heavily, and, rousing himself, the dream-shape he had all but conjured into a real illusion of his senses vanished.

Once more Armytage cautiously entered on the subject. It was, indeed, too grave to be lightly dismissed.

‘I do not say justice should not be done; but let us look at this matter all round,’ he urged, taking a common-place sensible tone that sounded strange as from the younger man towards his elder. But then Edward judged that a good blow of fresh air on the idea as such a ‘talking it over’ might give, was the best remedy for Kenyon’s state of mind which had grown like a closed and dark room of late. The young rector reasoned, argued, and said his best in the discussion that followed on the side of forgiveness—even towards Mark Hungerford.

‘Oh, I can forgive injuries to myself easily enough; yes, the worst,’ Kenyon passionately retorted, striking the table with his open hand. ‘But injuries done to her; *never!*’

‘It is far more difficult; but that is precisely what we ought to go on to do, I believe,’ Edward meditatively replied, studying his pipe; feeling an itching to preach

on the subject next Sunday, which he promptly put a stop to. In his secret heart, he believed that Kenyon had been misled by his own grief and indignation and fears for Hester, till brooding on this idea had encouraged it almost to fixed hallucination.

His own view was, that Hungerford being now absent nearly two years on lengthy travels (no one now knew well where), nothing could be done against him. On his return, if madness again showed itself, why, then proceed to shut him up, for little Ada's sake!—but not for this most terrible of old scores. That would be a blot for ever on the family scutcheon. And, therefore, he strove to banish the idea of getting access to the vault from Kenyon's mind. It was a hurtful thought for such a solitary man, he felt convinced; but did not say so. Kenyon was obliged to seemingly give his assent to much, but yet—he remained 'of the same opinion still.'

‘I will walk down to the “Three Choughs” with you,’ said Armytage, heartily, as his guest rose to depart. And Kit in secret was glad of the young man’s company, as they strolled half-a-mile further down the road by the river. ‘You said this evening that I was lonely, but it strikes me you are far more so. I have at least plenty of work,’ went on the fortunate rector of the parish. ‘It seems such a pity for you, if I may say so, with your powers and—and all that. You know “it is not good for man to be alone.”’

‘My life is wasted. It has been of no use to myself or to others, and it is too late to begin over again,’ returned Kenyon, with a cynical laugh. ‘But you would never have made a hermit, and loved sweet solitude, I see.’

‘I should not. The worst part of a man comes out in isolation, I believe . . . Why, one’s heart becomes as dry as dust, unless it has living joys and sorrows to

feed on—then misery of mind generally follows . . . Certainly, a man of artistic sensibilities may find solace in the beauty of nature, but still——’

‘But still! confess, my good preacher, that men’s lives are oftenest a mystery to themselves and to the wisest onlookers of the game,’ Kenyon sadly mocked. ‘Here was I, brought up luxuriously, all my tastes for the vanities and delights of this pleasant, hollow world of ours fostered. Later! I found myself turned out of Babylon to toil among other slaves in, as it were, the world’s desert. And poverty seems to have nipped all my best aspirations, and even my efforts, like a bitter frost. Some men in my place could and do struggle bravely to better their fortunes—at least, they may learn to lop off and prune their tastes and wants for good and all. Many don’t, but are simply failures in life. I have failed.’

Armytage did not know what to answer.

They reached the 'Three Choughs,' an almost painfully white-washed, little inn, with its sign swinging from an apple-tree close by.

It was a quiet and clean old-fashioned house of its kind. Yet Armytage wondered, as he followed Kenyon down two steps into the decidedly damp-smelling best-parlour where the colonel lived—noticed the low ceiling and the horse-hair-covered furniture which vainly strove to redeem its character for harshness by a profusion of snowy, crocheted antimacassars, as objectionable as their name. Then, as he eyed the sea-shells and wax-flower ornaments on the mantel-piece and side-table, the excruciating coloured prints on the walls, he marvelled more than ever, that a man with tastes and habits like Kenyon could endure to live here solitary for months, of his own free choice.

Kenyon had asked Edward in to show him a new invention in artificial flies. As

he came to the table with his candle to display this, the light fell on a black-edged letter, marked, 'Immediate,' lying there awaiting him, and bearing the Westcliff post-mark. There was no telegraph wire then in that part of the country.

'Will you excuse my just seeing what this can mean, Armytage?' he said, wonderingly. 'Luckily, for such news, I have no near relations left to feel alarmed for. Still, if one of the others is dead, I cannot imagine why they should write at all to me—a poor cousin.'

The letter was from the Kenyons' family lawyers, to say that a terrible accident had happened to Christopher's first cousin, Sir John Kenyon. (He had lately succeeded the old Sir Christopher, his father, with whom Kit used to stay at Westcliff.) As Sir John and his two boys were sailing together on the Lake of Geneva, they had all been drowned by the capsizing of their boat.

Christopher, accordingly, who stood reading this letter in the parlour of the 'Three Choughs,' was not only Sir Christopher Kenyon, Baronet, but the owner of a large rent-roll and the fine old family-seat, the Court, near Westcliff.

'Armytage!' uttered Kit, disjunctedly, almost blankly in his great surprise. 'Read this!—I—hardly understand it . . . *I am a rich man!*'

CHAPTER III.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER.

THE April sun, which had looked down on Hungerford as a daily pilgrim to the lonely chapel in the Helston wood, had now changed to that of June. The London season was at its height.

Two ladies were sitting together in the Row one day, watching the stream of passers-by, criticising the well-dressed women, and wondering why so few of their men acquaintance—at least those whom they cared to see, this both repeated often with disappointment—were here this morning. Suddenly, the prettier and younger of the two, whose dark eyes roved freely around, exclaimed,

‘Why, look there!—It is, it must be—Colonel Kenyon. Kit Kenyon himself.’

‘Where, where? eh?’

The elder lady half started up to see, fussily dropping her parasol and fumbling for her eye-glass. She caught sight of Kit for a moment, passing by with a dreamer’s unseeing eye; then he was lost in the crowd.

‘Yes—yes. I wonder if he will come back this way? . . . *Sir Christopher Kenyon*, as he is now, my dear,’ she said, more slowly, sitting down.

‘You need not remind me, Mrs. Emma. As if one did not always know it, when one’s men-friends have the luck to get a large fortune. It is a duty every woman in society owes to herself, to be posted in such news,’ laughed Mrs. Fisher, for it was she. She added,

‘As to his coming this way, don’t distress yourself about it. He is hardly likely to take much trouble to speak to either of *us*.’

‘Why not, pray?—Eh, eh! why not?’ asked Mrs. Vignolles, who was the elder of the two, with a frown and growing red. ‘Pray, explain yourself! I don’t see, for my part, why not,’ she persisted, with rather aggravating iteration.

‘Oh, don’t get excited—it’s too hot a day!’ returned Mrs. Fisher, with as annoying easy good-humour.

How were these two, formerly enemies, now become outwardly sworn allies, if not bosom friends? It might be hard to tell. Perhaps the old adage explains it best: ‘Birds of a feather flock together.’ Some people ill-naturedly said of them, that they could not afford to quarrel, having been much thrown together in the same set in society. Anyhow, their former cause of rivalry at Nice being long removed by Mark Hungerford’s protracted travels, and Edith having lightly shaken off his admiration even before that date, they had drawn together little by little, on

meeting again, by the magnet of mutual need.

Pretty Mrs. Fisher found herself coldly eyed by other jealous wives, because, as she sometimes half-angrily declared, she was not rich, nor a great lady.

‘*Then* I might go twice as far; and so long as I gave balls and dinners they would fawn on me.’

But now that, however surrounded and admired still by men, she often wanted one of her own sex to keep her in countenance, why!—there was Mrs. Vignolles ready to hand.

And the latter, whose charms were fading and purse was limited, grasped eagerly though with simulated indifference at this last chance of being asked to little dinners and pleasant theatre parties; being taken to races (though she never knew the winners), and on the river (though she secretly was always fearful in a boat).

As none of Mrs. Fisher's men-friends and admirers were to be seen to-day (those her companion still separately boasted of were fast becoming transparent fictions), both ladies, their memories of Nice stirred by Kenyon's sudden appearance, began to talk of him and of his strange life of late, buried down in the country, near Helston, it was said.

'He was always a little strange in some ways; high-flown and romantic, I thought,' observed Edith Fisher, even whilst taking note carefully of a passing skirt, with lace-flounces peculiarly arranged. She went on abstractedly (thinking at the same time she must see if her own Brussels' lace would be sufficient to trim up a dress for herself similarly). 'He was so handsome and interesting, with that sad look in his eyes at times. I suppose it was because he was so desperately fond of *her*.'

'Of Hester, do you mean? Not at all,' angrily rejoined Mrs. Vignolles. 'It was

a strong flirtation certainly; but I shall always believe *she led him on!*'

'Well, I always take the part of our sex, when I can; and I don't believe it,' said Edith Fisher, good-naturedly. She said the truth in this; for, though her principles might be lax, she was hardly ever ill-natured. 'No, I don't believe it—it was he who was in love. Now, I was really fond of Hester; but, till he came, I always thought her as cold as ice. It was quite a surprise to me, when you told me she meant to run off with him on the night that she died. What's done can't be undone, Emma; but still!—I think it a great pity you stopped her.'

(Mrs. Fisher was a little annoyed this morning, so was mildly revenging herself, in a good-humoured way, on her friend.)

'A pity!—Upon my word, I don't understand you. I am surprised, Mrs. Fisher . . . I—I acted as was right and proper in what I did, to help my cousin Mark,

when he came to me; for the family honour. It wasn't moral—so it would have been *wrong* not to stop her, when we had our suspicions,' sputtered Mrs. Vignolles, growing red again, and making ready apparently for what Mrs. Fisher called her 'fireworks.' The other much preferred in her own tiffs, 'women's weapons—water-drops.'

'Oh, *don't* get into a fuss, Emma,' she entreated, leaning comfortably back. 'I can't help saying what I think; and all I *do* say is, that I think it was unkind! If poor Hester wanted to run away from her husband, I don't see why anyone should have prevented her. She was very fond of Kit; and she hated Mr. Hungerford, I am sure—at least, any wife ought to have done so . . . Wrong!—not moral or proper? Fiddlestick, my dear! Mr. Hungerford would have divorced her; and then, you know, *you could have married him!*'

Mrs. Vignolles forced her lips, at this

playful remark of her friend, into a very bitter smile. She could have boxed Edith Fisher's ears with pleasure; have even scratched her. For!—in those days, at Nice, as both well knew, Mark Hungerford had been devoted to Edith herself. Was either woman likely to forget it?

And, just then, our old friend Kenyon came by where they sat, once more. He had thought that morning he would just go to the Park for an hour, with a vague idea that he ought to try if the sight of old friends, of pretty women, could any more give him pleasure. He had even gone out a little in London society, as much as his mourning warranted. But how insipid, how hollow it all seemed! Riches gave Kenyon a new sensation certainly, but ever coupled now with the thought, 'too late!' In society he had always been a favourite; nothing new there! No—his solitude, and its help towards gaining his darling wish, his re-

venge: *these* seemed worth living for! What were the ephemeral pleasures round him? shadows, bubbles!

‘How d’ye do, Sir Christopher: how d’ye do?’

Mrs. Vignolles’ voice sharply arrested his attention. The little widow almost caught him by the arm as he sauntered by; she barred his progress. Kenyon, though taken a good deal aback at sight of her and of Mrs. Fisher, who very softly greeted him, began expressing some vague remarks as to not having seen Mrs. Vignolles lately, with hopes she was well—then tried to pass on. But she would not suffer him.

‘Why don’t you come and see me?’ she asked. ‘You know I have little Ada with me, Ada Hungerford—I am so fond of the child—would you not like to see her?’

Kenyon winced, and murmured something half inaudible to the effect, ‘If he had time—if he could manage it.’ In reality

he would have seen *her* child again with melancholy gladness, but the sight of these two women together was too much for him just at first. He did not hate Mrs. Fisher, being a man and fair—especially to a pretty woman: only he never wished to see her more in life. Still Emma Vignolles went on, undaunted,

‘Well, you may prepare to see me soon, however, if you happen to be fishing again this summer down at Helston; for I mean to go to the Priory when the season is over, and take my little charge.’

Kenyon started at this announcement of his privacy being invaded, and ejaculated, ‘Indeed! But Mr. Hungerford; where is he?’

‘*That*, no one knows. He went travelling, and has never written a line home during a year and a half! So I mean to take matters into my own hands and go down into the country—— It is *right* that, as Ada’s guardian I should bring

up the child in her own home,' uttered Mrs. Emma, bristling her feathers, as it were against some imaginary attack.

(*'Quite right!* and much cheaper than to pay for lodgings at the seaside,' murmured Mrs. Fisher, with careless amusement; which, if heard, was unheeded.)

Kenyon excused himself with hurried adieux, and hastened on. This was news, with a vengeance, which might upset all his plans—or yet! (he must think it out) might further his scheme for revenge.

Once gone, Mrs. Fisher took up the conversation in a changed tone, sensible; business-like.

'Are you really going down to the Priory for the summer, Emma, with the child? I thought he—Mr. Hungerford—did not wish anyone to live there.'

'Yes, certainly. Mark has reposed so much trust in me, by putting his child under my sole care, that I feel perfectly justified in acting on my own discretion

now, as to what is right and best for Ada's future interests,' virtuously responded Mrs. Vignolles.

'Oh, never mind the child's interests; I am thinking of our own. Emma! you must have me down at the Priory, too. Come—one must be supposed to spend August and September somewhere out of town; and, to tell you the honest truth, now that Mr. Fisher has lost lately on the Stock Exchange (it seems extraordinary! but so it happens) we have nowhere to go to.'

Mrs. Vignolles was considerably staggered. She, who had hoped for some months to reign as lady of the Priory; had dreamed of being invited out in the neighbourhood and made much of; *not* any longer for the sake of any younger and prettier friend, who absorbed all attention!

She uttered some vague ejaculations as to gladness; her own wishes; and yet some *buts*. Nevertheless, with rapid mental

calculation she resignedly told herself, perhaps it must be so. Edith Fisher gave her kindnesses in town, often carelessly flung, it is true, but still tangible, substantial loaves and fishes. And, when little widows of a certain age like herself still wish to make a figure in society, it is not easy to do so when the money they would gladly feel heavy in their pockets is more heavy on their minds.

Yes: it must be done! Like a prudent general in these tactics, Emma Vignolles gave her invitation now with a cheerful, ungrudging air, by no means as if it were a necessity.

‘Well, I declare—really! you quite surprise me. If I had known you would have cared to come, *of course* I should have asked you long ago. Empty house, you know . . . well, eh? if you don’t mind that, it will be *very* pleasant. We’ll waken up the county, eh?’

‘But what if Bluebeard himself were to

come back?' ejaculated Emma Fisher, pursing up her pretty lips in dismay at the rout that would follow such a terrible visitation.

'Oh, nonsense—there is *no fear of that!*—unhappily,' retorted Mrs. Vignolles, angrily. For she remembered very well how, when Mark left, she had insinuated a wish to keep the Priory aired till his return, and he had furiously roared his refusal.

'Was it not enough he should pay her for lodging his child, without her trying to wheedle herself into his house in his absence? *By no means!* he utterly forbade her entertaining any such idea.'

But now—Mark had not been heard of since he was at Rio, nearly a year and a half ago.

'No, no!' she repeated, solemnly, bethinking herself of proper appearances. 'I fear he will never come back—never!'

'Dear me! How people come and go in and out of this funny world,' said Mrs.

Fisher, lightly. 'Well, dear—it is a snug little berth, at least, for you—Ah! here, thank goodness! is a man to speak to at last.'

CHAPTER IV.

A SOUND OF WHEELS.

WHEN, near the end of July, the leafy woods round Helston were at their darkest green, their first freshness, like young joy, gone; when the summer was really hot, and strawberries were blushing thickly red under their leaves in the rectory garden, and cherries were netted along the walls; there was a merry party gathered in Edward Armytage's lately so lonely big house.

Aunt Bessie had arrived some weeks ago, and her numerous boys and girls were already well-known through all the country round about. The rectory party were

all sitting in the garden which was ended by the river.

There was Uda, who was now a handsome though rather moon-faced maiden of about nineteen. And Bob, who was cramming, hoping to get into the Indian woods and forests; a fine young fellow, whose face was his mother's daily sun, to which her eyes often turned. There were also the little twin-girls, nearly six years older than when last we saw them, but still primly shy, pretty, always closely side by side, and as like as two drops of water. And, lastly, there was little Nona, still the youngest and universal pet—not to mention two or three intermediate school-boys of uninteresting age, and a few odd children besides, all cousins or young friends.

These were all amusing themselves, either playing croquet, which had not then gone out of fashion, or eating cherries; laughing and talking meanwhile, with Edward Armytage's voice to be heard loud above

all the rest. He was 'making up' for his late comparatively dumb state in solitariness.

Mrs. Armytage herself was comfortably seated on a low wicker chair, under the shade of a large Portugal laurel that was sweet with creamy flower-spikes. And, equally comfortably, our old friend Kenyon was lying at her feet, stretched on an Algerian rug. (He had lately 'escaped from over-civilization,' so he said; and appeared back in his accustomed quarters at the 'Three Choughs.')

'How they are enjoying themselves!' he lazily said now, in a tone which was slightly regretful, as if for himself; tilting his hat so that he could the better see the young figures flitting about the garden. 'It does one good to see them. We old people have still that left.'

'*Kit!*' ejaculated Mrs. Armytage, in a tone of the liveliest reproach, with a look that said plainly, '*Is* all my teaching in

vain?—Are my sympathy and scoldings wasted?’ she went on, finding voice for her indignation. ‘Oh, it is really evil-minded of you to talk in that way; casting a slur upon a poor woman’s age, who in her own conscience does not see why she should think herself at all old! Do you hear that, sir?’

‘You are not. Your heart will always be young and fresh,’ replied Kit, looking at her with friendly admiration. ‘But, as to me, my life is played out, as far as my own interest in it goes—from a fatal date. If *you* had even such cause for feeling yourself a dry tree, you would still strive to live in your children’s happiness; rejoice in their green shoots starting up round the parent stem. But I have none left to claim my sympathies—besides, I am too hopelessly selfish.’

‘You always wronged yourself,’ returned Mrs. Armytage, softly. ‘Hester used to say so; it often vexed her. I cannot

help thinking she would be grieved to see you leading this hopeless, aimless existence.'

Kenyon was silent. The blood rose darkly in his face, that was now less bronzed than in former years.

Bessie could not have more cunningly chosen a reason to make him pause, and question what was fast becoming a religion of melancholy with him. He was not hurt; for they two now often talked of Hester, in sacred confidence—almost always so, indeed, when alone together.

Kit felt as if he had just received a message from the dead.

'What would you have me do, then?' he asked, low. 'You know what my feelings are. Even putting them aside, remember I am at the top of the hill which we all spend our youth in climbing up—we gain it, and begin going down!'

'You have still what a politician, what all statesmen find the best half of their

lives before you. And I have somewhere read a remark that profoundly impressed me,' went on Bessie, most earnestly; 'that many great men who had not been distinguished in their youth, were ready to give up all heart and hope when they were approaching middle life; believing that they were failures in the world. They had simply never found their opportunity.'

'I have neither the ambition nor the capabilities to be a leader of men, though ——' put in Kenyon, humble under his schooling. 'Go on, please.'

'Then be a good citizen, a useful member of the rank and file,' exhorted Bessie; inclined to laugh at herself secretly as an old preaching woman; yet trying to make her person and good-humoured face take the semblance of a stern female law-giver. 'You have a beautiful place at the Court. You are a large landlord, and have many duties that make us poor people just a little glad you have a penalty

for your riches. You must live for the public and not for your private self, Sir Christopher. *What are you staying for here, I should like to know?*'

Kenyon, lying on the ground beside her chair, made no answer for some time. He bent his head so that his face was not discernible. It was a tremendous home-thrust, did Bessie but know the importance of her question. What, indeed? . . .

Kit dared not plead any small subterfuges to this kindly searching mentor, nor allege his real melancholy affection for the place which seemed to him Hester's last home. Bessie would have urged him to rouse from this spirit of uselessly sad dreaming, as she often had done before. And he could not—would not tell her of his secret plan of seeing his dead love's face once more. The plot not yet matured, but of which the germ was so dear to his heart's core wherein it was growing! No, no; he would not abandon it.

But, possibly, she might never hear of even the deed; unless a full discovery of Hungerford's crime resulted therefrom.

At last he said, as if dreamily, in reality pursuing a train of thought she could not follow,

‘I wonder if Mrs. Vignolles is really coming to the Priory? I heard some days ago, from the herdman at Helston, that she wrote she was coming this week. Old Russ was almost raving with rage, and goes about swearing she shall not get even through the gates. It will be Greek meeting Greek, when those two have a tussle, won't it? . . . Well, *I hope* she is coming!’

‘But why, Kit? You say that to-day as if you were really wanting to see her. Yet when was it?—only last week, you told me you could not bear her any longer. Now I don't like her, and never shall!—I know I cannot even be decently civil to her. Oh, what weathercocks are men! . . .

Here am I growing grey without understanding their ways any more than when I was a bit of a chit, like a half-baked piece of dough.'

'You understand them enough to be another Deborah under a tree; to judge and advise all Israel,' smiled Kenyon, raising himself from the ground. 'But what is that sound of wheels I hear down the lane? Armytage, do you expect any visitors? for surely a troop cometh out of Gad.'

Now, it so happened, that the lane in the hollow below the rectory went on nowhere in particular, past a few farms scattered between many fields. Therefore, when carriage-wheels were heard, as now, it surely signified that magic word in an English country house, 'visitors.' The sound of wheels grew louder, coming onward at speed; and not one only but two or more vehicles were evidently following each other in hot haste.

Excitement at once prevailed ; everyone behaved after their kind.

Bob, muttering as if the seven plagues of Egypt were imminent, slouched with good-natured grumpiness towards the shelter of the shrubbery. This young man was wont to aver he was not shy ; but that he hated talking to strangers, especially ladies, until he knew them a little.

Edward Armytage, on the contrary, hurried with hospitable strides to the highest spot in the garden, whence he could get a glimpse of part of the lane deep down behind the wall. Uda rushed after him.

‘ Here comes a carriage—two carriages !’ he cried, cheerily. ‘ I say, Uda, who is it ? What shall we give them for tea ? Will you, like a dear girl, ask Mrs. Doggett to give us some hot scones and more cream, and the twins will pick strawberries for them ? I dare not go near her.’ (*Her*

meant the cook, who indignantly believed her master thought that cream came like manna from heaven, and that he ought to tie his cows at the village cross-roads for the good of the parish.)

‘Leave her to me. I’ll manage her,’ quoth Uda, with an air of calm superiority. ‘You should not allow yourself to be sat upon by any woman like that, Edward.’

Mrs. Armytage and Kenyon, who overheard this, smiled at each other.

‘Mrs. Doggett is a most excellent person, and I have much sympathy with her trials among us,’ laughed Bessie.

‘But *he* is born to be ordered in life by some woman. And I believe he could not have a better guide than Miss Uda; she is meant by nature to govern a man for his good,’ said Kenyon, more low, glancing at the pair as they stood side by side, with an almost envying expression.

Bessie noticed this—but had not time to think further thereupon. For now the

carriages were passing below; and the twins came running to her, calling,

‘Mamma—mamma! There is a lady and a little girl and so many trunks! We couldn’t count them.’

‘Quite twelve-téen of them,’ announced Nona, following on her elder’s heels; her education had been sadly neglected in India, and Bob and Edward delighted in even darkening her ignorance.

‘Can it be *she*?’ exclaimed Mrs. Armytage, bounding up as lightly as if her considerable size weighed like mere feathers.

In a few moments, a carriage from the distant station, the horses’ sides reeking with heat, had mounted the short drive to the rectory porch. A fly laden with luggage followed close. And Mrs. Vignolles herself, flushed and excited (with her curls disordered and wearing a most juvenile bonnet adorned with a nodding ornament that Bob afterwards called a ‘top-knot,’ which gave her altogether

some resemblance to a hen who has been in battle, and whose feathers are still ruffled) came fussily towards them. She drew a little girl on by the hand, who pressed to her side as if frightened, and lagged wearily. The child was all dressed in white from her head to her small feet, and, with her rosy cherub's face peeping out shyly from under her pretty hat, looked just like a daisy.

‘Oh, my dear Mrs. Armytage, you must be astonished to see me—but such a thing has happened!! You could never believe it!’ cried Mrs. Vignolles, with flaming eyes. ‘Only fancy! . . . dear me, I ought to say how d’ye do first to Mr. Armytage; the rector, I hear . . . Eh—really—my head is quite confused. And Sir Christopher, too—— But here we are come to ask you shelter, positively shelter.’ (She looked straight at Edward during this appeal.) ‘I never knew such a thing—but look at this child (*you know*

Hester's child), Mr. Hungerford's daughter, who is absolutely refused permission to enter her own father's gates. In fact—most probably, for all we know now! *her own gates!*' lowering her voice ominously at the latter words, and looking around on the silent group.

'*Oh, me tired!*' complained little Ada. Then, in a pitiful small tone, half cross, and as if expecting sympathy from no one else—but sure of it here,—she turned half round towards a new-comer who followed them. 'Adrian, I *is* so tired!'

Adrian, who was now a tall and handsome but rather womanly-featured young fellow, had now come up close. He started violently as he saw Kenyon standing there—his old *accomplice*. They had not met from that afternoon before the unhappy night when their plans for Hester's deliverance so terribly failed.

'Yes, you see. She is worn out, poor mite; and no accommodation to be had in

the village! And that brute Russ, instead of being ready to receive us, kept the gates padlocked, and had the impudence—the—the insolence to tell me to my face we should not get in, as it was against Mr. Hungerford's orders! To me—the child's guardian. But I'll be his match. I'll drive to the agent to-morrow, who is the family lawyer, too—I intend to know the meaning of this behaviour of Master Russ! No doubt, he is busy feathering his own nest so well he is afraid of being disturbed.'

'You dear little child,' said Bessie, stooping down to draw little Ada close into her motherly arms; folding her in such an embrace as she might have given Hester's self long ago.

Mrs. Armytage said afterwards, in self-defence, that the child was so lovely and had looked up in her face with such an appealing little glance which seemed to come straight out of Hester's own grey eyes, she—could not help it! Anyhow,

she gave the lead to what followed. For, immediately, Ada was surrounded by all the rest of the party, confused with kisses, overwhelmed with admiration, pity, and little questions.

Thenceforth Mrs. Vignolles had won the day.

There could no longer be any question of her returning to the station, near which was a small market-town hotel; nor even to the 'Three Choughs.' Edward Armytage hastily whispered to his aunt; and then, calling on Uda, who promptly accompanied him, set forth to break his orders gently to Mrs. Doggett that the new visitors were going to *stay* at the rectory.

However much cause the wiser ones of the party had to dislike Mrs. Vignolles for herself, Hester's child gained her guardian all the latter wished. How could that little one come to the Armytages and be refused, even did a Judas Iscariot lead it by the hand. Impossible!

CHAPTER V.

HESTER'S LITTLE MESSENGER.

AFTER a while, Uda came cheerfully back with a small air of satisfied importance.

'It is all right! Mrs. Doggett and I have made all arrangements. Only we should like to know, please, does your maid sleep in the room with Ada generally; or do you have the child in your own, as mamma has Nona,' she said, addressing Mrs. Vignolles.

'Oh, my dear, thank you—but Ada *always* sleeps with her maid, always! In fact, she is her nurse and only maids me a little (I can't afford a maid, my dear

Bessie),’ replied Mrs. Vignolles, with quite a nervous flutter at the other idea.

Then, as Uda signified this arrangement could be perfectly complied with, she added, with a flattering manner,

‘ Ah! what a good housekeeper you are, I am sure, Miss Armytage. I can see you are the sensible one, the right-hand of the family. Dear me, Bessie, I wish, really I do! that I had such a helpful, wise daughter. What is her name?—eh? Gertrude; ah, very pretty, very nice, indeed!’

No one knew exactly whether the compliment applied to the name or the maiden. Nevertheless Uda, though a most comely, pleasant-featured girl, could not justly be called pretty—handsome, perhaps; being both tall and big, with a mass of strong, brown hair; bright, but rather too rolling brown eyes; and a healthily fresh complexion, which now deepened and spread blushing.

Mrs. Armytage looked perfectly immov-

able in countenance for a rare few moments ; a sure sign of displeasure with her.

Sir Christopher, who was only waiting beside Bessie as a silent ally till Uda's return, had been listening to little Ada's childish talk, while the other children made a worshipping circle round her. He had a growing feeling that her face, voice, little gestures were all so entirely Hester's own, he felt more pained each moment. And yet he was so fascinated, and even sorrowfully glad to trace the resemblance and revive his memory, he could hardly take his eyes off her.

But now he abruptly rose, and, quitting the rest, went mooning down the shrubbery, on pretence of having a cigar. Young Adrian furtively watched him, whilst shuffling uneasily from one foot to the other. Only a dread of Mrs. Vignolles' suspicions restrained him from showing his pleasure at sight of Kit, and renewing their old friendly inter-

course. Now he looked frequently, with inward longing, at the distant green maze of paths hedged in by privet, and the pleached rose-alleys in which his former patron had disappeared. But he forbore to follow, even when amply refreshed by tea, scones, and fruit.

Uda, however, had no such scruples. She disappeared immediately after performing all the duties of tea-maker, which she begged her mother to leave to her entirely. Presently she was seen returning up the central shrubbery walk, with Kenyon by her side. She wore an unmistakeable, smiling air of success; as, with a cheerful manner, she discoursed to her companion upon the 'right way' to graft roses. Not that she had ever done it herself, she truthfully replied to his languid questioning, but she had seen it done, and understood it thoroughly. Uda liked knowing always how things *were* done, she said.

‘Here, I have brought back a captive,’ she announced. ‘Sir Christopher was wandering all alone in the yew-walk; but I have persuaded him to play croquet with us instead.’

(Kit hated croquet.)

‘My child,’ Bessie Armytage warned her daughter that night, from whom she had been so much separated that the mother felt now the necessity of studying anew Gertrude’s developed character, ‘I am sorry you disturbed Colonel Kenyon to-day. He was in a sad mood, and wanted to be alone, I think.’

‘But, mamma, I am very sorry indeed if you disapproved; only I heard you tell Sir Christopher himself the other day (by the way, do you know, you often forget to give him his rank)—you said he was too given to melancholy, and wanted rousing up and cheerful companionship,’ began Uda, glibly, in a respectful torrent of self-defence.

She added a long string of explanations of how, therefore, she had believed she was acting for the best for him, and in accordance with her mother's wishes; and how she had only gone to find him after she had duly given tea to all the children and seen to everybody's wants; and how she had tried to draw him into conversation upon gardening.

Bessie at last succeeded in cutting all this short.

'Very well, dear; I understand; that will do—— But still, I fancied you would have noticed, Uda, that the sight of poor Hester's child rather upset him. You know he was very fond of her.'

'But then *she was married!*—so, of course, mamma, he can't have cared for Cousin Hester after that,' objected Uda, opening her eyes wide, and staring at her mother with a most virtuous air.

'My *dear* Uda! people certainly should care, as you call it, in a different way, but

still they may have some of the old feeling left,' responded Mrs. Armytage, almost tartly at feeling herself more romantic than her daughter.

'But I always thought that was very wrong,' persisted Uda, still keeping her ground.

Once *prove* to her she was in the wrong, and the good girl would humbly and heartily ask forgiveness; but, oh! it was so hard to convince her.

Mrs. Armytage, after a vague but slightly severe remark that *she* had certainly implied nothing wrong, gave it up with a secret sigh. She almost could have wished her sensible daughter had a little less of this quality for which their acquaintances so often praised Uda.

CHAPTER VI.

A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE SITUATION.

IN a few days, Mrs. Vignolles proved herself a most successful strategist in her operations at the rectory.

Even Kenyon, who had now altogether ceased to like her, could not but be amused seeing her manœuvres. Nevertheless he remained a perfectly passive spectator of the situation (in spite of various blandishments with which the lady flattered herself she had revived their old friendship a little.)

Mrs. Armytage had expressed a stronger dislike than all the others at the rectory towards her own old school-fellow, Emma

Vignolles. Yet very soon that clever little widow contrived to throw dust in her eyes also. She begged Bessie's advice about Ada ; the child's health, education, character ; humbly owning she herself was perhaps no very good judge on such matters. And, what was more, in many points she at once followed the advice given. Could any flattery have been more judicious ?

Bessie, whose motherly heart was yearning over Hester's child, whose hands were itching, so to say, to get the control of it and pour out the blessings of her love and experience on that sunny little head—well ; she now daily had her wish ! During ten days that the guardian and child stayed at the rectory, little Ada began to bloom visibly into a merrier, more independent child. She had been rather overdressed and over-educated in Bessie's opinion ; was a small hot-house plant, in fact. But now, her smart clothes exchanged for simpler country garments,

she dug her own garden-plot in emulation of the twins, who helped her and petted her. Her clear laugh, recalling her dead mother's sweet voice, seemed always on the air, in some corner or other of the shrubbery.

Kenyon, who now came daily to the rectory, late in the afternoon (giving no excuse for his presence, which was always expected), would hear that childish treble with a pleasure that was pain. But yet he would not now have missed it.

After Kit's daily visit to the door of Hester's vault, it seemed to him as much a necessity of habit to visit Hester's child. But, possibly, except Mrs. Armytage, none of the others at the rectory guessed the extent of his secret fondness for the little one. Still he used to watch Ada silently as she played on the lawn ; bring her dolls and sweets. And the child was always ready to come to him willingly, and even sit a long time quite happy on his knee ;

instinct teaching her, like all children, to know those who really loved her. (And, without his ever knowing it, Mrs. Vignolles used to foster the child's affection in return by talking to the little one of 'dear Sir Christopher,' and encouraging her to run to him prettily when he appeared; with a hundred, similar, little wiles. Had she not practised them on Adrian and Mark Hungerford years before?) On the whole, Mrs. Vignolles held a trump card in Ada, and she played her hand well.

The rectory stormed—a siege from it of the Priory was now in successful progress.

Edward Armytage threw himself heart and soul into the matter. He drove Mrs. Vignolles, himself, in his pony-trap to see the lawyer and agent, a certain Mr. Smith; her smart bonnet nodding comically beside his clerical attire. He explained her cause and that of little Ada, when she—confused with inward anger, and perhaps

recalling more than either men knew of Mark Hungerford's stern commands on the subject of the Priory—became slightly incoherent and rambling in her statements.

In the end, the agent owned that failing an express prohibition from Mr. Hungerford, of whose death there were vague rumours, he could see no reason why Mrs. Vignolles should not live with the child at the Priory.

‘It certainly seems probable, I own, that Mr. Hungerford may have fallen a victim to cholera or fever in some of the wilder parts of South America where he was last heard of as travelling. He was quite alone, too, without any companion or servant, which makes it more difficult to trace him,’ said the lawyer. ‘However, we are trying to do so—we are in hopes we shall do so in time.’

‘But—dear me! why, *he must be dead!* or he would have written back for more

money long ago. Mark used to spend so extravagantly,' interposed Mrs. Vignolles, discomposed at the implied doubts of her cousin's decease, which she now much more desired to be confirmed. The agent coughed drily.

'Mr. Hungerford took a large, a very large sum abroad with him,' he said.

'Then you may be sure he has been robbed and murdered abroad for the sake of it!' cried Mrs. Vignolles, excitedly.

'Well, eh! you may shake your heads. Men are always slow to believe, but I am sure of it. And, pray, how long is this to go on? If you *don't* hear of him, we must presume he is dead, so I hope, Mr. Smith, you will then make up your mind! Because, well—of course you will let Ada have the Priory painted and papered, eh; and all made tidy for *her*.'

Mr. Smith was tickled at the decisive tone of this sharp but pleasant woman of the world, as he thought her. He himself

had no liking and small respect left for Mr. Hungerford, and would perhaps not be very sorry if Mrs. Vignolles' suppositions proved true.

'My dear lady, the law does not allow us to take the decease of anyone for granted on their disappearance, till after seven years. Meanwhile, Mr. Hungerford left me express orders that not a penny was to be expended on the Priory, whatever state of neglect it might be in. "Let it rot!—let it be like a grave!" those were his very words.'

'*Seven years!* five years more. Why, it will be like a wilderness,' cried Mrs. Vignolles, raising her hands in dismay. 'From what I saw, looking through the gates, it is utterly neglected already. Well, then, after the seven years, Mr. Smith, what will you do for us?' (in a most coaxing tone).

'Then——' returned Mr. Smith, with business-like calm, though, being a very

plain, country-bred man, he smiled, rather pleased at this London fine lady, whose dress and bonnet much impressed him. 'The will must be read, my dear madam; and we shall see what arrangements our friend Hungerford has made for his daughter's guardianship and bringing-up.'

'Ah——!' Mrs. Vignolles considered within herself.

It suddenly dawned upon her, that she might no longer have any paid appointment nor free home at the Priory, when that same will should come to be read. It might even be no worse for her, but rather better, if, after all, Mark came home alive.

Nevertheless, she carried her point, as was said. And Mr. Smith himself drove over to the Priory to inform Russ that the old house must at once be made ready for Mrs. Vignolles, the child, and what servants they might bring with them.

Russ was almost speechless with rage.

He grew redder than ever, alleged Mr. Hungerford's express orders to the contrary, and almost choked with passion at this disturbance of his sluggard's reign over the weeds, damp, mildew, and neglect of the ghostly old Priory.

Mr. Smith, who was a thin-lipped stern man with grey hair, and whiskers which made a neat frill from his cheeks under his chin, was somewhat incensed at this opposition to his orders. He insisted on being obeyed, all the more peremptorily that he had well-founded suspicions of the steward's reluctance to be disturbed by any invaders of those ivy-hung park-walls, and the padlocked rusty gates of which he so jealously kept the keys.

Therefore, after Russ sullenly gave way, —and the house itself was at last opened to receive airing and cleaning,—the Priory was reported ready for Mrs. Vignolles' triumphal entry.

Meanwhile, Mistress Emma had some

strange and confidential talks with Mrs. Armytage. These were upon a very painful subject to the latter—that of poor Hester's death.

‘No, no—I don't wish to distress you. Eh—I don't, I assure you, but still I—I should like to *have it out* with you, Bessie, I should indeed. I always believed, upon my word, that poor Hester—(well, it was forgiveable, perhaps, considering all things) that she meant to run off with Kit Kenyon that night . . .’

Mrs. Armytage indignantly but solemnly denied the accusation: explained the very different reason that moved her dear Hester to flight—told of the letter she herself had received, asking her to protect both mother and child. Emma Vignolles was truly penitent for having misjudged the dead, she said. *But she was careful never to say that she herself it was*, who had urged Mark Hungerford to watch his wife that night. Well, she thought in her

heart, she *was* sorry ! so no more could be said or done now !

But then Bessie Armytage asked her a question in turn, relating to Hester's death. And as earnestly Mrs. Vignolles assured her (fully believing her own words were true) that it seemed to her to have been quite a natural one.

'I went up to the villa next morning, immediately on hearing the news ; for I was very frightened and horrified (and I will own to you, Bessie, that, with Mark Hungerford's violent temper, one did not know what to think). A *great* friend of mine came too, a General Doyle, ahem !' (Mrs. Emma significantly coughed, and made a downward look do duty for a blush.) 'He knew Kit Kenyon very well—and they both thought it so strange, and told me there were disagreeable rumours flying about . . . Mark must have heard of this, for he met me—I was quite trembling. But still, with the

general—such a brave man—I felt more safe. And he—Mark, I mean—told me, positively ordered me to go into the room and see Hester's body. I had hardly ever seen a corpse! and thought I should have fainted, though her maid was with me. Wasn't it dreadful?—quite a trial! but still, for friendship's sake, poor dear—'

'We must all become corpses some day: there have been as many in the world as living bodies; and I should never shrink from that of one I loved,' declared Bessie, who was grieved to think her dear Hester had had no loving eyes, no reverent hands by her fair body in those last hours. 'But how did she look? *What did she die of?*—tell me that!'

'It must have been a sudden attack of heart-disease, as Mark always said; for she looked lovely, so peaceful, and as if only sleeping. I could hardly believe she was dead,' returned Mrs. Vignolles, roused to direct speech for once in her earnestness.

‘There was not a sign of violence upon her. Depend upon it, she was so terrified at Mark stopping her escape that she had a heart-attack, and simply died.’

(Oh, brave Hester! She had loyally kept her resolution. Her child should never be shamed by being called a murderer’s daughter, could a mother spare her.)

Bessie Armytage, with a sigh, hoped it might indeed have been so; from hoping grew to believe it. She told Edward Armytage all this, who agreed with her. Only Kenyon—who of course heard it all also, when alone with Bessie—gave a groan—and was outwardly silent. But he utterly disbelieved in his heart.

Meanwhile, the rest of the young people at the rectory went on riding and walking, and rifling the cherry-trees, knowing little or nothing of the undercurrent of thought in the elders’ minds.

To them Mrs. Vignolles’ siege of the

Priory was simply an amusing incident. They had daily jests upon 'old Russ,' who was a badger in his den, according to Bob, that must be drawn; a bugbear to Nona and Ada; an impudent and no doubt grasping steward, who ought to be cashiered at once, according to Uda. And lastly, in Adrian's still romantic views of all such subjects, a grim old seneschal who had been confided dark secrets by his master, which he was trying to hide, being himself, perhaps, a guilty accomplice.

Adrian was a great favourite with 'the young people,' as Bessie generally called her party, never being able to remember in a hurry whether at that particular time they were all her own or not. Bob certainly thought him rather Frenchified; and Uda was inclined to be annoyed on finding he calmly checked her whenever the well-intentioned girl chid little Ada 'for the child's good.' Adrian only allowed Mrs. Armytage's own interference, but

that he warmly courted as to his self-chosen charge.

‘Really, mamma, one would think he was Ada’s nurse and tutor and guardian all himself,’ Uda complained, with some vexation.

‘Dear,’ said Bessie, soothingly, ‘remember Mrs. Vignolles does not pretend to understand children. So it is really a comfort to think that Adrian was there to be a big brother and playfellow to the poor little orphan. He has kept her happy since her mother died. Hester was fond of him, and he returns it by his devotion to her child.’

(‘I cannot understand why they all made such a fuss about Cousin Hester,’ thought Uda, inclined to grumble in her heart. Her beautiful cousin was only a dim memory to the fresh merry girl; and the living, she justly considered, have their rights, too.)

But Adrian could not give so much of

his society to the young people as they all wished, for he had formed almost at once a most amazing intimacy with Sir Christopher. The latter had never been known to take a companion before in his long and solitary saunters. But now he and Adrian used to disappear daily together for hours.

‘I cannot think, really, what Sir Christopher finds in my boy,’ Mrs. Vignolles would remark, bridling with complacency, fully believing she now held a second trump card in her hitherto disregarded offspring.

‘I quite wonder what they talk about all day.’

Oh, Mrs. Vignolles, if you had but known that, what a viper in your bosom you would have considered that tall son of yours! what a rod you were laying up in pickle for yourself through all these years of neglect and scorn of him! And yet neither Kenyon nor the lad had anything to reproach themselves with as regarded Adrian’s mother. It was as follows.

CHAPTER VII.

A PLOT IN THE WOOD.

ON the second day that Kenyon saw Adrian, moved by kindly remembrance of the young fellow's former eager efforts to help him, he took an opportunity of finding him apart from the rest, and said, with a melancholy but kindly look,

‘You and I ought to be friends, I think, Vignolles—I have never forgotten your help those *last days* at Nice.’

As he held out his hand, Adrian grasped it gladly; then, looking fervently in Kenyon's face, the latter saw, to his surprise, tears rising in Adrian's greenish-grey-coloured eyes.

‘Oh, Sir Christopher, I have been wondering ever since yesterday if you *would* speak to me again as in old days. I—I hardly expected it. I don’t feel as if I deserved it, but still I’m awfully glad.’

‘But why? What have you done not to deserve it?’ asked Kit, surprised and moved.

‘Oh, because I was afraid I must have muffed it somehow so *dreadfully*. Oh, Sir Christopher, how was it all found out by him—that demon? You can’t think what a relief it will be now, if I may talk it over with you. It has haunted me night and day ever since.’

‘Talk it over!—yes. Will you come out with me to-morrow afternoon at two o’clock—say we are going fishing,’ replied Kit, with an inward thought, that such a talk would be also a solace to him!

‘Come? I will go anywhere and at any time *you* ask me. You *and she* were the two kindest friends I’ve ever had in this

world,' replied the young man, effusively. He added, hesitating, 'But, Sir Christopher, if I might ask you something—and that is a very great wish. Will you take me to her grave? They say it is not far from here. Oh, I adored her so——!' Adrian almost sobbed. He was very emotional. Yet Kit recognised, though he winced, that the young fellow's feelings were sincere and that—he did not forget. Besides, Hester had loved him.

'Very well,' he said, slowly. 'Say nothing to anyone of it, Adrian; but we will go.'

'Say—I say nothing, I know nothing of what is past and what is now, but what you wish me to say, or to remember!' exclaimed Adrian, ardently. He was the most loyal and romantic of confidants, and Kenyon was really touched, later, to find what a warm memory Adrian had kept of little friendly actions towards the awk-

ward boy at Nice which *he* had long forgotten.

So they two went alone to the chapel. How those left behind at the rectory would have wondered had they known. Then Adrian recounted sadly but eagerly to Kenyon all he had seen and heard of Hester during those last days at the Villa Beausite: of her goodness, her patience.

‘She was an angel! She was too good to live! But oh—I still wish we could only know how it was she died,’ exclaimed Adrian. He knew no more about it than Kenyon: yet he, too, so the latter found, thought it meant foul play, somehow, and—demanded revenge.

‘Can we not still find it out, Adrian? If you will help me. *Can you be silent?*’ he uttered, impulsively. At moments Kit was impulsive as any woman; though in these days he felt as if he could plot, scheme, conceal a dark design, and smile

and talk lightly the while, with the deepest-dyed conspirator of his kind.

‘Help you!’ Young Adrian swore he would help Sir Christopher in anything; he would be silent, yea, as the grave, as he had been silent heretofore. ‘I know he killed her. Oh, I could murder him with pleasure!’ And he gnashed his teeth.

Poor Adrian, whenever Mark Hungerford’s eye was upon him, had been as frightened as a mouse when a cat is near. But he hated his elderly relative so heartily, that Kit felt gloomily in this much they two were akin. And then how Adrian still worshipped Hester!

Later on the homeward path, where the yew-trees grew wild in the wood and made a solemn shade from the summer sun, when no living ear was near them, no sound heard but the wood-pigeons cooing in the thick green heights of the oak-tops, these two talked together

‘Yes, yes,’ Adrian breathed, rather than

spoke, as they consulted in whispers, sitting on a fallen and barked tree which looked like a ghost of its kind. He was frightened, though fascinated by the very terror of the enterprise proposed. 'But what will you do afterwards? You cannot put *it back!* It will be so difficult to open the mausoleum, and the coffin, twice. It is no place for her; let us bury her again just where we two will know of it—in some lovely spot.'

'It is extraordinary. You and I have thought exactly the same, Adrian,' replied Kenyon, in a hollow voice. 'I could have said so to no living mortal but yourself. I mean to take her to my own people; my own last resting-place, I trust; and where she once wished to be laid—high up on a hill at Westcliff overhanging the sea.'

So they two went back to the rectory; having discussed many details of a certain most secret plot, and promising each other to meet often thus. Adrian was happy in

being taken into the deepest secrets of a man he had long revered in his boyish fancy. Kenyon was relieved inexpressibly, and helped in anticipation, by such a trusty ally within the very fortress he designed to attack by stealth.

‘I declare Sir Kit looks quite bright, since he has begun taking out that son of mine with him. He is a changed man, and his old delightful self again,’ quoth Mrs. Vignolles, playfully, the last day of her stay at the rectory.

‘Yes; he looks happier, indeed,’ returned Bessie. But she did not add that, to her discerning eyes, young Adrian looked proportionately less gay and thoughtless. It was perhaps an improvement, but still he had almost too grave and pre-occupied a look at times, when he returned from those long rambles with his older friend.

‘Well, good-bye, Sir Christopher. This is my last evening in this hospitable house, you know,’ said Emma Vignolles, with her

most pressingly friendly manner, soon afterwards. 'To-morrow I go to that terribly lonely old Priory. Dear me! what stories the servants have picked up already about it; ghosts and noises, and I don't know what. Ugh!—I quite shudder at leaving this cheerful circle to be all alone.' (Astute little woman. She never said she expected Mrs. Fisher and the latter lady's husband very shortly. But then she did not guess Adrian had confided as much, with hatred of both guests, to Kenyon; under solemn seal of secrecy.) 'Promise you will come and see me soon, Sir Christopher. Come two days from now—Thursday. All the Armytages are engaged to come.'

'I shall be going away soon,' said Kit, slowly. (He would not, could not stay to see the Fisher couple near the vault where poor Hester's body mouldered.) Then, with a strong effort, he added, 'But, Mrs. Vignolles, there is one great wish of mine

which you could perhaps gratify before I go. It seems a strange one, but—could you have the mausoleum at the Priory opened one day, and let me see the inside of the chapel?’

Then, as Mrs. Vignolles started and stared, surprised, he added, hastily,

‘I believe Mrs. Armytage would like to come, too. It would be a last token of respect to Mrs. Hungerford—— We would go very quietly together: she and I—and you, if you wish it—and Adrian.’

Mrs. Vignolles recovered herself.

‘Of course, Sir Christopher, I understand. Yes; really a beautiful idea—a memorial visit. It shall be done; I promise you that.’

Kenyon smiled bitterly to himself. He knew Emma Vignolles, and that she would keep her word to a rich man, a baronet, like himself. He had not waited weary weeks, worn a mask, cajoled, plotted, hoped in vain!

CHAPTER VIII.

SHADOWS FROM AN UNSEEN WORLD.

HELSTON PRIORY was, however neglected and gloomy, a fine specimen of an old house. It was long and low, built truly to the cardinal points, and dated back to Tudor days. One wing of the house, which had veritably been part of the old priory, and corresponded exactly in its stones and manner of building to the old tower, was, however, earlier.

The Armytages could not but admire it to some extent, as, on the day fixed by Mrs. Vignolles, they made their way (for it was no easy journey) through the gates that were certainly no longer padlocked,

but yet were so rusty the visitors inclined at first to believe them bolted, till Bob's vigorous onslaught forced them open. The leopards grinned down hideously on the intruders. The lodge under the thick trees was empty, damp, and promised to be soon ruinous. The straight drive before them through the wood was gloomy, even more overspread with straying branches than when last we saw it at the funeral of the late mistress of Helston. There was a smell of rotting leaves and decay, for it had rained heavily the day and night before, and little pools lay in the path.

Even when the party came out into clearer spaces near the Priory itself, the desolation and stillness around were still more oppressive. Here was a once pretty shell-house, of which the thatched roof had caved in, and formed an unsightly mass of ruin. There was a statue, so green from damp one scarcely knew whether it was that of a cupid or a satyr. Along a

garden-balustrade nearer the house, where a row of marble vases should have been, some were overthrown, all were dilapidated. A fountain was choked; the garden-plot around it ran wild.

All the Armytage party uttered exclamations of surprise and regret at these signs of desolation as they came nearer and nearer the house.

‘What a pity! and it could be made quite a *nice* place,’ said Uda, looking round as if counting the cost of paint, gardeners, and workmen.

‘How solitary, how *forgotten*! It seems under a spell; as if witches and goblins came out on stormy nights to hold a saturnalia here,’ uttered Adrian.

‘No, no,’ put in Bessie Armytage, briskly. ‘It is to me more like the enchanted wood where the sleeping princess lay so many years. I wonder which room she is in, and who among you all is the prince.’

She smiled as she spoke, turning to

Kenyon, unthinking, as she spoke. He shivered slightly, as a strange thought passed through his mind that would have horrified the kind woman. A few minutes later they all reached the house.

The Priory had a most picturesque porch (although this latter was weed-grown underfoot, wanting paint, and rusty). Beneath this porch was a low, squat door, fastened by an enormous lock.

Mrs. Vignolles' servant, who came from London and looked depressed and altogether out of place in this wilderness, led them with a funereal air into a large hall, pannelled in black oak. A wide, shallow staircase, also of the same solid black wood, rose from the further end of the hall. They were ushered into a small sitting-room, likewise wainscoted in black oak, apparently only meant to hold very few persons from its little size and the half-dozen oaken chairs and an old settle

arranged on its bare, polished floor. Here Mrs. Vignolles met them, talking rather nervously.

‘How d’ye do, all?—eh, eh! so glad to see you . . . This is my own sanctum—tiny quarters, eh? But I like to feel the four walls close round me . . . no gloomy corners—no shadowy places here. When my lamp is lit at night, I can see clearly all round. Upon my word, I never knew what an advantage that was before in a ghostly old house like this, where the servants tell such stories—— Dear me!’ laughing faintly, ‘one does not know what to think. I’m not superstitious, thank goodness, however; never was.’

Her son, who was standing behind her, gave an indescribable look towards Kenyon at this.

‘Well,’ went on Mrs. Vignolles, regaining a vivacity more like her late self. ‘Would you like to see the house, now? This room was said to be the old prior’s

oratory (I wonder if they really said their prayers here). I have taken possession of this wing—the oldest part of the house; for really, we are such a small party, it is cheerier to be close together and near the hall. Upstairs there are so many long passages, dreadfully troublesome to light at night; with steps down here and up there—really, I declare one might break one's neck before one knew.'

Then, lowering her voice, she continued, looking round on them all (having already begged the twins and Nona to go outside and play with Ada),

'Would you believe, that idiot of a manservant of mine, who showed you in, gave me warning the very day I arrived here? He and the cook and housemaid were only in the house two days, as you know, before we came home from the rectory. Well!—he declares the house is haunted; and he won't stay. He told me that the second night, when he was crossing the hall in

the dusk, the library door was suddenly shut quickly in his face by somebody—and he rushed into the room and found it empty (of course!) so his knees shook.’

‘What? is that all?’ exclaimed the hearers. ‘Why, it was a draught of wind; or another servant.’

‘Eh, eh—no, I don’t believe that. The two maids say they were both in the kitchen; and, as they have as yet seen nothing, they are staying; though they all annoy me by declaring they hear strange noises at night, and are often fancying there is some one near them in the house after dark; hear a sort of sigh in their ears close by and see nobody—*Rubbish!* Well—I have sent for Mr. Smith to come over to-day. He will settle it, if my suspicions are right.’

‘But what or who do you suspect?’ Bessie Armytage asked, all being much interested.

Mrs. Vignolles grew red, and her eyes lit up with angry flame.

‘Eh, who? . . . Why, that man, Russ ! I believe, if there is anything, he is playing pranks just to get us all to leave, as he hated our coming in. But he’ll find his match !’

After this, Mrs. Vignolles showed them round the house ; first warning them that, as young Mrs. Russ was acting as house-keeper, she had sent for her to open the unoccupied rooms. Therefore they must all be careful, in their allusions to ghosts or unjust stewards.

The said Mrs. Russ, who was originally a farmer’s daughter from the neighbourhood, proved to be a pleasant-faced, buxom young woman. She had been married to the steward when he came to live at the Priory, after his late mistress’s funeral.

There was not so much of interest to be seen in the Priory, as might have been supposed from its strange reputation and its age. The library was, however, a fine old room, darkly wainscoted, like all the

rest of this wing. It had bay-windows embowered in books, and corresponding recesses on the other side of the room formed by heavy wooden screens that made little gulfs and capes of literature, as it were, being lined with works of every age, beginning with black-letter tomes written in Norman-French.

‘Mark collected a good many of these when he lived here alone. I believe the people hereabouts were convinced he used to dabble in the black arts,’ whispered Mrs. Vignolles.

‘Why, anyone could whisk round in these corners in a jiffy. It’s a capital place for hide-and-seek,’ muttered Bob Armytage to Kenyon, who nodded.

The rest of the house upstairs, being unoccupied, was all closed up, and its possible treasures of furniture swathed in brown holland and old sheets.

The party soon grew tired of exploring the low, wide rooms, and hearing their steps

echoing on bare boards, while Mrs. Russ undid half-shutters and let in the light on the mummy-like objects around. They all willingly returned to the little sitting-room, where Mr. Smith now joined them.

Bob, Uda, and the rest of the young people all went gladly off, for fresh air outside, without ceremony; having heard of some foxes' earths and young cubs to be possibly found in the wood. Adrian stayed on some excuse, however, having had a private hint of what was to follow.

Mr. Smith was now told of the footman's pusillanimity, by Mrs. Vignolles, and her angry suspicions of Russ. The careful lawyer caressed his dry, grey face slowly with a dry, withered hand. It was a trick he had whilst reflecting; and the habit, as also the appearance of his grey frill of whiskers, gave the worthy gentleman an undeserved resemblance to a cat washing its face.

‘I do not think Russ is really to blame,

my dear madam,' he decided, however, after a due pause. 'I will confess to you that I have found the man a little inclined to be arrogant and difficult to deal with at times, on account of being such a favourite with Mr. Hungerford that, during *his* life-time, he is never likely to be dismissed. Yet for these last two years, Russ has, I really think—(It seems ridiculous!)—but he has *verily believed in some appearances or other himself.*'

'Then *I* don't believe him! It is all a blind. Depend upon it, he has been robbing my cousin Mark—yes, robbing him!—so thought it convenient to get up a bugbear, to prevent our coming sooner to live here and find him out,' cried Mrs. Vignolles, angrily.

'It is strange—I do not myself put credit in any apparitions that can hurt, or need disturb anybody,' returned the family lawyer, with a caution that gave all present the impression (which was

correct) that he would not commit himself to any opinion. 'But, in justice to Russ, I myself offered to pay him higher wages if he and his wife would live in the house and keep it aired, but he refused. It is a most absurd idea, doubtless—but he has some unreasonable fears, and said he would not sleep here for any money. With your pluck, my dear madam, however—and your fine son—and—— *In fact it is all nonsense!*' ended Mr. Smith, in some haste. The poor man was slightly confused; fearing that his sense of fairness was leading him to indiscretion.

'Shall we visit the chapel, now?' he asked, rising. 'I understood, from your letter, Mrs. Vignolles, that your friends' (looking towards Mrs. Armytage and the young rector) 'were desirous of seeing the interior of the mausoleum, where the remains of their relative, the late Mrs. Hungerford, were placed. Russ keeps the keys—so, meanwhile, I shall take the

opportunity of sounding him further as to your little household alarm.'

This last of his rather pompous phrases was uttered to Mrs. Vignolles, who somewhat silently acquiesced.

Mr. Smith went outside to find Russ, and give his orders on the subject of the chapel. Presently the rest of the party were summoned by him, and found the steward looking redder than usual, if possible, and even sulkier. The big man had evidently been opposing the lawyer's wishes, but was no match for the grey, quiet gentleman, who appeared now mildly victorious in manner.

As they went down the carriage drive to the chapel, and then took the well-known old path through the trees, which had led thereto from the days when all was wood and wild around, Kenyon fell behind the others. It was strange to him—so strange! to visit Hester's tomb; to see her coffin for the first time! and that not

alone, when his sacred sorrow might feel free and unespied, but as now, with this party ahead of him. It seemed a desecration to his own feelings, that Mrs. Vignolles, the lawyer, and Russ should be by. But Kit felt it must be so, now; he must control himself.

They reached the chapel door, low, and seeming so old and dead, surrounded by its fringe of living young birches and green bushes. Kenyon looked silently at the stone seat where he had sat so often, and vainly wished to pass that heavy Norman portal. (Adrian stole one loyal look at his older friend, as might a young squire towards his knight, then dropped his inquisitive eyes.)

The key groaned in the lock: the old door swung heavily back on its rusty hinges. And, as all went in, a little murmur of surprised admiration came inarticulately from the group. The rude rock shrine of hermit days was now an exquisite

chapel rich with inlaid marbles, which gave hues of rose, green, and white, to both floor, walls and altar. There were finely sculptured bas reliefs also of the resurrection of Lazarus and similar subjects. But the eye turned chiefly to low niches in the walls adorned by stonework canopies and little pillars, within which recesses, as in Roman catacombs, the coffins of the Hungerford family were placed.

One narrow lancet window beyond the tiny altar looked out upon the river. Perhaps Mark Hungerford had shown his taste best by only filling the upper part with stained glass, whilst below a charming river-view was framed by the old stone pointed arch. There was the Stoure rushing deep and brown between its high, wooded banks; while, beyond a peep of greensward, the Priory and its lawn were just discernible. The chapel had once been a cave in the lowest end of the hill on which the old tower stood. And the river,

after washing the chapel walls, took an abrupt curve round the little headland of the tower.

But none of the visitors noticed the beauty of the situation just then. They were looking with solemn feelings of awe and sadness at one niche towards which Russ gruffly pointed. There lay an ebony coffin, richly mounted in silver. How well Kenyon remembered it!—and Mrs. Vignolles too; for the sight brought back the scene of the Villa Beausite at Nice with painful vividness, so that even Emma herself felt her conscience uneasily stirred, and shuddered a little as she gazed. Kenyon turned his head a moment aside. It was terrible to him to see it thus, with all these spectators (some so utterly indifferent!) round him; to imagine *her* there, under that black lid with her sweet face hidden from him, though so near! ah, perhaps no longer sweet nor fair now. He felt choking; and was just turning to go

hastily outside again, when a low murmur of surprise from the rest arrested him. They were examining a heap of withered funeral wreaths lying on the floor of the chapel, as if flung down pell-mell from the coffin.

‘How did those come there? They were left upon it when last I myself saw this chapel closed,’ asked Mr. Smith, severely, stooping to examine the mass of dead moss and wires on which cards were still legible as sent by Mrs. Vignolles herself, by Mr. and Mrs. Fisher, and so forth.

‘Dunno, sir! I’ll take my davy no living soul has been in here since *then*—these two years, that is,’ burst out Russ, staring at them with a look of genuine surprise, almost dismay, on his heavy features.

‘Take care, Russ. Remember where you *are* in speaking here,’ went on Mr. Smith, in a whispered displeased reproof. ‘It is very strange, but see here *are* some sprigs

left, and stray dead flowers on the coffin.'

'Yes, sir. Those are what the child, Miss Ada, was given to strew, as I believe, there's nought left on it, you see, but *them*.'

'And—why! what is that *on the coffin-lid itself?* by all that is strange! The ceiling must be unsafe.'

All, breathless, and excited they hardly knew why, pressed nearer to look.

On the silver coffin-plate, just above where the date of Hester Hungerford's death was engraved, the letters were hidden by apparently fallen fragments of old carved stonework, arranged by some strange accident in the shape of a rude cross. There was a silence for a few moments. Then Kenyon spoke the first in a deep tone, surprising himself by its strangely quiet sound, as if this event, far from being a cause of wonder, was something he had foreknown, or expected.

'Nothing has fallen from the roof. That is no accident.'

CHAPTER IX.

THE WHITE LADY.

THE little group in the chapel looked at each other, and then all around with inquiring, puzzled faces; but were at first silent. Then, as they began to wonder in murmurs, a low exclamation from Mr. Smith, who was examining the chapel floor with critical scrutiny, made them start. The lawyer had put his glasses on, and was eyeing the stone window-ledge overlooking the river, and the ancient flags below it; for this portion of the chapel, behind the altar, had not been re-floored or altered in any portion; because it was the veritable old shrine, the rest having been rather a rock passage.

‘Humph, Mr. Russ! . . . some one has been here—so much for your keys!’ he whispered, reverence for the place still weighing upon him. ‘I notice a foot-print, I believe, in the dust there—and see, it has been brushed entirely off this part of the stone sill, while it is thick everywhere else.’

All bent to see; and certainly fancied they could trace the impress of a human foot. Mr. Smith, who prided himself on his ingenuity in such matters, took out his large, white handkerchief with a careful air, his business-like feeling overpowering the sense, upon all more or less, that they were in the house of the dead. Slowly he measured the mark; then tried it by his own foot.

‘Quite right! Some of us have made it since we came in,’ muttered Edward Armytage, with a faint approach to what might be called reverential irony, while Mrs. Vignolles, by her face, evidently tried

to commend the common-sense remark.

Mr. Smith shook his head.

‘This is too small for mine—a woman’s foot, I should say. And neither of you ladies, nor anyone of us but myself, has come to this spot since we all entered the chapel.’ This was the case. All looked at each other. The interest was at its greatest height. ‘Russ,’ asked Mr. Smith, with a stern but perplexed impression, ‘can any woman have come into the chapel here, do you think?’

Russ was standing watching the party with a look which seemed to say, ‘What fools you all be!—I could have told you so.’ Now he just unclosed his heavy mouth to say, before he shut it to again,

‘Yes.’

‘Yes, do you say? Yes, sir? Then pray, why do you allow it? What do you mean by leaving your key about—not fastening the door?’ demanded Mr. Smith, working himself into a cool rage

at sight of the man's surly self-possession.

'I can't keep *her* out.'

'Because she is your wife, I suppose; but no matter! Let me tell you——'

'You need not tell me nothing as regards my wife, Mr. Smith,' interrupted Russ, with a gruff quickness and turn of the head, meant to deprecate any illusion to that young woman. 'She's young, maybe; but she's a good girl, and does my bidding. No; it's not her.'

'Then, who is it? I desire to know. Did you not say no living soul had come in here, to your knowledge, these two years?'

'I did—*no living soul, to my knowledge,*' repeated Russ, slowly. 'But there is one that does come in, I have small doubt; and, if you can keep her out of wherever *she* pleases to come by bolts or licks, Mr. Smith, you are a more able man than me; and so there is my key of the chancel, sir!'

Russ pointed as he spoke to the open door, and strode towards it. The rest all

followed him like sheep after the foremost wether, the steward's rudeness overlooked in the indescribable discomfort with which his manner and tone had inspired them. They were all glad to come out from the chapel; despite its still beauty of marble and stone; and the deep shade and coolness under its low roof which had seemed so solemn and pleasing at first.

'I feel chilled to the heart, somehow. I could almost wish we had not gone! Does it not give you a foolish feeling that it seems unkind in us to leave Hester behind there?' whispered Bessie Armytage apart to Sir Christopher.

'It does——' he answered back from the depths of his heart. Strange! that Bessie, too, felt the same inspiration of the very thought which had now so possessed him night and day, and day and night, like a haunting presence. No: Hester could not be resting peacefully, wherever she might be, or thoughts of her would

not surely thus evermore possess him. At moments in the dead of night, or in the silence of the woods by day, Kenyon had sometimes a feeling as if she was calling to him—soundlessly; and that, though she must be far, far away, he was aware of her thought of him.

Meanwhile, the sight of the green trees and rustling branches aroused them, and, what with the summer air and a gleam of sunshine now after the morning's rain, the spirits of the rest had vastly revived, and curiosity now became uppermost. They were all plying Russ with questions. And though he now replied to these with the evasive manner of nearly all of the lower classes, when the positive facts about reported apparitions or strange occurrences are sought to be extracted from them by less credulous superiors, still a new trust as to the man's honesty of belief in what he allowed to be implied, rather than to be affirmed, began to grow in them all.

‘But who *is it?*’ repeated Edward Armytage, inquisitively, for the twentieth time, though Russ had as often muttered, ‘Who could say? One said this—another that.’ ‘Is it the white lady who was murdered by the monks long ago?’

‘If it is not, I don’t know *who it is*,—but there! it’s not a thing to talk much about,’ returned the steward, glancing over his shoulder heavily with an uncomfortable movement.

‘What’s the matter? You don’t suppose she can hear you—and it’s daylight, man! Ghosts only walk at night,’ laughed Armytage.

‘Oh, *do* they, sir?’ retorted Russ, flushing angrily. ‘Then let me tell you that them is by no means the worst kind. There are some that is around you, as I know too well, in as bright a day as any man could wish, and this is one of them—*I’ve* seen her!’

‘But what was she like?’ they cried out in chorus.

Russ seemed troubled. ‘How could any man tell, when you saw a thing one moment and it was vanished the next? But wait a while!—They would know soon enough, maybe; just a sweep of a dress by you, and a little cry that turned all the blood in one’s body to ice—No! More he couldn’t and durstn’t say.’

‘“The spirit that walketh in the noon-day.” Yes, I have heard that was the worst form of apparition of all,’ declared the young rector, quite inclined to rub his hands with satisfaction. ‘I have long wished to see if the old form of prayer the church used up to the sixteenth century, for exorcising ghosts, could not be put in practice again. Let us look if it can be found in one of the old religious books in the library.’

‘Then we will have a service and you shall lay the ghost, Mr. Armytage; that is,

if I have not discovered what it all means, *as I trust*, before then,' said Mrs. Vignolles, severely, who seemed decidedly more ill at ease than an hour ago.

Presently, however, as they explored the Priory grounds and ate fruit in the weedy, neglected, but still fairly productive kitchen-garden, the strange footprint was forgotten for the time; as Mrs. Vignolles did her best to banish the supernatural from the conversation.

'Come,' she had said, with a little acidity of briskness, 'after all my trouble in getting into the Priory, it will be too bad if you help to frighten me out of it. No, no; ghosts or no ghosts, it is a great point to live rent-free—eh, eh!'

Everyone understood her point of view, and tried to respect her wishes accordingly.

The afternoon had insensibly slipped away while they were visiting the house and chapel, and it was nearly seven o'clock when they at last returned to the Priory.

The Armytage children were now sent home with a servant; for it had been already arranged that the elders of the rectory party were to spend the evening with Mrs. Vignolles, and have a 'tea-dinner,' as she expressed it. Bessie had instituted that pleasantly nondescript meal at the rectory; for 'cluck as the old hen would,' she declared, it was impossible to gather the various chickens she mothered always back at any given time from fishing, sketching, or boating.

'As you all like it, I shall give you the same,' Mrs. Vignolles pleasantly declared. 'I love country fashions.'

'Yes,' Uda had replied, like a practical maiden. 'And then it is really much less expensive for a large party; besides, it saves the waiting when one has not many servants.'

Mrs. Vignolles looked at the speaker sharply; but then, seeing that there was simple honesty in the remark without

malice, contented herself with tossing her head, and remarking aside to Kenyon, as she gave a short laugh,

‘Dear me! how very *tactless* Miss Armytage is, eh?’

‘Is she?’ returned Kit, rousing from a reverie, into which he had fallen constantly that afternoon after visiting the chapel. ‘I have not noticed it . . . She is a good girl . . . I like her.’

‘Oh, very good, most excellent,’ agreed Mrs. Vignolles, with suspicious quickness. ‘And very handsome, too, many people would think. She would make a good wife, Sir Christopher. Eh—really’ (with her old assumption of archness and a small succession of nods). ‘You might do worse, eh? For, of course, everyone expects you to marry, with the old family name and the title and all to keep up.’

They were standing in the library as she said this, waiting for the tea-dinner to be served in the dining-room across the

hall; and Mrs. Vignolles had come up to Kenyon, who stood apart from the rest in one of the book recesses beside the wide stone-lined fire-place. Kenyon was not surprised at her jest; many persons had told him of late, he ought to marry. Yet, still being in a dream, he sighed heavily, and, by way of excusing himself, said,

‘I am too old to marry her. A young girl like Uda would scarcely care for me now, I am afraid—— It is too late!’ Kit had turned his head towards the fireplace, as though to examine the stone carving of a coat-of-arms over the high mantel-piece, and to evade perhaps Mrs. Vignolles’ further inquisitiveness. As he did so, a faint whisper seemed to come to his ear from he knew not where, ‘*Kit, Kit—Christopher Kenyon.*’ And, in the low accents that had a pleading agonised sound, he could have fancied it was Hester’s voice calling in his very ear. Kit started, in spite of his scepticism of supernatural

occurrences, and looked quickly round; but he was now standing utterly alone. The rest were talking and joking in a bay-window opposite, and Mrs. Vignolles was sailing back to them with a smiling face. That entreating whisper could not have been hers? (No indeed! if Christopher could have but known, she was triumphantly repeating in her heart, 'Too old!—no young girl for him, eh? Well, then, *there is a chance still.*') Kit moved sharply away to rouse himself. How weak he must be growing in mind that he could so be overcome by a trick of his own imagination. Still he had surely heard it with his own ears, as any other sound! And, at that moment, he was not even thinking of any mysterious presence, but planning a day's excursion with Adrian on the morrow.

The gong sounded for their meal just then, so Kenyon rejoined his hostess. As he sat down beside her at the head of the

table, he put his late plans into execution by saying,

‘Can you spare my friend Adrian to-morrow, Mrs. Vignolles? I am starting off early to sketch, and mean to spend a long day; and so I should be very glad of his company.’ He caught Adrian’s eye a moment, who immediately after looked shyly down.

The poor lad was well aware that studies he detested had been maternally ordered for him as his portion for most of the morrow, and many a long day to follow. He was still treated by his mother as a little boy. And she had recently announced to him that his holidays of late at the rectory were now ended, and he must grind again for his last trial of examination before entering one of the public-offices, having failed twice already. Now, Adrian seemed entirely wanting in brains in this necessary course of learning; and furthermore loathed the prospect of such a future

life as his mother had chosen for him.

‘*Sketching*, Sir Christopher,’ echoed Mrs. Vignolles, in a high voice.

If it had not been for Kenyon’s suave tones, and the irresistible look he could throw without effort into his dark eyes when talking to a woman, a power for which many men envied and some talked against him, she would have instantly refused. The little woman hated this dawdling amusement, as she termed it; one her idle, long-legged son was most reprehensibly addicted to. Still—still——

‘Well, as *you* ask it, Sir Christopher—’ she replied, with her most fascinating look, nodding her head so that her frizzy tower of little curls quivered. ‘But, pray, do not mislead that son of mine, eh? He actually once wanted to be an artist—if anyone ever heard of such an idea! Who is to support him then, I should like to know?’

‘I should soon support myself,’ put in

Adrian, his usual drawling, soft tones slightly sharpened now.

‘*Soon!*—and who is to do so for you till that soon arrives? (after years, if ever, I should think!) Not I, certainly—after this year, either you pass your examination, or else you provide for yourself, my friend,’ retorted his mother, witheringly. Then, as Adrian, with a little gasp of annoyance at this speech being made before visitors, seemed prepared to speak, ‘No answer, please—I cannot bear any answering, and I always insist upon being treated with respect by my son.’

Her son, who had a light nature, but one easily stirred to anger on the surface, might hardly have controlled himself under the aggravation of his mother’s look and tone, but that he met Kenyon’s sympathetic, silencing glance, and was comforted. Mrs. Vignolles would have been angry indeed had she known that in their frequent walks together Adrian

had outpoured all his griefs, dislikes, and vain longings on the subject of his profession into Kenyon's pitying ears. And the latter, thereupon, one day—moved by the poor lad's disappointment on thus going out into life without any natural gladness or ambition, and feeling himself a rich and lonely man, had sympathised; yes, more—had held out certain promises of very material assistance, which now caused Adrian to take his mother's threat lightly enough. But Kenyon, sitting there at table, felt almost traitorously guilty towards the shrewish, unmaternal little woman who now smiled on, and tried to wheedle him.

When they rose to leave the dining-room, Uda and the two young Armytage men stopped in the hall, urged by Adrian to try an old bagatelle-table. Kenyon stayed with them, declining to play, though amused by their laughter and jokes, and quizzing them all, especially his friend

Adrian, with a quiet, grim humour which was now his nearest approach to the old sudden tides of high spirits. It was rather curious to see how much the younger people liked always to have him among them, though he seldom joined in their amusements. Perhaps it was because everyone could see how he silently enjoyed himself watching them; the cloud lifting off his face, and a happier, interested expression replacing the more usual resigned, gentle melancholy there.

Mrs. Vignolles, having escorted Bessie Armytage into the little, black-oak sitting-room, looked back at the group in the hall, and said, feeling elated in spirit that night,

‘Eh, dear me! your girl Uda and the young rector are together again, I see. She seems to have quite a fancy for him, eh; and ’pon my word’ (patronisingly) ‘he is a very nice young fellow. It would be a capital match—*hein!* And I daresay

you have foreseen it already, my dear.'

'I never make plans now for any of my children as to marriage,' returned Bessie, earnestly, slightly reddening; for, even though she was Uda's mother, she was perhaps younger in her heart than her girl. (Alas! she had tried to make plans for poor Hester, and that had failed.) 'I mean to leave them perfectly free, so long as there is nothing to disapprove of,' she went on. 'But I do not think I should like to stir even an inch to help them, unless being *quite* sure it was a mutual matter.'

'Very right! I think that is a very high principle, Bessie,' nodded Mrs. Vignolles, with irritating approval. 'It is *so* much better to let young people be happy together, I think, than for mothers to be ambitious, and run after some greater match for their daughters, which very often never comes off, or turns out a mistake. Like turns to like, after all—eh? And—

ha, ha, ha!—I suspect Miss Uda likes our parson *a little*.’

Clever little Emma, she believed that Bessie was too absurdly unworldly to go contrary to the supposed wishes of her child in such a matter; and this would help to clear the ground.

‘Shall we bring them in, and all have a round game together?’ she went on, rising with alacrity. ‘I see Sir Christopher out there does not care for bagatelle.’

Mrs. Armytage assented to this last indifferently, with a feeling of annoyance in her heart, which, strive as she might against it, still grew. It seemed almost as if her daughter had been accused of being forward; unmaidenly. Mrs. Vignolles had overshot the mark in discussing Uda’s supposed fancy. For Bessie, knowing how malicious she had been of old at times—and believing that, if there was ‘anything between Edward and Uda,’ her own eyes would not have failed to discern it with

motherly instinct—feared her child did make too great a display of being useful at the rectory, and in ordering Edward's household.

'Edward, Edward,' Uda was exclaiming just then, 'you mustn't play like *that*. Let me show you how.'

'Quite right, Uda. I always make blunders without you to look after me,' returned the young rector, laughing.

Mrs. Vignolles carried them all off to "Vingt-et-un," though it is doubtful if Sir Christopher, for whom she effected this manœuvre, appreciated her kindness.

('Gertrude,' whispered Mrs. Armytage, as they broke up from bagatelle, 'why do you take your cousin to task so often? It does not sound well, my dear; remember his position, now.')

Uda opened her eyes wide; to be called Gertrude was equivalent to a scolding. Her mother's tone, too, was gently dignified to severity, but Mrs. Armytage had

moved away so as to make explanation then impossible.

The prior's little room was hardly large enough to hold them all, as they sat round the table. It was very hot, too, when the lights were all lit, so Adrian was desired to open the latticed window. He threw it wide on its hinges ; and so, what between the black wainscot walls so near all round them and the moonless darkness outside, they seemed almost sitting in the night itself.

There was a little rustling sound of the breeze in the bushes outside. A night-moth or two fluttered round like the grey ghosts of butterflies, and now and then a bat darted in and out again, startling them disagreeably.

A sort of uncomfortable silence fell upon the little party, after a while. Mrs. Vignolles in vain laboured bravely to make jokes. Uda had become unaccountably dull, and even Mrs. Armytage was not in

her usual spirits. Adrian hated having his mother's eye immediately upon him, in any pursuit; and Kenyon, who was as impressionable to surrounding influences as any chameleon to colour, relapsed into a dual state of reverie even whilst playing his cards. Once he roused himself in a pause to say dreamily, looking round at the dark-pannelled walls and ceiling,

‘This makes one think of being in a black coffin.’

‘Oh, fie—Sir Christopher! what a shocking idea! Don't you think it is very morbid of him, Mrs. Armytage?’ cried Mrs. Vignolles.

Bessie did not answer: she guessed where Kit's thoughts had been.

A few minutes later, a sudden strange noise, as of scuffling and running across the hall outside, made them all stop short and look at each other's faces. Then came suppressed voices and a sort of sobbing in the distance.

‘Who is that—what is the matter?’ called out Mrs. Vignolles, pluckily, in shrill tones, starting up in a fume.

One of the maid-servants came slowly at her call, with a pale, frightened face.

‘Oh, if you please, m’m, Susan is in a faint’ (Susan was Mrs. Vignolles’ maid, who attended also on little Ada). ‘*She—she—oh, it’s awful! but she has just seen the ghost!*’

‘Seen it—where—how?’ all cried.

‘In Miss Ada’s room. Susan went in there very softly not to wake the child, and she saw a tall, dark lady with white hair beside the bed. Susan saw her by the light of the night-light distinctly enough. She didn’t wait to look twice, but just ran, and got out somehow, she didn’t know how—and now she’s swooned right off.’

‘Susan is an idiot,’ declared Mrs. Vignolles, hotly. ‘I shall go and see for myself.’

She snatched up a candle. All the party followed her closely across the hall, as noiselessly as possible, into Ada's room, which was out of a little passage, and between Mrs. Vignolles' own room and the library. The upraised candle showed the child sleeping peacefully, like a rosy cherub, in her cot; though, at the sudden light, she stirred, and then awaking—startled on seeing the little group of faces round her—needed to be petted and soothed by Bessie Armytage.

There was not a sign of the ghost anywhere. No trace of a strange presence was to be seen, though they carefully searched the room.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE BANKS OF THE STOURE.

THE following day, Adrian was late in reaching the 'Three Choughs,' where Sir Christopher was waiting for him to start on their sketching ramble.

'Oh, I am so sorry ; but there has been such a jolly row at the Priory,' called out young Vignolles, as he came up breathless. 'What do you think? but old Russ lost his temper so awfully with Cowgill this morning in the farmyard, that he knocked him down. Then Cowgill got up and fought him, they say—the two garden boys told me—but Russ is the stronger man of the two, and gave the other poor

fellow a tremendous thrashing, and turned him out of the Priory demesne neck-and-crop—all his cottage furniture was carted down to the road, and shot out there by Russ himself. Luckily, it was left close to the village, so he'll get put up; for they all hate Russ like poison there.'

Kenyon stood still, and drew a long breath like a whistle. Little by little, a deeper import of this news than most people could have guessed seemed to come to him. As he took-in the whole possible results thereof, his face became a study of anger and disappointment over their foiled plans, while his eyes were set in eager meditation.

'Gone—really gone!' he repeated to himself; then he swore under his breath. '*The one* man we trusted! Adrian, how are we to open the chapel now? Besides, *he knows our secret!*—and, if he cannot help us, that is a terrible mistake.'

('But he dare not tell. You bound him

too solemnly never to breathe it while he lived,' said Adrian, impressively, ready to suppose Cowgill as sentimentally high-strung as himself. 'And then you have been so generous to him——'

'Ah, that is more to the purpose. He may be silent while I make it worth his while,' answered Kenyon, cynically, seeming greatly depressed. 'Come, shall we go for our walk?'

He started off so fast that Adrian kept beside him with difficulty. Sometimes the youth stole a glance at the gloomy face of his elder friend, but did not like to interrupt his thoughts. After an hour or more of almost total silence, the rapid pace at which he had gone seemed to have relieved Kenyon's feelings. He had felt at first like one who, after working at a secret mine for weary days and weeks, is suddenly confronted by an unforeseen obstacle. The darling project hidden in his soul seemed withheld from his grasp

just as he was on the point of realising it. He stopped and threw himself down on the grass almost as suddenly as he had started off walking.

‘Shall we stay here? We can talk over this awhile,’ he vaguely said. Adrian assented by silently following his example.

The spot was very sequestered. It was an open glade by the side of the Stoure, surrounded by brushwood and backed by some wild cherry-trees. Kenyon had made it a favourite haunt, wearying of the dull meadows he so often fished, and glad to feel here shut out from even the occasional inquiring eyes of the country folk.

But, as he and Adrian lay on the grass and talked over their plan in low voices, they were disturbed for the first time. A sound of some one pushing through the brushwood startled both—but then they saw Zachary Cowgill emerge and come towards them looking hot, scratched, and sullenly excited.

‘I’ve followed you, mester—I made my way here a purpose from the “Three Choughs,”’ he said, bluntly to Kenyon, looking like a faithful dog who has been beaten by strangers and returns aggrieved to his master.

Kenyon was really sorry for the poor fellow, and at once inquired with kindness and deep interest into the cause of Cowgill’s quarrel with his employer, Russ. The man told a rather strange story.

He was often employed in rough garden work at the Priory, and the evening before was desired by the steward to rake and tidy a little space outside the library windows. Mrs. Vignolles had complained bitterly of the neglected state of this spot, on which her eyes were always forced to light. It was a square garden plot, consisting merely of some flower-borders, a sundial, and gravelled paths. On three sides, it was enclosed by the house-walls of the old wing. The fourth was guarded by

high iron palings and a gate of which Russ kept the key, for the old windows were easy of access.

Cowgill declared he accordingly raked and rolled the paths carefully, and dug the borders, the last stroke of work he did before sundown. This morning he unlocked the gate again ; and was astonished to see footmarks all over the fresh gravel paths, while the newly-dug flower-borders outside the windows were trampled down. It had rained last night and the ground was wet, so the nightly visitor had left deep prints. Cowgill complained to the servants of having spoilt his work, but they all denied it. He then thought it his duty to warn Russ that some midnight marauder must have climbed the railings, although the marks were small and narrow as if left by a woman.

Russ was in a quarrelsome state that morning, having only just recovered from a heavy drinking-bout of the previous

night, so Cowgill believed. He first scouted the man's assertion, roughly declaring that the key of the gate had not left his own pocket from the night before till Cowgill took it that morning. Then he affected to disbelieve poor Zachary, who he swore had been idling and had never done his work at all. The latter retorted angrily, declaring Russ knew as well as he did that strange things happened at the Priory, and there were more inhabitants there than folk knew of, and whom most men would not care to face. Russ, grown furious at this, taunted Cowgill as a liar and a coward. From words they soon came to blows—the rest Adrian had correctly heard.

On further inquiries, Cowgill told that Russ had begun drinking heavily of late, while also his tempers were more violent than usual. In fact, this year, since the occupation of the Priory especially, he was so savage it was as much as a man

dare do to accost him. He was also very jealous of his young wife, whom he hardly suffered to keep company with any living creature but himself. And she was a pleasant young woman, too, and affable, said Cowgill; but, though Russ was really fond enough of her, he kept her shut up with her baby, as if the Priory was a prison.

‘Does she see no one else then? Has she no friends?’ asked Adrian, eagerly. For his imaginative mind went off on this new track at once, ready to scent fresh mystery.

‘Well, I did go to her cottage once, out of curiosity purely,’ owned Cowgill, with a slow, sly grin. ‘Mister Russ was gone to the town, being market-day, and, thinks I, if he does hear of it, I’ll take the racket! But I got little for my pains—she seemed frightened in a manner to see me.’

There was another person with her—

Cowgill went on to tell in a rambling manner. This was a woman, and an old one, but rarely handsome in her day she seemed. She was strange, too; for, whenever Mrs. Russ turned her back, this woman made signs to Zachary, and managed to whisper once she had something to tell—he was to ‘come back.’ But the young wife seemed to suspect her, and contrived to get rid of Zachary Cowgill very promptly. She led him outside herself, and, explaining that the other inmate of the cottage was only a half-witted relation whom Russ kept out of kindness, begged him not to take notice of anything the poor soul said or did.

‘She did not look so crazy, neither,’ ended Cowgill, with a reflective air.

‘We must go and see her,’ exclaimed Adrian.

‘Yes,’ mused Kenyon aloud. ‘If half-witted, and that they are afraid of trusting her with strangers, it would seem as if

there was something to hide. Who knows but some of these midnight appearances may be explained naturally, after all?’

Kenyon was sceptical on the subject of spiritual phenomena; but did not like to say so very distinctly, for fear of hurting Adrian’s feelings, who was an ardent believer that there are many more strange things in heaven and earth, ‘than are dreamt of in our philosophy.’ Nevertheless, being himself a dreamer by day, and one who over-indulged in the opiate of imagination, Kit could not get rid of the strange fancy that he had heard Hester’s own voice speaking to him. Often, of late, she seemed more near him in thought than ever before during those two lonely years. By the river-side, through the woods, in his solitary walks, her presence seemed to haunt him. Little wonder the hallucination had so grown in his heart, that he fancied at last he verily heard with his bodily ears her faint call—‘Kit! Kit!’

Though almost ashamed of his own weakness, Kenyon yet confided his strange fancy to Adrian. The latter, in his boyish eagerness and morbid enthusiasm, was solemnly affected, but not surprised.

‘She is not happy. She is calling you because she cannot rest,’ he decided. And Christopher sighed, tortured at the thought. He preferred thinking of Hester as one of a shining and blessed company of happy spirits, among whom none could be more beautiful.

They stayed and consulted together the best part of that summer’s day. Cowgill retired discreetly and humbly to the background of the bushes, in company with the remains of the lunch brought by Sir Christopher. At last, when his patrons had agreed on the details of their plan, long whispered over, he was signed to approach and hear so much as was necessary. Kenyon had settled to leave his friends and fishing immediately ; pretend-

ing business at his house near Westcliff, the Court. Thus he would escape seeing the Fishers, which last he sensitively dreaded, and would likewise divert possible suspicion afterwards. He was then to return on a certain night, accompanied only by Cowgill. Adrian was to meet them at the vault, and they must force the lock, having already discussed how to do this best without discovery. But Cowgill forestalled them. He now, as they explained their views, carefully and slowly produced two lumps of wax from his pocket, and with a dry smile handed them silently to Kenyon. They were impressions of the keys of the vault.

‘But how did you come by these?’ exclaimed Kenyon, wondering.

‘Well, *he*—old Russ, that is—was drunk two days ago, so I stole the keys out of his pocket. It seemed my duty to you, Sir Christopher,’ confessed Cowgill, apologetically, adding in a cautious tone the assur-

ance that in general his conduct was honest, and that he had no experience in such light-fingered practices.

All was therefore made easy enough. Kenyon half shuddered to himself at the means he had thus to employ on such a sacred errand: stolen keys—a drunken steward—poor Zachary for a well-meaning but vulgar accomplice. He felt as if those wooden doors of Hester's vault ought to open silently of their own accord, as if touched by the hand of some angel, assisting to set free her dear body from its prison.

Rousing himself to coarser realities of life, however, Kit asked, still in a half-dream,

‘And afterwards, Cowgill, where will you go? You would want to stay hereabouts, no doubt. I shall never wish to come back here *then*, but I should like to know you happily settled.’

To his surprise, Zachary shuffled his feet and seemed uneasy.

‘If it appears I’ve not given no cause for displeasure, colonel—Sir Christopher that is—but, if there was ever any cottage on your own estate, or a place for a man like me? I can turn my hand to most jobs; and I’d—well—I’d just be *sorry to leave you!*’

The simple-minded fellow just gave his patron a humbly reproachful look, and then stared hard at the ground.

Kenyon felt, with a sudden astonishment, how even such a mark of being looked-up to and depended on, though only by the meanest of our fellow-beings, gave him a pleasure long unknown. He promised at once to provide for Zachary at the Court; ‘and we must keep your future cottage tight against the rheumatics,’ he added, smiling.

‘Ah! if that was all,’ Cowgill oracularly responded, with a nod of his head in the direction of the Priory. ‘Rheumatism is a thing o’ nature—but to have ghostesses,

and corpse-lights, and the-Lord-knows-what! creeping about that old tower at nights is enough to make the hair on a man's flesh stand up, as Job said.'

'Ghosts and corpse-lights——?'

Both hearers inquired into this. Then Cowgill, with a mysterious air and hesitating; but doggedly—as if afraid to be ridiculed, though obstinate in his own belief—told them, he had often seen a strange light in the old tower at nights. They might see it for themselves, perhaps, if they watched. It would appear, towards mid-night, for a moment at one window, and a few seconds later at another and another lower loophole of the tower, flitting downwards, then would vanish. What it meant, he could not say; but the tower was empty and half-ruinous, he believed, and Russ kept closely, moreover, the keys of it.

'Then it must have been himself,' suggested Kenyon and Adrian in a breath.

‘Nay; that it is not,’ said Zachary.

He explained that, on first seeing it, the night being dark and the wood lonesome, his hair rose with fright. He hurried towards Russ’s cottage, thinking to rouse the latter, just for company’s sake. But, through a window, he saw that the steward was sitting beside his kitchen fire. Cowgill paused in some surprise that Russ should be still up so late (after mid-night) till he perceived his employer was moodily drinking alone. This made Zachary reflect that, if Russ happened to ask what business took Cowgill out of the park at that hour, it might possibly transpire that his labourer had been visiting the ‘Three Choughs.’

For Zachary was indeed returning from one of his secret visits to Sir Christopher. So he thought best to be silent, and go to his own house.

After that, he had several times seen the same light, about mid-night, which

generally happened when he was coming back from the same errand.

‘Shall we watch to-night?’ said Kit, suddenly, to young Vignolles.

So it was agreed between them to do so.

CHAPTER XI.

A LIGHT IN THE TOWER.

THAT night accordingly, both friends, the elder and the younger man, met by appointment near the chapel in the wood.

Adrian slipped, unperceived by his mother, out of the Priory. But all the rumours of ghosts and mysterious appearances that had occupied his thoughts of late made him feel uncomfortable. Being a professed believer in supernatural occurrences, he started now at every sound; and in the darkness was ready to take every stir of a leaf for the soft footstep of the white lady of monkish days. He

found Kenyon quietly sitting on the stone bench at the door of the vault, and, when the dark figure rose to greet him, Adrian was secretly nearly scared out of his wits.

Sir Christopher, though as impressionable a man as any, felt very different emotions from his young companion. It pleased his sadly gentle melancholy to feel himself alone there in the hush and coolness of the summer night, sitting at the door of Hester's tomb. The clouds softly veiling the moon, the murmur of the woods answering the breeze, soothed his fancy? Instead of being startled, he would have been glad could he have seen Hester's own shadowy figure glide through the doors of her vault, and come like her own sweet self to look at him, if not to speak. Why had he heard her that once? why did she never come to *see* him, though she called to him?

The dreamer was half ashamed of his own strange hope; but while alone there,

waiting for Adrian, he softly called twice, under his breath,

‘*Hester . . . Hester . . . speak to me !*’

Then he listened long with painful intentness. But nothing answered, save a night-jar and the bark of a watch-dog far away.

‘It was precious hard for me to slip out,’ said Adrian, eagerly. ‘I say, I have some news for you! Mrs. Fisher has come; she’s staying up there at the Priory now. It quite took me by surprise when she arrived before dinner, for I believed she wasn’t coming for a few days, because my mother was so vague about it. Mrs. Fisher laughed at me and said she had always meant to come to-day, and asked was I still kept in leading-strings like a little boy. That made my mother angry, and *she* said, rather sharply, it could be no possible business of mine when her visitors came. It’s a little ruse, don’t you see?’

‘No,’ answered Kenyon, deeply annoyed.

For each fresh arrival of intruders, as he considered guests, at the Priory, made his secret plot more difficult of execution. 'I do not see.'

'Why,' returned Adrian, who prided himself on having the *finesse* of the weaker sex in understanding such household intrigues, and delighted in unravelling them. 'It is a case of wheels within wheels. My mother knows Mrs. Fisher will not be welcome at the rectory on account of the past,' (he lowered his voice at the recollection). 'But as we do not want to lose our intimacy either with country or town acquaintance—you see?—why! we shall pretend Mrs. Fisher took us rather by surprise.'

Kenyon was not listening. His whole mind was absorbed in a rapid calculation. Whatever touched on his secret scheme. the inmost darling, dark longing of his heart, *that* concerned him; otherwise he cared for little that went on around. He

interrupted Adrian by uttering decidedly,

‘Then I must leave to-morrow—go to say good-bye at the rectory in the morning, or they will think me uncivil, and start for Westcliff in the afternoon. And two nights later *I shall come back!*’

‘So soon?’ asked Adrian, awed.

‘Yes. Fate seems hurrying it on, even against my own wishes. Strange, after such a long weary delay! . . . But “there is a tide in the affairs of men,” you know, Adrian, and ours seems to have set in now strongly. May it carry us to success!’

Sir Christopher had only finished speaking a few moments, when—as both stood on the path through the wood, where they had waited because the old tower was best seen thence, rising up dark and square above the trees on the hill—Adrian started.

He whispered, eagerly catching Kenyon’s arm,

‘Look, look——’

Sir Christopher only breathed low,

‘Yes, I see.’

Up in the topmost window of the tower, a light showed distinctly though only for a moment. Then it was lost again in darkness; but presently a flickering gleam shone again lower and smaller down the tower; then lower still. Then—they saw no more. They waited some time, but all was still and dark again as before.

‘There must be a winding stair there, and whoever it was came down past the old loopholes,’ mused Kenyon aloud. ‘Who can it be? Some one has taken up an abode in the tower. But what is the object?’

Adrian made some murmured dissenting remarks. How anyone could still be doubtful after the apparition seen beside Ada’s bed; owned to by Russ himself with fear; universally believed in and whispered of among the servants and labourers; how any person could be so crassly obstinate of persuasion passed young Vignolles’ comprehension! Adrian almost loved yet feared

the ghostly atmosphere of this evil old house, as he dimly felt it to be. To him, the decay, neglect, and desolation of the demesne around seemed to make the Priory *full* of ghosts; for such he supposed to be the thoughts of those who had lived or suffered there, taking shape again in semblance of their former selves; embodied memories rather than spirits.

‘Did you examine the wood and tower to-day, as I asked you?’ went on Kenyon, keenly, taking command of the matter; his attention roused, and his mind at work with the same interest he felt in puzzling out an abstruse problem. ‘I would have searched myself, but that Russ might have probably been disagreeable to me as a trespasser.’

‘I did my best, but there was nothing to be seen,’ said Adrian, regretfully, who had been on a bootless quest. ‘One can’t get near the tower because of a high wall round it, at some little distance. There

seems to be an old garden or enclosure beyond, for I could see walnut branches. It was impossible to climb the wall anywhere, and I thought of getting up some of the trees, then; but they are all mere scrub, and none were high enough. I tried to find Mrs. Russ, and her cottage seemed shut up too, for I knocked in vain. However, where would be the use if even one could examine the place? You would see nothing by day: nothing living.'

'I am not so sure of that,' said Kenyon, suddenly, after thinking for some minutes; then, breaking the silence in a quick, impressive tone, 'Adrian! A strange idea has just struck me. What if Mark Hungerford himself was hidden in there?'

'My uncle—here!' stammered Adrian, in dismay.

'It would be like a madman's trick,' pursued Kit, gloomily. 'And, if so, our plans will be ten times more difficult. It may be himself who comes prowling about

at night, and Russ is perhaps humouring his fancy by hiding him there.'

Adrian still demurred, for the strange footprints in the garden, the vision seen by the maid, all pointed to the female apparition which had haunted the Priory for centuries. It was easy to be mistaken about footmarks, replied Kenyon, trying to examine the evidence in his own mind, yet almost ready to be convinced that his own startling surmise was right. *That* would explain Russ's anger at the invasion of the Priory, and resistance when Mrs. Vignolles took possession thereof. That would explain also the steward's strange behaviour always, in fear of displeasing his master's secret orders, yet not daring to reveal his presence. Yes; it all seemed likely enough, as even young Vignolles owned. Kenyon ended,

'He may spring out upon us at any time, now, Adrian. Be on the watch while I am away.'

‘Trust me! I shall hardly close an eye. Old fox! How I should like to pay him back in his own coin,’ hissed young Vignolles, with real hatred, in spite of his gentle nature.

Christopher went back that night, often looking about him vengefully if he saw any darker shadows than usual which might conceal the lurking form of a madman. And, more resolutely than ever, he still swore in his heart to carry off Hester’s corpse—should her own husband himself stand in his path.

CHAPTER XII.

CUPID AT THE RECTORY.

ON the day when Sir Christopher and Adrian lay and plotted by the banks of the Stoure, Mrs. Armytage, motherly soul! up at the rectory, did what she very much disliked. She explained first to Uda her rather abrupt little warning of the night before, and then took her daughter to task.

‘It is very disagreeable that Mrs. Vignolles should think herself justified in making such a remark about you, my dear child. Of course *I* know you only look upon Edward as your cousin, and have helped him in his household arrange-

ments out of pure kindness. But still, this shows how careful one must be in conduct, or people who don't know you well may say unkind things.'

'It is a great shame of Mrs. Vignolles, I consider, mother—and I who was ready to like her very much! I shall never speak to her again, and I hope you won't either,' cried poor Uda, hotly incensed.

'Come, dear, it is no such unusual matter,' smiled Mrs. Armytage, with her benevolent and always most comforting expression. 'One need not try to please everybody certainly in life, or you would be like the fable of the old man and his ass. Up to this, however, you have only thought of pleasing Edward. But, now, you and I must try not to let anyone with a tongue that's too lightly-latched have an excuse for supposing my girl wants to run after any young man; least of all, your cousin.'

Hereupon Bessie patted her daughter's

shoulder soothingly, her touch being soft and benignant, as was her whole disposition. Uda needed consolation, poor girl. What, she! whose secret aim was to be a model of circumspection and propriety of behaviour to her younger sisters, to the whole of her family, and who would have liked indeed to be admired for her excellent qualities and sound sense by all the world!—*she* to find unkind tongues wagged lightly about what she regarded, with grave propriety of feeling, as the most secret affairs of her own heart. She was shocked—no other word expresses her emotion.

Her face burnt crimson; her unhappy, round, dark eyes seemed starting out of her head. Mrs. Armytage good-naturedly pitied her good child, having now learnt Gertrude's developed character thoroughly, and believing, therefore, she understood 'all about it.' Softly, though, kind Bessie; thoughtful though she was for others,

affairs of the heart never were that good woman's strong point!

Nevertheless, when Uda exclaimed, with unnecessary vehemence, 'I do not mean to marry anyone! I shall always stay with you, mother; always,' a faint surmise crept into Bessie's mind that her daughter had perhaps thought of some one. And she wondered in her heart who it could be.

Meanwhile, Edward came in breezy haste to find his young daily adviser.

'Uda, Uda, the black hen has brought out her brood, five chickens. Will you come and see what coop you think they ought to go into?'

'Uda is rather busy with me this morning, Edward,' said Mrs. Armytage, cheerily, trying to help matters into a new groove. 'I want her for an hour or so. Don't you think you could see after the chickens yourself?'

'Very well,' said the young rector, re-

gretfully ; ‘ but, Uda, I shall wait for you to help me with changing last week’s young Brahmas to a new spot ; they seem sickly.’

His fowls were Edward’s latest hobby, and Uda had taken the deepest interest in them hitherto.

For an hour, therefore, Edward departed. But it had no sooner elapsed than he sought his cousin again.

‘ Uda, the gardener wants to know where he is to put the new bee-hives. There are two situations, he says, both good. Do come and help me to choose between them.’

Gertrude knew rather less about bees than her cousin. But she always decided promptly and upheld her own opinion, which impressed him with her greater sagacity : for he himself was so eager to look at all sides of a question that he distrusted his own judgment in matters out of his experience.

‘I am afraid mother wants me to—wants me not—that I can’t well come, Edward,’ stammered Uda.

‘Well, in half-an-hour—an hour then—name your own time,’ persisted Edward, with good-humoured blindness to the possibility of her being unwilling.

‘Don’t you think you had better . . . really, Edward, I would *prefer* that you chose for yourself,’ was the humbly-sounding reply, accompanied by an entreating glance.

Edward went away rather perplexed, and forbore to tease Uda more that day; though a dozen times he felt the wish to come to her with some of his household wants, or school and parish items of good or ill news.

But on the morrow, thinking his patience should now be rewarded, back he came, more eager than before. This day happened, unfortunately, to be that occasional one which the young rector did

not spend in his parish work, but enjoyed in a thorough over-looking of his garden and farmyard with the delight of a boy in a still new diversion. He had a dozen questions to propose to his aunt and Uda about the planning of a new flower-bed, the consequent change of a gravel path, and the planting of some young trees. Mrs. Armytage was, however, called away for a time by some requirements of her younger children, so could not help Uda in what now seemed to the latter a painfully difficult position. She hesitated continually, and in a new, meek voice kept assuring Edward she had no opinions worth giving; or agreed to all of his contradictory suggestions in confusion of mind—very different to her usual promptness of judgment—till she found the gardener and his master looking at her with puzzled surprise.

‘ You don’t care much about the garden to-day; and we have been boring you

unmercifully,' said Edward, kindly smiling at her.

'Oh, no, no—I mean, indeed, yes, I do care very much about anything that concerns——' Uda stopped short, nearly crying, and more confused than ever; then substituted for the word 'you,' that had come almost to her very lips, 'that concerns the rectory.'

Armytage saw there was something amiss, but forbore to question her then. A little while later, however, he came to her in haste, full of a subject on which she was always interested.

'Uda, Mrs. Doggett is going to preserve the gooseberries, and she wants to know how many pots you think we shall require.'

'Oh, please, Edward, let her consult you herself. I—I don't know anything about it.'

'Why, you always know about everything. Come, Uda, nonsense—Mrs. Doggett positively says she won't give any

directions how much fruit is to be picked till she has seen you.'

'But indeed, Edward, I would rather not interfere,' cried poor Uda, feeling driven into a corner, and getting hot. 'I—I—have no business. Oh, please ask mother's advice.'

'Aunt Bessie is busy,' returned Edward, rather coldly. Then, a minute afterwards, he changed his manner, and asked, with affectionate solicitude, 'My dear girl, have I offended you to-day? If so, tell me frankly what is the matter, that I may set it straight—for you know I would never mean to do such a thing. Then, I hope, we shall get back to our old relations.'

But Uda, who had nothing to say except what she wished to conceal, rushed into evasions so contradictory to her general nature that she became quite unintelligible and hot all over. Armytage was not to be so put off.

'I have guessed there was something

wrong since yesterday ; you have not been like yourself. There is no use saying nothing is the matter—come, Uda, tell me all about it. You and I have never had many secrets from each other,’ he affectionately persisted.

And, as they two had indeed been always on the most intimate terms, Edward succeeded, though with difficulty, in gaining a glimmering that unkind things had been said at the Priory ; that—that Mrs. Armytage was afraid her daughter had seemed taking too much upon herself lately ; that she had, in fact, warned Uda against this.

‘ But surely my aunt knows my feelings —“taking too much on yourself.” It is impossible I could think such a thing, so what does it matter what others say?’ uttered Edward, warmly.

They had walked on, beside each other, during this little talk, too engrossed to heed where they were going. Now they found themselves beside a low wall, en-

closing the kitchen courtyard, and overheard a dialogue between Mrs. Doggett and her kitchen-maid, which elucidated the situation considerably. The maid was calling to Mrs. Doggett across the yard, saying a man had just brought some chickens to sell; would any be wanted in the house?

‘What is the use of asking *me*?’ retorted the housekeeper in Edward’s bachelor establishment, who was evidently vexed with some press of work, though in the main a good-natured soul, but too free with her tongue. ‘Go and ask Miss Armytage, can’t you? She’s the young mistress here, and I only wish Mr. Armytage and she would be quick and get married. It would spare a body having first to ask him and then her for orders.’

Edward started, and in the twinkling of an eye understood his cousin’s late reluctance of manner. He looked at Uda quickly, who was biting her lips and turning

her head aside. But though there were tears in her eyes, and that her cheeks were dark red, she was evidently not much surprised.

‘Was this what you meant, Uda?’ asked the young man, stopping short and speaking low and very kindly. ‘Yes, yes. I see it was. But, still, don’t let it vex you.’

He tried to take his cousin’s hand. But Uda turned away, and, leaning over a paling looking into the paddock, answered brokenly, in hot grief and confusion, that she was not vexed, not at all, but that the people were hateful to say such things, when Edward and she had been like brother and sister.

‘Not quite,’ corrected Armytage, who had for some time been contemplating this very match in his own mind. He never meant to speak about it, however, till nearer the time of his aunt’s departure. Meanwhile Uda’s interest in his house and

pursuits, the schools, and the parish made him feel daily with growing satisfaction that she would be the most excellent young helpmate possible for him. And Edward believed she was also unconsciously taking root in what he hoped would be her future home, by all the fibres of her affections which in women cling so naturally to the objects and interests about them.

So now he said,

‘Not quite like brother and sister—At least when even the servants can see my wishes, Uda, you might, I hoped, have guessed them.’

To this Edward got no answer, however, but a hot rain of sudden tears down his cousin’s cheeks. A good deal perplexed, Edward came nearer, and as soothingly as he could tried to find out what it meant, while begging Uda not to cry, and pleading for some reply. The one which came surprised him, it must be owned.

‘Oh, *please* say no more about it, Ed-

ward; don't speak of it ever again. It is quite impossible—quite! And, if you would not mind, please say nothing of this to mother either—For she would be so vexed, and there is no use——'

Armytage was a good deal taken aback. He had counted on success as a tolerable certainty. And if not violently in love, yet he had a sincere affection for Uda, and the probability of disappointment stirred all his feelings now considerably. He would not take his answer at first in his surprise, believing shyness was the matter, or that Uda had not time to know her own mind. He pleaded, urged, offered to wait for an answer.

'No, no,' repeated Gertrude, still weeping, 'I have thought it over already, because it seemed right; and it is impossible!'

'Do you think you can never care for me, then?' asked Edward, greatly mortified, yet very kindly. 'Or is there anyone else. Uda, I believe that is it, from the

way you turn your head, Tell me, dear :
you may trust me.'

'I shall never marry at all; never, never!' was all Uda would be brought to say, however, though Edward, now pained at the sight of her grief, forgot his own trouble, seeing hers so much greater. He still tried to console her, and to draw out her confidence, with the most brotherly assurances. But, though Uda would not deny there was a 'somebody,' she allowed it to be implied that it was a hopeless attachment. She could never change, however; so was vowed to a single life.

This was the very time Kenyon chose to make his farewell visit to the rectory. Uda and Edward, being told of his arrival, had to compose themselves to make their appearance separately after a few minutes in the drawing-room. Mrs. Armytage also joined them; and Kit told her he had come to say farewell, being obliged to go to Westcliff.

‘Well, you ought to go to your home, I suppose, still we are all very sorry I am sure,’ cried Bessie, heartily. ‘Well, when are you coming back?’

‘Ah!’ said Kenyon, feeling his own equivocation. ‘You will not see me again for some time—perhaps a long time.’

‘Why, Uda, Sir Christopher is leaving us; do you hear this?’ cried Mrs. Armytage, in good-humoured dismay.

‘Yes, mother,’ replied Uda, in a very small voice. Bessie perceived that her girl looked dejected, and that a few minutes later Uda slipped out of the room without saying good-bye to Sir Christopher. When he had left, the mother went upstairs to see if any little matter was amiss with her daughter. To her great surprise she found Uda crying violently—but evidently in such a horror at being so discovered, that by no means, even the most affectionate, could she be persuaded to disclose the cause of her grief. At last

Bessie had to go away, for she knew, however good, Gertrude was obstinacy itself; she, in fact, bore out Butler's lines,

'The soberest saints are more stiff-necked
Than the hottest-headed of the wicked.'

So, drawing the blinds and persuading her to lie down for an hour,—for the poor girl had a bad head-ache, and was really prostrated from her own emotion,—Bessie slowly came away. As she did so, she thought in her heart, 'Oh, Kit, Kit! I am afraid you are the cause of this. First it was Hester, and now it seems my own poor child—are you fated to bring trouble to me without ever meaning it?'

Some one else came to the same conclusion. Kit had warmly asked Edward to walk back with him as far as the 'Three Choughs,' that they might have a longer talk before parting. The young rector did so with apparent willingness. But Kit could not fail to notice that his friend was depressed, and tried to find out the

cause. With his usual open-heartedness, Edward told of Uda having refused him.

Kenyon was all amazement at the result of what, he declared, he had long foreseen.

‘My dear fellow, I thought it was a certainty: you seemed to get on so capitally, and to be meant for each other . . . There can hardly be anyone else?’

‘That is exactly what I should like to speak to you about. I am inclined to think that is the reason. But, if *you* have no knowledge of it, perhaps I ought not to say so,’ said Edward, in a troubled manner.

‘*I?* What can I know about it?’ inquired Kenyon, bewildered. But he was confounded when young Armytage explained that, coupling Uda’s half-confession with her sudden retreat from the drawing-room, he believed the unknown in question might be—Sir Christopher himself.

Kit looked quite miserable at the suggestion.

‘My dear fellow, I trust with all my heart you are wrong. Nothing could make me more sorry. What have I to offer any young girl; that is to say, in the light of a companion, a husband?’

‘A great deal, I should say,’ returned Edward, rather bitterly, looking at the handsome elder man, whose air and manner, however tinged with melancholy, were always so pleasingly attractive. ‘Besides, as Aunt Bessie told you lately, you ought to marry.’

‘Perhaps so,’ Kit owned, with an involuntary sigh. To himself this new idea was only so disturbing he was glad to be quitting the Helston neighbourhood for awhile, at least ostensibly. If Bessie wished this—if her daughter indeed cared for such a broken reed as he felt—*that* might be some inducement! But, as yet, the thought of giving a living successor to the shadowy image which had so long reigned in his heart was truly painful.

At the door of the 'Three Choughs' they saw Mr. Smith, who had just driven up to speak to the landlord on business. He eagerly approached them to say good-bye to Kenyon now. Then, drawing him and Armytage beyond the hearing of the inn people, said, with more vivacity than the precise grey lawyer generally allowed himself,

'By the way, I have just heard a piece of news that will interest you both, as you, Mr. Armytage, are a relation of the Priory family, and you, Sir Christopher—well, you are very intimate, and were so with all concerned. *Mr. Hungerford has returned!*—I got a letter from him this morning, giving me an address in London. And, between ourselves, for the little girl's sake, I had better tell you it is a very extraordinary letter. He asks me to send him an enormous sum—in fact, a quarter of a million, at once! That looks bad. Don't you think so?' Mr.

Smith tapped his forehead significantly. 'Have none of you heard from him, too?'

They of course knew nothing of Mark Hungerford; this news took both Mr. Smith's hearers utterly by surprise. Kenyon, in especial, felt tingling with a secret excitement the other two men could not guess. He controlled himself only sufficiently to ask,

'When is he coming here, do you think?'

But Mr. Smith could only look grave and shrug his shoulders. He could not tell.

Kenyon took his departure for Westcliff, deep in thought.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TOUCH OF A VANISHED HAND.

MEANWHILE, Adrian had laid a little plan on his own account, which gave him some private satisfaction.

The young fellow went mooning over to the rectory in the afternoon, missing Sir Christopher's society, though the latter was hardly gone yet, and feeling dejected in consequence. He was kindly received.

'Hullo, Vignolles! you don't look very bright. One would think that old ghost at the Priory had been keeping you awake all night,' said Bob Armytage, good-naturedly.

Poor Adrian forced a smile. A horrible

idea flashed across his mind for a moment, how that happy family party would all hate him if they knew the dark secret that lay heavy on his breast. What if some one were to tell them aloud that he, sitting so quietly among them, meant to help to-morrow night to steal their dear Hester's body out of the coffin wherein it had rested two years?—like the body-snatchers of horrible memory! He was always in extremes, and felt as if covered with guilt and fearfulness, now Kenyon had left him. Then, with an effort, Adrian remembered there was another side to the question. He had loved Hester as much as they; and so—and far more, he guessed—had Sir Christopher. *She* would never be angry with what they two did, meaning the best for her repose.

It does not take long to think all this. So in a minute or two, after an evasive mutter that *he* had slept all right (as, indeed, was the case from pure fatigue, for

hitherto the poor wretch had hardly closed an eye at the Priory with the pre-occupation of his mind), Adrian burst out,

‘But, I’ll tell you a queer thing that did happen last night. The ghost was in Mrs. Fisher’s room!—and she is in such a fright this morning that she was nearly leaving at once. Though I can’t bear her, I was quite sorry for her. It was too bad of my mother to put her in *that* room; the one Ada had near the library, where it was seen before, you know.’

‘But why don’t you like Mrs. Fisher?’ asked Bob, plainly. He had heard little of the secret history of his dead cousin’s life at Nice. ‘I met her this morning walking out in the lane, and she seemed very pretty and pleasant, I thought.’

Adrian glanced in some confusion at Mrs. Armytage, who looked severe; and this was so rare, he saw she understood him. As Uda was present, he thought it best only to say, hastily,

‘Oh, there were bygone reasons! . . . Yes, she’s very pretty, but I never much cared for her myself.’

Then, being further questioned by all, he told what had happened on the night before.

After her arrival, Mrs. Fisher, who was all gaiety, found her spirits somewhat damped by the lugubrious face of her hostess. Adrian privately suspected (but kept this to himself) that his mother rather enjoyed having ill-tidings to give to the self-invited guest of this roof-tree she had chosen. Besides, Mrs. Emma was vexed because Mr. Fisher had stayed away, alleging to his wife that he preferred Margate to such country dulness. ‘A man’s a man,’ was the little widow’s opinion; and, however mean a specimen was this particular one, still she preferred male society, even of a feebler sort, to more brilliant conversation with her own sex. Also, should Edith Fisher attract the uni-

versal homage as usual to herself, her husband at least would be in duty bound to devote himself to his hostess. Be all this as it might, pretty Mrs. Fisher did not go to bed that first night without receiving, in confidence, vague intimations that the house was uncanny, and the servants all scared to death. Mrs. Vignolles declared herself, however, as valiant as a lion; and vowed Edith was not to mind any such nonsense. Nevertheless, though Mrs. Fisher agreed to be brave too, she started visibly at the least creak of a chair, and frankly owned she felt 'just a little creepy.' Afterwards, she went to bed, resolved to sleep soundly, and no one knew anything had alarmed her till next morning. Then she appeared at breakfast, white and heavy-eyed, in such a hysterical state, and so indignant at having been put in what her maid assured her was 'the ghost-room,' that, if Mrs. Vignolles had not taken fright and pacified her by a hundred assurances,

her excited guest would have departed for Margate at once. (And then, adieu to all little London parties for Emma Vignolles, if her friend was once roused to shake off the Priory dust from her shoes with such indecent haste !)

Mrs. Fisher, really half-sobbing at the recollection, told that, after going to bed, she had slept well for some time, till it seemed to herself that some slight noise must have disturbed her. Listening, as she lay awake, she then became certain that something or some one was in the room. She heard quiet steps approach her bed ; and while she lay, too frightened to stir or call out, a hand was softly laid upon her face one instant. At that, Mrs. Fisher found voice enough to scream, however faintly, and called on her maid and for Mrs. Vignolles. The touch of the hand vanished at once. When the frightened lady, in trembling fear, found the match-box beside her pillow and struck a light, she

could see nothing in her room. Afterwards, she lay awake for hours, she declared—too alarmed to rise for help, or to put the candle out, though light disturbed her sleep. And it was only when daylight came, and household noises began, that she had closed her eyes at last after a night of agonised fears.

On hearing this, Bessie Armytage was of opinion that Mrs. Fisher's own terrified imagination, worked upon by what she had heard the evening before, would account for it all. But though Bob railed at the idea of the ghost's touch, in a coarser and more man-like way, he seemed in half-an-hour to have altered his opinion. Adrian and he had gone out together for a turn in the rectory garden, and young Vignolles there in secrecy confided to him a rather startling suggestion.

Adrian never could help confiding in some one, unless the matter oppressing his mind was the secret of a friend. Then

honour would keep him painfully silent to the grave. But, now, what could it matter to Sir Christopher if he did impart a suspicion regarding Mark Hungerford? The ghost was common property; and, if it were indeed a lunatic, the sooner it was laid the better. Adrian was far more frightened of Mr. Hungerford than even of any spirit unclothed from the flesh.

‘Mother,’ said Bob Armytage, with the affectionate manner of a big dog, or a schoolboy; plunging down beside her upon the sofa, with an embrace out of which Bessie arose half-smothered, and mildly protesting,—‘I want to go over to the Priory this evening with Vignolles, to dine and sleep. This ghost needs your son’s investigation, with all the common sense he inherited from you.’

Bessie looked a little grave. Still she had no good reason to give for dissuading her son. He was a man, now, and she kept her gentle power over him by a

judicious remembrance of the fact. Mrs. Armytage distrusted Emma Vignolles, and disliked all she had heard of Mrs. Fisher. But as Adrian shared the latter feelings, so the young fellow had gained all her sympathies. When he joined his entreaties, and that she remembered how miserable he looked this day, the good-natured woman could not remain glum. For she believed Adrian was really in need of a friend of his own age, just like her Bob, to rouse him, and make him more like everyone else.

‘If Edward will spare you for one evening, I can; though it is a sacrifice of my first-born. But, remember he is our host, my dear boy.’

‘Oh, I’ll settle it with him,’ cried Bob, with jovial confidence.

And, upon the young rector joining them soon, Bob promptly explained as much of the matter as he had told his mother, adding,

‘You won’t mind if I leave you for this evening, Edward? Uda will keep you company, instead; won’t you, Uda?’

The two persons he addressed felt inwardly confused, a feeling Mrs. Armytage, with her usual sympathy, quite shared with them. But Edward Armytage answered with the utmost outward heartiness at once,

‘Go by all means, Bob. If you all like to desert me, I shan’t grumble, if only you promise to *come back*. You ought all to consider yourselves at home here.’

Accordingly, that evening the two young men dined at the Priory. Adrian knew very well that his mother would forgive such a daring indiscretion on his part, for sake of the bridge it threw over what seemed like a gulf yawning between herself and the rectory. For Mrs. Armytage had clearly made her displeasure apparent at little Ada being brought into intimacy, however young she was, with her mother’s

false friend. Bessie had refused an artfully apologetic, little note of invitation sent to herself and Uda.

It was difficult to the kindly woman to express herself thus, after Mrs. Vignolles had eaten of the rectory salt, and been received in friendship among them—for Ada's sake. But she had a little consultation with Edward, her nephew. And the young rector, fully entering into her indignation, agreed that Mrs. Vignolles had shown bad taste, if not want of right feeling, in welcoming such a guest to Helston Priory.

He himself undertook to carry his aunt's answer. And, meeting Mrs. Vignolles in some cottages where he now daily visited a sick old man, to whom the little widow also showed a wonderfully zealous charity at the hour when the clergyman's visits were usually timed, Edward delivered his message. With a frankness quite heathenish, in Mrs. Emma's opinion, the young

rector said that it would be painful to his aunt or himself to meet Mrs. Fisher, on account of the circumstances connected with the death of their dear Hester, of which they were both aware. Therefore Mrs. Vignolles would understand that, while her guest remained at the Priory, the intercourse between the two households could not be so frequent as hitherto.

Mrs. Vignolles bit her lips, and tossed her head, while assuring the young man truly that Mrs. Fisher had invited herself.

‘What could I do? It is better not to rake up old scandals, Mr. Armytage.’

‘Perhaps not; but that is how we feel on the subject,’ said Edward, gravely.

And, bowing, he went away; his coat-skirts flying to his rapid strides.

‘An awkward, countrified young pedant,’ decided little Emma, in a rage.

And, in her own mortification, she did not fail to recount the whole matter to Mrs. Fisher; with malicious satisfaction,

that for once her pretty friend should find she could not always have 'things her own way,' but taste a bitter cup of retribution. Edith made a wry face a moment, certainly; the blood rose hotly to her cheeks. Then she laughed it off in her easy way.

'Dear, simple people! Do they really think I can possibly care a straw for their good opinion. And what patriarchal memories they must have, Emma. Why, you and I have forgotten all we did ourselves, besides the unkind stories we heard of other people as long ago as that.'

Nevertheless—or rather, all the more—both ladies exerted themselves to be extremely pleasant to Bob and Adrian that evening. Mrs. Vignolles alone knew their project, which she warmly approved. If the Priory was to be her future home, the annoyance of its being supposed haunted was fast becoming too disagreeable to be patiently endured.

Mrs. Fisher had been given a room in

the new part of the house, safely beside that of her hostess. Adrian meanwhile declared that he meant to try the ghost-room on the ground-floor. None of the servants even knew, however, that Bob Armytage stayed there to watch through the night with him. The young men had pretended to go outside late for a stroll and a cigar together. Then Adrian secretly brought back his friend, and they prepared to camp till the morning with feelings of lively expectation.

First they locked the door, and then made a careful examination of the darkly wainscoted room and a small dress closet opening off it: but with no results. Then, having agreed to keep awake turn about, Adrian took the first watch, while Bob lay down prepared for a hearty slumber on the bed. Adrian had contrived a small dark lantern, a rather clumsy piece of his own workmanship; but he kept it beside himself with huge satisfaction. Bob grinned

in silence, but secretly slapped his pocket, in which he had what he considered a still better reception for the ghost.

Two hours had passed, when Adrian, who had grown drowsy in spite of his efforts to be wakeful, started to more alert consciousness. He fancied he had heard a slight grating noise. Listening intently, though with his senses still somewhat confused, he seemed to catch the soft sound as of a trailing dress approaching the bed. The blind was only partially drawn, and there was glimmer enough from the window to distinguish the shadowy outline of a figure. The watcher caught at his dark lantern, and tried to pull up the slide he had improvised; but fumbled at it vainly a moment or so in the darkness. Meanwhile, he was electrified by hearing a voice utter his name in low and it seemed plaintive accents, '*Adrian! Adrian!*'

In his dismay he called loudly, rousing Bob at once, and at the same time managed to open his lantern sufficiently to reveal a figure gliding towards the little closet.

‘Hi! Stop there, or I’ll fire! Stand, I say, if you are living,’ challenged Bob, springing from bed, and presenting a pistol. The apparition still retreated. Bob rushed towards it, and fired——! At that moment Adrian succeeded in turning on his light fully, and saw a dark female form one instant, hidden by the smoke of the pistol immediately afterwards. Both heard a faint cry—and the figure vanished in the closet. Adrian sprang forward with the light, but the place was empty. They examined the dark little recess, wainscot, floor, and ceiling with astonishment, but in vain. There were no means of exit to be seen.

‘Here is my shot; it has pickled the woodwork. I was afraid of doing mischief with a bullet,’ exclaimed Bob. ‘Well, I

would have sworn that was a real figure, and yet how did it disappear?—and how could I have missed it, so near, too? *That* beats my comprehension!

‘And I,’ said Adrian, awestruck, ‘saw the very hem of her skirt curl up against the doorway, as she vanished.’

The voice that had called him impressed his mind strangely. It brought to his recollection Kenyon’s somewhat similar experience. Could it be that a murdered mother’s spirit was wandering in the house where her child lived; that she had appealed to him! as to Sir Christopher?—and he had repulsed her. Adrian was now greatly grieved that he had not felt more presence of mind, and answered the voice when it came to him. He did not like to reproach Bob. But the latter honestly regretted his own harsh measures, for that faint parting cry rang most uncomfortably in his ears, also.

Having pacified some of the rest of the

household, whom the report had roused, with vague assurances all was right, both young men watched till daylight.

But they saw nothing more.

CHAPTER XIV.

‘ONE THAT WAS A WOMAN, SIR ; BUT, REST
HER SOUL, SHE’S DEAD.’

THE following night had come.

It was after eleven o’clock when Adrian slipped out of the Priory by opening his window and softly letting himself drop on the grass below, so as to elude his mother’s vigilance. He found Kenyon, with Zachary Cowgill in his rear, waiting in the darkest part of the chapel wood. The night was just such an one as was best fitted for a deed like theirs. It was very dark, with no ray of moon or starlight to betray them ; at times it rained a little,

while the air was so heavy and close that all sounds were dulled.

Zachary carried a dark lantern, a better one than poor Adrian's clumsy toy of the previous night. And now, as the three men silently crept to the door of the vault—after cautiously listening that no belated wayfarer was passing on the path by the chapel-door, or through the wood—he turned the light a moment on the arched entrance. The key was tried, and fitted! Slowly, and now in darkness again, the massive oak portal of the house of the dead swung back, and showed the obscurity within faintly illumined by the far window. A cold breath of chilly air met them as they crossed the threshold.

Closing the door lightly, so as not to attract notice should Russ by any ill chance yet happen to pass that way, Kenyon shook his head as Cowgill mutely signed the question, ought he to lock them in?

‘Every moment is precious—we must hurry our best to go back through the wood afterwards, to catch the train and get clear off,’ he murmured.

Outside the demesne he had left a dog-cart, hired from a town at some distance. It was hidden in a lonely spot of a wood known to Zachary: the horse tied to a tree. Kenyon would not risk sharing the knowledge of their destination with anyone. Afterwards, he and Cowgill were to drive back to this town, and thence take the earliest train for Westcliff.

Zachary was now left on guard beside the door, to listen for anyone approaching from the outside, while his round eyes stared wonderingly after the movements of his master with some dull horror but more of curiosity. Kenyon, closely followed by Adrian, walked straight to Hester’s ebony coffin and turned the light of the lantern full upon it.

The hour had come!—the moment he

had so dreamed of day and night for weeks and months past. Kit's heart was beating heavily, but yet he only knew it was strange that he seemed now unable to feel any overwhelming emotion, so he thought. *There was no time!*

With hands shaking as he did so (but from intense haste, surely! not mere nervousness), Kit at once took some tools he had brought in a small bag and began rapidly unscrewing the coffin-lid. Adrian tried to help him, but was growing white, till as each moment passed, and the dull sound only broke the silence of the charnel-house, he at last fairly trembled.

'Are you ill?' whispered Kenyon, pausing an instant in his task to glance at his young comrade. He could feel for Adrian; though the latter noticed that Sir Christopher's own eyes were full of eager light, and his features set with a stern determination, seldom seen there, that was like a dreadful joy. 'Would you rather go

away—or, stay! I have brandy in a flask here.'

'No, no! I will never leave you now,' muttered Adrian, ashamed of his own weakness.

Without another word, Kenyon went on working at the coffin-lid. *It was loosening—loosening!*

A moment, Kenyon paused, and placed the lantern nearer himself, so that its light should first reveal to his own eyes what lay below. A sickening sensation gripped his heart with a dread pain of what was coming. Would it be—ah, wild, darling hope!—the beautiful face of former days, seen once more as some dear dead faces have been seen, like a dream realised for a brief few instants, snatched from the grave and death? Or must it rather?—reason told him it would, it must!—be, that corruption to which all flesh comes at last, returning to its dust, and gases, and ashes that once built up the fair earthly tene-

ments of the spirits we loved. Bracing himself to meet this awful sight, Kenyon pushed back the coffin-lid on its silver hinges.

A white shroud lay underneath, as he expected; with the outlines of a figure below those still folds.

What a small figure it seemed! lying so solemnly cold and motionless in the gleaming white, satin-padded casket that Mark Hungerford had once himself designed. Do the dead shrink so terribly?

The muffled head, lying under that covering, appeared no larger than that of a baby. It must be the embalming process of which he had heard—— Kenyon felt all his inner self revolt, shrink back with fear and almost loathing, in spite of his great revengeful longing, from what he must see next moment. It seemed to him now, for the first time, an awful desecration—a violation of the reverence he owed the dead woman there. Cold drops stood

on his clammy brow. He felt sick at heart; yet with an inward groan that was almost a prayer to the spirit of this dead body, to forgive him—'for love's sake, Hester,'—his hand touched the shroud. He forced himself to go on, while his fixed eyes stared on the outlined corpse. Adrian bent forward too; so fascinated by curiosity, he forgot his horror.

There were a few distinct moments of awful silence, as Kenyon moved the covering *slowly, slowly back*—

Then! a muffled cry of astonishment broke from his lips and Adrian's simultaneously. They saw a white marble statue revealed in the coffin! A small female statuette smiling up in their faces with a simpering air. The very same that Mark Hungerford had worked upon at Nice, meaning it for a copy of his wife, the 'Galatea!' Both knew it at once. No corpse: naught else! With an exclamation, that was almost an execra-

tion, Kit tore out the false shroud, and glared at Adrian with eyes maddened by dumb, impotent fury.

‘ Fooled!—gulled—duped to the last!’ were the wild thoughts surging in Kenyon’s brain. His brain was in a whirl—He tried to speak, but could not.

Adrian and he stared confounded at each other.

Well-nigh mad himself, Kenyon caught up the dark lantern, hardly conscious what he did, so that its light fell on his own pale face and that of Adrian gazing still stupefied at each other. Then the words burst with low but intense passion from Christopher’s lips,

‘ Oh, villain!—murderer!—madman! He has hidden her elsewhere, fearing detection, but I will find out his secret yet . . . I will never give up the search for Hester till I die!’

In his excitement, in that moment of

intensest disappointment—when the anxiety, toil, constant hidden hopes and thoughts of so many weary days, their dreadful task of this night, with its secrecy and danger, were only answered by the horrible mockery of that smiling stone face—Kenyon failed, at first, to hear a stifled groan of terror from Zachary Cowgill. Adrian did not hear it either. But now it was repeated, coming incoherently from lips that were almost paralysed by fright.

Then they saw the poor labourer, half crouched by the chapel door, a trembling mass in the darkness, staring with starting eyes before him.

Behind the altar, a shadowy female figure had risen. A slight black figure, with snow-white hair. As Kenyon and Adrian saw it, a shock ran through their nerves, too. But the woman held out her hands in supplication. A voice that pierced Christopher's very soul, to which every vein and fibre of his body thrilled in response, implored him,

‘Kit, Kit, save me! It is I—Hester!
Oh! Adrian, help me!’

Neither of the men could move or stir.
She glided hastily forward instead, mur-
muring pathetically,

‘I am alive, Kit; indeed I am alive.
Don’t be frightened Dear Adrian,
don’t hurt me.’

She sank on the stone floor now, clasp-
ing Christopher’s knees, as if too weak or
too frightened herself to rise. But he
heard her voice—he felt her touch. And
oh, blessed, most blessed sign! heaven-sent,
it seemed in his bewilderment, to show
him this was not all a dream, she caught
his hand next moment to her cheek in an
agony of entreating ecstasy, and he felt
his hand wet with a warm tear.

Kenyon caught her up, raised and held
her fast in that supreme moment of his
life, and gazed still half-disbelieving. He
saw snow-white hair, sadly white features,
sharp-set now, as if with some great terror

of apprehension, but still the luminous grey eyes that met his were hers—were beautiful as ever.

‘Hester! Hester!’ he babbled like a child, forgetting Adrian, Cowgill, everything else. ‘Is this really you, really . . . I must hold you fast! . . . Hester dear, are you living again?’

‘I was never dead! Christopher, we must not stay here. Listen!—you must understand. Mark Hungerford has come, my husband. He is searching for me now—he is quite mad, and will really kill me this time. He has kept me shut up in the tower these two years; my funeral was all a sham . . . Oh, I have tried so vainly to escape! But now—now—What was that?’

The poor woman, who seemed come to life again from the dead, had started at some fancied sound and listened with such a look of fear that Kenyon drew close to her in protection.

‘Mark returned home this evening,’ she went on, in hurried, tremulous accents. ‘Mrs. Russ told me—she was kind, and warned me he was quite mad and was coming to the tower. I fled here to escape from him . . . There is a secret passage. Then I saw you both and hid *there*’ (she pointed behind the altar) ‘till you raised the lantern, and, thank God, I saw your faces . . . Kit, Kit! I am afraid of my husband. You will not let him hurt me. Keep them from locking me up again . . . I want to live! I want to live!’ she went on, poor soul. After thinking herself condemned to solitary imprisonment for what wretched existence remained to her, her dungeon door was burst at last. Friends were by her side. She felt crazed at seeing them, hearing their voices.

‘Hester, I swear he shall not touch you! We will never let you go now, Adrian and I—I promise you, Hester.’

Kenyon was repeating her dear name in

a very delirium of strange joy. Could it be all true? Were they not in a dream? And yet, in a dream, he would surely have taken her now into his arms, he would have dared call her his poor darling—his lost own love. But, now, that at least he saw her again and knew her living, not all the madmen that might people a town should hurt a hair of her head: should keep him from her side to rescue and defend her.

As they three spoke again, exchanging hurried sentences of question and answer pregnant with life or death to Hester,

‘Ada—my child! Is she safe from him?’ she was saying, when suddenly her voice stopped short, her gaze turned spell-bound to the chapel door.

Cowgill, amazed at the supposed ghost having become a living woman, had slowly left his post and advanced in stupefied curiosity towards the group of speakers, step by step.

The chapel door was meanwhile being softly pushed wider open by some one outside, and an evil face peered in at them. The face was so aged, changed and distorted by the expression of cunning, hatred, and the passionate glare as of a wild beast foiled in its bloodthirstiness, that she alone at once recognised it. But she knew too well who it was—Mark Hungerford!

A wild maniacal cry rang with hideous sound through the silent midnight chapel, only lit by one lantern, of which the rays revealed the little group standing by the open coffin. It was a roar of baffled rage, of irresponsible, reasonless hate.

‘Villain! Have I met you at last?’ uttered Kenyon, as he rushed forward to grapple with the madman in Hester’s defence.

But Mark Hungerford had turned, even more quickly, and fled away into the darkness of the night and the woods; away,

away, blindly urged by fear of the retribution of his sins ; by a thousand horrible fears yelled in his ears by the evil spirits he had harboured in his soul.

He vanished out of their sight, with that cry as of a lost soul ringing in their ears and they saw him no more !

CHAPTER XV.

BROUGHT BACK TO LIFE.

KENYON hurried back to Hester immediately on finding the pursuit of Hungerford was useless. As the three men and Hester came out of the old chapel, she seeming like a woman resurrected from the dead, they were met by a new alarm. The grating of carriage-wheels sounded on the drive close by, two lamps flared through the darkness, and an indistinct group of persons came hurrying towards them with challenging exclamations.

Sick with fear, Hester clung desperately to her defenders; unable to speak, but

dreading to see Russ and her husband reappear; or perhaps others in Mark Hungerford's pay, who might declare her mad and drag her away to some fresh, perhaps worse confinement. Kenyon hastily told her to fear nothing, utterly resolved to keep her safe. Adrian was promising her, in a rapture of devotion, to be cut in little pieces for her sake. Christopher held the lantern high at the same moment, turning its rays on the new comers.

Heaven be thanked! they were friends. Mr. Smith came hastening first, with his grey face unusually eager, and behind him Edward Armytage and Bob, and Aunt Bessie herself.

‘Halloa! Who are you all? What are you doing in this chapel at this hour? What—why—Sir Christopher Kenyon! And—and—*who is this?*’ the old lawyer exclaimed.

But next instant a wild, rapturous cry of recognition startled him, and indeed the

two Armytage men greatly, and they saw the two women falling on each other's necks. Bessie Armytage did not know whether she herself was sleeping or waking, alive or dead almost in her intense bewilderment. She only knew that this was Hester—her dearly-loved Hester—and that they two had met.

‘Is Mr. Hungerford here? Where is my master, Mr. Hungerford, and who are you all?’ called a coarse, authoritative voice from out of the darkness; and Russ burst in among the group, which he could not distinguish till within the small circle of light in their midst.

The steward was out of breath from having been running in hasty pursuit of his master. He glared round upon them all, as he suddenly recognised the faces he little expected to see, having supposed these were only some of the Priory household. His eyes met Hester in their midst

standing a free woman, safe and glad, as she gazed back at her gaoler.

‘Don’t let him go,’ exclaimed Kenyon, impetuously. ‘Here, Cowgill, Bob—keep this man fast.’

His own grasp was on Russ’s collar, but the man, seeing, with one glance round, he was caught in a trap, muttered,

‘The game is up!’ Then, with an oath, he sullenly added: ‘You may let me go, Sir Christopher; I’ll give myself up. What I’ve done, was only what I was bid—and I’m ready to answer for it.’

The strange appearance of this new reinforcement of Hester’s deliverers, was owing to Mark Hungerford’s arrival that night at his home. Before reaching Helston Priory he had gone some distance out of his way to stop at Mr. Smith’s house. Driving up in furious haste, Hungerford had demanded his agent and lawyer to give him ‘money, money!’ He had written for a quarter of a million—where was it?

Give it him—at once! at once! Mr. Smith, who was somewhat taken by surprise, thus stormed in his own quiet country home, yet was forearmed, therefore in a slight degree forewarned. He tried to calm the lunatic, as he justly considered his visitor; promised but temporised.

‘Thief!’ Mark Hungerford screamed out at him in return. ‘You Smith!—You are an old thief, thief! What do you mean by having that gold watch and those rings and chains of yours, sir? Take them off, d’you hear? They are mine, mine, mine. The whole earth is mine, and all the gold that is therein. You are an unjust steward, sir, an unfaithful servant! When your lord comes home he ought to see piles of gold! mountains!’

Like Coriolanus, Mark Hungerford talked ‘like a knell, and his hum was a battery.’ His roar of anger was so terrific that it startled Mr. Smith’s two clerks (who had been hastily desired by poor Smith to be

on the watch during Hungerford's visit) into hurrying to their employer's aid, if necessary. As soon as he saw them, Hungerford rose to leave; evidently dreading violent hands being laid upon the liberty of his person, as Mr. Smith would indeed have greatly wished to do there and then, if compatible with law.

Although frightened himself, the quiet gentleman yet valiantly tried to urge Hungerford to stay where he was; fearing the greater mischief he might do the women and the child at Helston Priory.

'You had much better stay here, Mr. Hungerford. Come, I will promise you as good a glass of claret and a cigar as any man can wish. And Mrs. Vignolles—your cousin, you know—is just now staying with your little girl at the Priory, for a few days' change of air. You will not care for a nursery life with them—better stay here,' he urged, with the blandest of cheery manners, concealing consider-

able anxiety. But Mark raved at him.

‘What, Emma?—Emma Vignolles at Helston!—She dared to disobey my express commands! . . .’

His fury broke in a storm of words uttered with such breathless volubility, that half was quite incoherent to the old lawyer’s ears, except the threat uttered with horrible significance that they were all a pack of rogues and thieves, and unless Emma gave him money—all her fortune!—he would put her, too, where Hester was. He should *contrive to find room for her!* As to Hester’s child, a whining brat, it would be best in heaven. He would dash out its brains against the wall.

So shouting, Hungerford broke away from the men who vainly tried to restrain him. Luckily the driver of his hired cab refused to go further, alleging that his horse had been driven like the whirlwind and was lame too. In reality, the man understood the situation on a hint

from Mr. Smith. Hungerford had then execrated him and all of them, and started off himself at a furious pace; not indeed running, but walking so fast and with such gestures of anger as to convince anyone that he was in a hopeless and even dangerous state of unreason. This all happened after nightfall. It was past nine o'clock when Hungerford arrived. It was nearly ten when he left.

Mr. Smith at once ordered out his own horse, as the fly-man's jaded animal was really tired, and with forethought had it harnessed to the hired carriage which his own bachelor establishment could not equal for roominess in conveying a large load in case of need. He hurriedly drove off at once, hoping to arrive at Helston long before Hungerford himself could reach it on foot. Taking another road to avoid passing the latter, his way led by the rectory. On a sudden impulse, that more help might be useful, he pulled up

there, and told his tale in haste ; explaining that he meant to remove the ladies and little Ada from the Priory that night at a moment's notice.

Mrs. Armytage at once so eagerly begged to go too, she could not be gainsaid. Good Bessie, she felt as if Hester's child would only be safe in her own arms. She could trust none of the rest, however kind their intentions, as she would herself. Her son and Edward naturally insisted on going to take care of her. In any case, it seemed dangerous to them that an old man like Mr. Smith should be left alone to face Mr. Hungerford in his reported state, in case the latter should succeed in finding the helpless women and the child still at the Priory. Adrian—most thought with a kindly sort of pity—would be like a willow in a storm.

So they all drove to the Priory in anxious utmost haste. And yet—Mark Hungerford arrived there first!

No one ever knew afterwards how he had done so. He must have struck across country in the night, despite no familiar remembrance since years of its features. He must have leaped deep ditches yawning in the darkness to unseen width; have torn his furious way through great hedges; stumbled onwards in the night over tilled land and pasture, through briars and brambles. But he got there first, with madness and murder seething in his brain.

On reaching Helston demesne, Hungerford made his way first of all to Russ's cottage. With cunning, amidst all the wild confusion of passions that possessed him, he knew it would be easier to enforce his authority in his own house, if his steward helped him, and was faithful as in bygone days to keep his terrible secret from the knowledge of the world.

Mad! mad! mad! he had repeated breathlessly to himself as he ran that night; he would have shouted it aloud

but for fear of the swaying black trees hearing him, and the long serried hedges, the rustling woods, and sleeping earth. But he would yet have his wish! He would have gold—he must have blood! He should kill Hester at last, after the gratification of keeping her shut up fast in solitary confinement so long. Ah! that was power—to hold the life of another human being trembling in your hand two years, and gloat playing with it; hesitating whether to destroy it or not.

But now!—he had reached Russ's cottage, and thundered with his fists on the door. In alarm the steward, knowing his voice, rushed out very hastily, with his coarse features unusually paled.

Mark Hungerford assailed him with a storm of wild reproaches, uttered with incoherent and almost incredible rapidity.

Behind, in the inner cottage-room, Russ's young wife tremblingly clasped her baby

to her breast in the darkness. She heard the madman say,

‘Have you got that woman safe in the old tower? I must go and kill her to-night. If there are people at the Priory, they will be sniffing, sniffing, and smell her out at last. I must kill her now.’

‘Come to the Priory first, sir. It is your own house!—Come and tell Mrs. Vignolles she must leave it, and do your bidding, though she would not go away at mine,’ the steward urged.

To do him justice, Russ was temporising; hoping that within half-an-hour he might gain back his old power as a keeper over his master. He was striving to divert Hungerford’s mood, that so, perhaps, the worst of the paroxysm might pass. He succeeded so far that he coaxed him out towards the Priory.

Neither guessed that behind them young Mrs. Russ had crept out, too; and that she hurried, with trembling footsteps, to the

old tower above on the hill. The silent woman there, whom she believed crazed, had been kind to her baby—had saved its life when in convulsions by her knowledge and care.

‘Save yourself—’ she cried out, panting. ‘Hide from Mr. Hungerford.’

Meanwhile, Hungerford with his servant, like a trusty bull-dog at his heels, went on straight to the dark Priory, that was closed for the night, and demanded admission into his own house. Mrs. Vignolles, roused by the alarm they made in knocking, looked out from her upper window. She was like a vigilant little dame holding a fortress in trust, who would not even let its lord in unless she was certain of his identity.

‘Who is it? What do you want?’ she demanded, sharply, leaning out in her flannel dressing-gown, with a woollen shawl wrapped about her head.

Mark assailed her with such a torrent

of abusive language for daring to be installed in his house, that she quickly perceived the fears Mr. Smith had confided to her, as to his client's state, were justified. She refused to unbar the door, therefore, even to Russ's attempted persuasion; and she promptly denied Hungerford permission to enter the house.

'I am in charge here—It is quite impossible for me to let you in at this time of night, and without Mr. Smith's leave. Go and tell him so! It is much better to stay the night at Russ's cottage, and go in the morning to see Mr. Smith,' she reiterated, resolved to stand a siege first; being by no means deficient in courage, and remembering with some confidence the strong bolts and locks behind which she was entrenched.

Then Hungerford, changing his tone, tried entreaties, persuasions, at last wept. If Emma would not let him in, at least would she shower him down gold. He

wanted *gold, gold!*—it was all his own. Worse and worse! thought the little woman, listening safely above, who remained un pitying as adamant to his prayers.

Coming down rapidly from millions to hundreds, and thence to even shillings, Mark assured her he was starving, beggared. He would be dragged to prison for the sake of a pitiful five pounds! Would she not fling him that much down, she to whom he had given costly dresses, trinkets? had lavished luxuries on in former days; his dear cousin—his dearest Emma! Probably, had she thrown down her purse he might have been satisfied then. But no! prudent, close-fingered little soul, she preferred grasping its substance herself to the shadowy chance of pleasing such an irresponsible being. So Hungerford went away loading her with such curses against her ingratitude and treachery—shouted up through the night air—they made Mistress Emma's face burn even after she had closed

the window hurriedly, while she felt inclined, but for strong curiosity, to cover her ears.

After this rebuff, Hungerford reverted to his first demand of being given the key of the tower. Faithful in some degree to his own ideas of his duty, Russ refused this. A terrible struggle ensued; but of which no one ever heard the details from the mouth of the steward. Its nature was only guessed by his severe bruises, which were plain enough, though he bore them in dogged silence. The madman, getting worsted, burst away from the contest and rushed into the darkness. Russ, with a curious fidelity, instantly followed, 'lest his master should injure himself,' he said afterwards.

The group left standing round Hester at the chapel door, with the lantern only to illumine the midnight darkness around them, were all excited beyond measure

—excepting, it seemed, herself. They gathered round her as round some one who had been buried alive and just rescued; or a prisoner freed from the dungeon of a Bastille. She alone stood bewildered, yet outwardly calm and still in her black dress; with the summer snow on her hair that made them look and speak even more softly, and hush their voices in a sort of awe of pity as they addressed her, with hasty, loving, amazed questions. They would have asked many more. But she put all curiosity aside with a few sentences, brief and low, and in a hurried tone as if all that had happened to her was past now: so what did it matter!

She was not dead. Hungerford had carried out a strange deception, the scheme of a madman's brain! These two years she had been shut up above there—Hester raised her hand silently to the tower.

‘But now—now! what ought first to be done?’ asked Mrs. Armytage, with appre-

hensive dread of delay, gazing round nervously. The men began suggesting one that this, one that that course be taken.

But Hester interrupted them all.

‘My child, my child! Give me my child first!’ she exclaimed, in a low hoarse voice of entreaty. And turning with her hands outstretched, ‘Aunt Bessie, help me to get my little Ada; now—this moment. Then you will take us both away with yourself to your home, will you not? Promise me!—say you will!’

They could not have withstood a word or wish of hers that night, even had she asked them aught wild or unreasonable.

Soon afterwards, Mrs. Vignolles, who was just talking over her late exploit triumphantly in Mrs. Fisher’s bed-room next door to her own, was startled once more. She had spoken of Mr. Smith, and now he himself demanded admittance. Thinking that the party below in the porch were all come from the rectory, as

friends, (which had indeed been wholly true a little while ago,) Mrs. Vignolles and her friend Edith Fisher hurried to dress themselves partly and come downstairs. They opened the door with a victorious feeling. For already Emma Vignolles foresaw that Hungerford, being mad, she herself would be surely installed as guardian and mistress at the Priory for years to come. Mrs. Fisher, no less, though more vaguely elated, meant to share in her friend's loaves and fishes. Chattering eagerly and excitedly, both ladies led the way into the prior's little sitting-room, without paying special heed to the group which followed.

Then a sudden silence fell upon them both. The words paused, seeming frozen on their lips.

Who?—*who* was this that had entered, a mute dark figure all muffled, but the gaze of whose darkly-yearning eyes appalled them?

A sort of prescience came to both, as they stood gaping and expectant in the midst of the watching circle; even before the stranger dropped the shawl from her head and showed her features.

‘Where is my child? Give me my child!’ Hester only said, disregarding the outcry of startled horror that greeted her, and not observing that Emma Vignolles’ teeth were chattering in her head.

Hester seemed in a feverish dream, in which she only panted and pressed forward to catch a glimpse of the rosy face and flaxen hair of her little one; to hold it fast in her arms and hurry away with it to safety. Adrian had already rushed to fulfil her wish. He entered that moment, carrying the child, snatched hastily out of her sleep, but not frightened, only drowsily surprised at being in her big playfellow’s arms. Adrian felt a romantic, more intense delight than the rest, as Hester caught her child to herself. He had brought her

Ada first. Hester would never forget that.

‘Will you not stay here to-night? It is your own house, you know,’ stammered Mrs. Vignolles, white to her lips.

‘No: I never will stay another hour under *his* roof if I can help it,’ was all Hester answered, with a stillness that in itself was terrible; as she heard, but seemed unable to answer by a syllable, the faltered words of gladness, of horrified, choking surprise Emma tried to utter.

Out into the night the poor woman, restored to life, went with her child in her arms, and her friends around her. As they drove through the blackness and rain, onward, little Ada sleeping safe in her lap, Hester at last seemed herself to wake. Dimly she understood that she was free—oh, wonderful thought, after those two years of awful silence and imprisoning walls!—that henceforth her life would be warmly and safely sheltered.

CHAPTER XVI.

A STRANGE STORY.

WHEN the next morning came, there were already bands of men searching over the country for traces of Mark Hungerford. Mr. Smith directed these. The shrewd, quiet old man, with his grey face, had never before felt so excited in his life; though outwardly he strove to appear as if such circumstances were by no means so extraordinary to his superior experience as they might seem to others.

They searched from dawn : they searched all day—but none saw or heard tidings of the missing man. It could not be found, by any possibility, that he might have

reached some railway station far or near, or have travelled by any other manner of conveyance. The police were alert everywhere: large rewards were offered for news of him; his description was advertised as a missing man.

Yet neither all that day, nor the next, nor the next was Mark Hungerford heard of!

At the rectory, this day, they gathered round Hester in an awed but very curious family council, to hear her story. The baptism of a great trial was fresh upon her. They gazed at her wondering, as on a rescued martyr. She was as beautiful as ever, nay, more so! in the eyes of several there; but so strangely altered, with that snow-white thick hair brushed off her forehead, which, joined to her calm, steadfast nobleness of manner, gave her the air of a great lady of former days.

‘Mother, is Cousin Hester powdered? She is just like an old picture of some

lovely duchess in old, old days,' whispered one of the twins.

'No,' corrected the other twin. 'Her face has more the expression of the poor French queen going to have her head cut off.'

All listened to hear Hester speak, almost in silence; hardly venturing to interrupt her even by expressions of pity or sympathy. Somehow, even these seemed misplaced.

Hester began in her old veiled voice, that had, however, become curiously hoarse, from want of use and from being no longer accustomed to hear herself speak. Going back to that terrible night of her supposed death, she recounted part of the scene between herself and her husband.

After his tortured victim had finally resigned herself to expect that her last moments of life were come, and that she was calmly awaiting to be released from the agony of suspense by knife-stroke or poison, Hungerford seemed to change his

intention. He sat, now, coolly reflecting and watching her till sunrise dawned beyond the far blue sea, and touched the highest tops of the mountains behind Nice.

Then, when the stealing daylight struggled with the lamps in the crimson-hung torture-room, Hungerford rose and approached his victim. Hester was by this time almost insensible to what was around her; all acuteness of her senses mercifully dulled by, as it were, a mist. She saw, feeling mesmerised, how Hungerford carefully chose out a phial from a locked case, and slowly mixed what she dully supposed to be poison. She drank the draught he brought her, unresistingly—then knew no more!

When Hester again came to consciousness it was night-time. She found herself lying on her bed, dressed in a white gown which she could not remember having ever seen or worn before. Her husband

was standing over her. He forced her to rise and dress herself differently and in haste, desiring her with terrible imprecations to be silent and do his bidding, or he would have no mercy upon her. Hester's tongue seemed dry and clove to her mouth; she could not have cried out even had she wished it. Feeling drugged, faint, and stupefied, it was with difficulty she could obey. She was even hardly astonished to find herself alive.

Then Russ knocked and came into the room. Between him and her husband she was next half dragged, half carried out of the villa and thrust into a carriage. Russ only went with her; and then she started on a journey that seemed to her like a frightful dream.

Sometimes, when Hester was put into a train, she tried to attract the notice and help of other people; but though some seemed to look at her pityingly, they removed themselves to a distance. It

dawned, even upon her enfeebled mind, that Russ made it supposed he was in charge of a lunatic.

‘But could you not call out? Could you not make some sign?’ asked Bessie, pityingly.

‘I tried to do so once or twice, especially when we went on board the steamer,’ said Hester, in a resigned tone, as if the helpless hopelessness of that time were coming back upon her, in recalling it. ‘But each time Russ, pretending I was ill, put something to my face. Perhaps it was chloroform: at any rate I was drugged too much to resist any more, though I never lost consciousness of what was passing around me. Besides, Russ was not uncivil, to give him his due. He even tried to coax me, like a child, into keeping still by reminding me, that I had had a narrow escape of my life; but that now I was going back to England, where I should be quite safe, if only I went quietly and made

no disturbance. So a slender hope dawned in my mind : I was perhaps being sent back in supposed disgrace to you all, my own people ; and I was almost happy.'

A sigh came from Kenyon. He was thinking how little contented her, who had suffered so much. Hester looked round at him gently. He had been admitted, without a word spoken, to their family circle that day, as they listened to Hester ; but hitherto she had not looked at him once specially, or seemed to notice his existence since he had held her in his arms, in the chapel, the night before. Now a little more light came into her starry eyes, though the stillness of her face never altered ; as if perforce she answered his unspoken thought.

'It was a reprieve. And life was still sweet when I remembered all of you, my friends and dear ones.'

She went on to tell how, after a long mid-night country drive—ending some

travelling in England, she knew not whither—being too exhausted, then, even to hear the names of the few stations at which their fast train stopped—they halted at last in a wood. Her heart beat faster with fears, yet expectation, as she was made to get out and walk to a tower she saw dimly rising above through the trees. Russ unlocked the door; and she believed herself brought into a dungeon, for they entered a bare stone room, cold and utterly comfortless. A key was turned upon her, and there till daylight she remained; without fire or light; and in solitude.

The next day, Hester knew indeed her abode was a prison, if not so terrible as she at first feared. Her gaoler reappeared, and brought her food, fire, and some common articles of furniture and coarse necessaries of life. Changing his tone of rough persuasion to one of stern authority, he told his mistress his orders were, to keep her

always confined to the tower. She could never escape: all attempts would not only be useless, but lead to worse captivity. It was best to make up her mind to it. For himself, he was paid well to carry out Mr. Hungerford's orders; so she need not try on prayers or tears, as they would be wasted.

Hester was stupefied at first. Then, rousing as she found herself at last alone, she began to examine where she was.

It was a square, very old tower, of which the entrance was barred by a massive, oaken-pannelled door, secured by an enormous lock. Two low steps descending into a sunken stone passage denoted antiquity, and led to the bare chamber where Hester had passed the most of her late miserable night. This was by daylight seen to be a hall, floored and walled in heavy stone-work, with a wide hearth for logs, and a door opening into a small neglected garden, which Hester hurried out to examine, but found it was enclosed

on all sides by a high wall. A shallow, wooden staircase, with a heavy-topped balustrade, the whole dusty and somewhat crazy with age, led upstairs, ending inside a second room of the same size as the hall below. Here a surprise awaited Hester. This, though almost bare of furniture too, had evidently once been a handsome sitting-room; being all wainscoted in dark wood-panels, divided by pilasters, the whole surmounted by a carved frieze running round the walls under the ceiling. The chimney-piece, likewise of carved wood, bore two female figures in rude design. Beneath the one was cut, in old English letters, *Faith*; beneath the other, *Hope*. Hester said that—as she stood and looked at these—all on a sudden the words appeared to her as a sign. She remembered that she was still alive; as a little while ago she had not expected to be! Tears gushed from her eyes, and seemed to clear her heavy brain. Hope

had revived in her heart. She promised herself she would seek to have faith.

The latticed-window was heavily barred, and the trees outside grew so close that, though Hester had flown to it, no view could be seen any more than from the loop-holes on the stairs. She now mounted, with fresh curiosity, still higher up the stairs, which wound round in flights of three or four steps together and square landings between, till they ended inside a third room. This was even more handsomely wainscoted than that below; and an ancient four-post bed supported on its carved top a mass of dust and festoons of cobwebs. There were a few straight-backed oaken arm-chairs, as in the lower room, and a mouldering table.

But the window! Hester saw at the first glance that here was some view over the tree-tops. She hurried to it; and though there was only part of a drive to be seen—seemingly leading to a neglected

great house—and the entrance to a building which she could not discern well in the hill below the tower, she felt rewarded.

Returning downstairs to search the garden once more, she noticed that the doors were so ancient they were pulled to by an iron handle in the middle, while a string passed through a hole worked the latch. The garden, on closer view, was a rough, grassy enclosure that had, however, been grazed fairly well by a goat, which stared in astonishment at the new human visitor. Some old cherry and walnut-trees grew here and there, and in the centre was a really fine, old mulberry-tree. That was all. A second search showed the wall to be still higher, more impracticable than even on first sight.

It was only now a sudden idea that she was at Helston Priory flashed on Hester. She had never been taken there by her husband. Still she remembered seeing an old print of the house, in one

corner of which some such tower as she was immured in rose lonely among trees. When her gaoler came again that evening, Hester told him of her discovery ; and, though Russ never answered a word, his face seemed to betray his surprise.

Three days later, Hester, watching from her upper window where she spent almost all the daylight hours at first, saw a long funeral pass down the drive and halt at the building under the hill, which was almost hidden from her view. Fascinated, Hester gazed wonderingly with strange surmises following each other rapidly in her brain.

‘I could hardly distinguish the figures of the mourners, and yet—I fancied I recognised some,’ she now said. Her gaze timidly passed round the circle, and paused a little longer on Kenyon. He gave her an almost imperceptible answering sign of the head in affirmation, which she understood.

After the funeral had gone, Russ surprised his prisoner by an unusual midday visit. She had not spoken to him for two days, after he had obstinately persisted in silence to her previous questions, but now she suddenly asked him,

‘Whose funeral was that?’

‘It was your own,’ said the man, gruffly. ‘Now, you will see it is of no use to think of ever getting out of this place while you live.’ Then while Hester gazed at him, only half understanding, he explained all briefly, adding, ‘Mr. Hungerford is coming to see you. Take my advice and don’t cross him. Be very quiet, or this job may have a worse ending.’

Of the scene which followed between herself and Mark Hungerford Hester never told much. She only said briefly that it was terrible. Her nerves already overstrung from long tension, and her strength exhausted, she trembled at sight of her tyrant, and tried in vain to speak. He

seemed to think with surprise she was become a gibbering idiot. At that, a hope of deceiving his cunning came faintly to the unhappy prisoner's mind amidst her fears, and she strove to keep up the delusion.

Hungerford—Hester never owned this, however—seemed moved with a secret fearful joy at seeing her thus.

Nevertheless, he forced his victim to take an awful, and it then seemed to her a most binding oath, never to attempt escape from her prison, nor to try to make it known that she still lived. Then he quitted the tower, and Hester fainted.

When Russ found her, she could hardly speak intelligibly ; and then he too looked at her strangely, and seemed to think her intellect somewhat crazed. She had laughed wildly in his face. He never did thoroughly give up the idea afterwards ; and, with the cunning which weak creatures must use against the strong, she allowed

him to believe so. It was no great wonder, verily, that even the astuteness of her gaoler was thus deceived.

For days afterwards, Hester owned, she sat motionless in the old walled-in garden, under the mulberry-tree, neither stirring nor it seemed seeing aught. Yet, little by little, the influences of the summer air, the quietness around, the peace from strife of mind seemed to steal into her senses with invigorating refreshment. She began to notice the beauty overhead of the

‘ Blue deeps ! magnificently strewn
With coloured clouds, large—light, and fugitive—
By upper winds through pompous motions blown.’

The twitter of the birds, the ripening of fruit, the rustling of leaves around seemed to arouse her to some new interest, fear no longer her predominant feeling. A stray butterfly coming over those high walls, a droning bee were visitors. And then she began also to feel a slow growing security, however brief it might be.

Russ never molested her, beyond making a rigorous daily inspection of the window-bars and the locks of the tower. Seeing her so quiet, the steward had reduced his visits to a single daily one. And this, with lingering distrust, he varied as to hours, the better to detect his charge in any attempts at plans of escape. For the rest of the twenty-four hours the imprisoned woman was free to cook her simple meals, by such rude means as a cotter's wife might scorn, at the wide hearth in the old hall; or to clean the wainscoted rooms which her fastidious tastes soon took a care in keeping scrupulously free from dust.

But, as to her mind, the lonely prisoner did indeed fear at times to become idiotic in her solitude; when, towards the end of that summer, Russ brought a young woman into the tower. This was his wife, he briefly said. It was fitter she should look after Mrs. Hungerford than himself. Hes-

ter roused to hope at hearing her own name given her, with kindly pity, by the young woman. Alas! she soon found it was regarded by the latter as a craze under which the poor lady—a former dependent and connection of the Hungerfords—was suffering. Nevertheless, after that day, Hester had at least a feeling fellow-being near. Mrs. Russ showed her many little womanly good offices; brought her sewing; even borrowed books for her, unknown to Russ, from the Priory library.

This first winter, however, Hester herself found a strange means of access to the desolate old house that should have known her as its mistress. She was busied at the hall-fire one day, when, having accidentally pushed against one of the sides rather heavily with a boiling kettle she was lifting, the shock moved a large stone slightly inwards. It was the entrance to a secret passage leading to the chapel, and thence further to the Priory

itself. The feelings with which she explored this subterranean passage were indescribable. It was almost choked in some parts: it was difficult and disagreeable to traverse in the last degree, and many evenings she was obliged to economise the scanty store of candles allowed by Russ's parsimony, that enough might remain to light her on occasional nightly visits.

But to her, nevertheless, it was as a path to another little world of comparative freedom. The passage, Hester now explained, had two outlets: one in the library of the Priory, the other in the small closet opening off the adjoining bed-room. The rest of the house was generally locked up. And all escape from it was as impossible as in the tower.

But—however disappointed in hopes of finding liberty—she had the solace of carrying stores of books which she kept hidden in the tower.

‘ I seem to have been reading a lifetime,’ said Hester afterwards, smiling. And, indeed, her mind, undisturbed by outer distractions, had amassed a store of knowledge and ranged through the choicest fields of literature in those long months ; leaving her almost as delightful in her intellectual cultivation as she had been previously merely in her beauty and womanly qualities.

On one of these excursions, Russ surprised her unawares, though she escaped. Afterwards, Mrs. Russ came to the tower with a confidential tale of how her husband had been frightened by a ghost. Hester resolved to profit by this superstitious weakness of her gaoler, and even bravely lay in wait at times to alarm him more as the supposed White Lady.

At one time, only, Hester was allowed outside her tower. This was when, his wife being ill, Russ churlishly refused to allow anyone to come and nurse her ; no

doubt fearing that the secret of the tower's inmate might be betrayed; and dreading the consequences of justice, and also the loss of the large reward promised him by Hungerford, in addition to his already high pay for carrying out the maniac's wish. The poor prisoner, longing for a change and occupation, however, begged with such zeal that she at last obtained the steward's permission to nurse the young woman herself, promising faithfully not to escape. On one of these occasions Zachary Cowgill came into the cottage, and saw her. Hester had by this time (she owned to them) reasoned out with herself, that the oath exacted under such cruel circumstances by her husband was not really binding upon her conscience.

An exclamation of surprise from most of those whosatround, interrupted the speaker.

‘ You surely did not ever consider such a promise need be kept ? ’ cried several of her hearers, in much surprise.

‘The remembrance of that oath was a horror to me for months,’ said Hester, sadly and gravely, with a shudder she could not repress. ‘You see, I had a choice given me—of preferring to die or keeping my word! Perhaps some persons would have taken your view of the question, at once. I have come to do so, at last—but it was a real agony to my mind for long. Yet, once that I found by chance the Priory was inhabited again, I made every effort to let any of my friends know of my existence.’

‘But *why* did you not appear boldly before Mrs. Vignolles—among us all at the Priory when we were there?’ asked the Armytage men. Kenyon and Aunt Bessie did not ask questions; they sat very still and listened.

Hester explained, with a pitiful and apologetic look at having failed in accomplishing what they all thought so easy.

‘It is only a week or so, I think, since

Mrs. Vignolles has come to the Priory. Neither Russ nor Mrs. Russ let a hint drop to me of anyone arriving there. He had always told his wife that any news or talk about the Hungerford family excited me. One evening I went for books as usual, when the man-servant nearly surprised me in the library. I supposed him to be Russ, at first; but then I saw, from my upper window, people passing by the drive to the long-deserted house. You can imagine my startled wondering! When Russ came to the tower I asked him in terror, was Mr. Hungerford come back? He would not answer directly, yes; but led me to believe my fears were correct. I was in hourly, momentary terror then!—my life seemed again in the balance. I questioned Mrs. Russ repeatedly, who, though forbidden to speak on the subject, let out that “little Miss Ada,” my child, was at the Priory with Mrs. Vignolles. I felt I must see my little one at all risks, and made my

first attempt that very evening. The secret gallery in the library has a pierced air-hole, hidden by the carved stonework above the fireplace. Stealing past it, a hum of people talking came to my ears, and I fancied—yet could hardly believe it—that I recognised your voice, Sir Christopher.’

Kit started.

‘Then it was you, you yourself who called me?—it was no trick of my imagination?’ he cried.

‘Yes; I tried to whisper your name, low, in fear,’ explained poor Hester. ‘For if only Mark Hungerford and Mrs. Vignolles were there, *I feared—I feared—*’

She stopped, seeing the colour rise hotly to Adrian’s fair forehead, like a girl’s. The young fellow had come over by cock-crow to the rectory, though as yet Mrs. Vignolles had neither appeared nor sent a message there.

Hester hastily resumed.

‘When I listened again, all was still. I crept out, and found the library empty. I meant to search the house till I found Ada, hiding myself as well as possible, meanwhile. And chance favoured me at last; for she was in the very next room. But a maid surprised me; and, hearing the hue and cry, I escaped, believing Mr. Hungerford was in the house—and, without some one I could trust, I dared not face *him*.’

‘But you could trust me. I was there,’ burst out Adrian, impetuously.

‘Oh! if I had been *sure* you were,’ answered Hester, half playfully. ‘But it was a mere wild hope. The next night, hearing from Mrs. Russ the stir about the ghost, I went back; but found the child removed and the doors mostly locked. Then I haunted the plot of garden enclosed between the house-walls, and went back again and again to that same room, hoping to find you, Adrian; for Mrs. Russ brought

me the gossip that you meant to sleep there and dare the ghost. The first time I crept back to the bed-room, Mrs. Fisher was there; and her voice gave me more fright than any she could have felt herself. It was like a horrible mystery how all these people could be at the Priory. The next night, Adrian, I came and spoke to you. But Bob fired at me; and then, believing myself on the point of falling into Mr. Hungerford's hands again (for, in the darkness, I could not see either of you), I rushed back to my tower.

'There is hardly any more to tell. Russ watched me like a dragon those days. I only escaped at nights. Then, last night, Mrs. Russ came running to the tower, imploring me to hide—for Mr. Hungerford had come. She guessed long before, I used to go to some secret nook, having often missed me; but, as I had implored her not to tell this to Russ, she had kept silent out of good-nature, thinking it, no doubt,

a mere harmless freak. Then I fled to the chapel. And you both saved me——!’

Hester rose, and held out a hand to both Kenyon and Adrian, with her old fascinating manner that seemed to them both, as always, (nay, to Kenyon a thousand times more than ever!) infinitely more regal, yet gentle, and altogether sweetly unapproachable than that of any other woman either ever knew.

‘Thank you!’ she said, simply, with the smile of an angel.

Christopher bent and kissed her hand. Adrian promptly did the same. Uda gazed at them both, round-eyed, in surprise

CHAPTER XVII.

‘WHEN THE WICKED CEASE FROM TROUBLING.’

THREE days and nights had come and gone. Yet still no tidings were brought of Mark Hungerford, though the country had been searched far and wide.

Meanwhile, at the Priory its late regent, Mrs. Vignolles, sat on thorns, fussing and fuming, her plans wildly upset. For one small thing at least she felt grateful in heart, that her quondam friend, Mrs. Fisher, was no longer there. That look given from Hester's eyes the night before had frozen the false-sweet traitress to the heart. Not daring to face again the injured woman who had called her friend,

she went away very quietly and quickly the next morning; and so vanished likewise, for the most part, from the ken of all in this history. Even Emma Vignolles virtuously resolved to have 'nothing more to say to her.' For the latter little person, after some secret indecision, espoused Hester's cause warmly; and pitied her wrongs with a real enough amazed horror.

'I told you so,' she could not keep her lips back from repeating, with many sharp shakes of the head. 'You will remember now. I warned you at the time, when you *would* marry Mark Hungerford. Well, poor Hester, 'pon my word, it is the most shocking story!—eh, eh! I declare, I don't know what the world will say of it . . . but at all events, my dear, I think you will acknowledge I have done my duty by your child, Ada.'

Hester replied, in her gentle tone, that seemed to prove she viewed all things justly and like one removed above earthly passions

(as if her thoughts still looked out on the world afar, from her lonely tower in the wood), that this was true. According to her worldly woman's judgment, Emma Vignolles had tried to bring up her charge as she thought was best for the small heiress of the Priory. Who could expect more of her?

'And you see, Hester,' went on the little widow, 'how hard my position is! For Mark had promised me a large reward for my care of Ada when he came back; and now I shall get nothing but my bare expenses.'

'In justice, you should get what he promised you. I will do my best about it,' Hester replied, in a calm tone, strongly contrasting with her interlocutor's anxious eagerness. In her long loneliness money had lost its value to her mind except as a means of giving help and joy to others. What to her now seemed the prime good gifts to be enjoyed were very different objects—love, freedom, life.

So these two women became therefore 'friends;' or so Mrs. Vignolles at least warmly declared, extolling loudly thenceforth the virtues and sufferings of 'poor dear Hester—quite a saint, you know! These very good people are so victimised.' And the latter felt glad to be reconciled, having amply lived out all grudges of heart during her lonely two prison-years. Now she only wished to be at peace with all mankind, so far as in her lay.

On the third day of Hester's return to the living world, Sir Christopher Kenyon was announced and came into the little room at the rectory set apart for Hester's daily use; for she could not, as yet, bear easily the voices and presences of many persons near her. Kit and she for the first time stood alone together since—two years ago—they had parted at Nice. But though both recalled this, and felt as if they were looking strangely at each other, Kenyon only said,

‘I have come to wish you good-bye. Perhaps it is better for me to go back to Westcliff?’

‘Yes. No doubt it is best,’ said Hester, low, almost like a sigh.

‘Unless you should need me to help you in anything——’

‘If so, I shall send for you, my friend.’

Hester in herself felt like one long blindfolded, who, set free, gazes round on earth and sky and lately familiar objects with dazed eyes. But Kenyon, watching her with a joy like pain, was somehow reminded of a statue of Memory he had somewhere seen, with that same expression—sweet, steadfast, unrepining. Her still features helped the resemblance, as did the summer snow that would evermore lie white on her hair, a sign of sorrow for which he felt he could love her still more dearly. And yet little Ada’s laugh, as all in the house knew, would send new life pulsing once more warmly through her

mother's veins. Kenyon felt maddeningly how a far fuller, gladder life than she had ever known lay yet dormant in the fair woman whose eyes now met his; as if between him and her, though the dearest of friends, there, lay a great gulf. He had to put force upon himself to say merely,

‘One thing more. Say you forgive my intention in opening your coffin, as I supposed. Adrian has told you why.’

A humid gleam, making the eyes that had so long been his soul's stars still more lovely, met his appealing, beseeching glance. A faint colour, like some happy yet half-shamed gladness of returning youth, crept in a slow wave over Hester's cheeks. With quicker breath she replied, low,

‘Yes, yes. It was a kind thought—it was like you. If I had been dead, I think I should have known and blessed you.’

Kenyon, not trusting himself to say more, gave her hand a farewell pressure, and was turning away, when she said, rather faintly,

‘Stay—one moment.’

He turned eagerly at that, but with her first words the quick roused expectancy died in his glance. She said, faltering a little at first, but then growing firmer,

‘Edward—my cousin Edward—has been telling me of something. He always used to come to me long ago with his troubles as a boy; do not be vexed, please, that I know of his disappointment about Uda—and the cause of it.’

Kenyon turned to look out of the window, while actually a blush that seemed guilty rose darkly under his bronzed skin. However innocent he knew himself to have been in intention, the horrible thought sprang into his mind that Hester might possibly be suspecting him of a platonic flirtation with her young girl-

cousin ; he who had embittered, yes, spoiled ! her own young life. He answered feebly, after an awkward pause, like a chidden boy,

‘ Armytage told me the same . . . something, I mean. I never thought of it, never guessed—believe me, it was a most painful surprise. But still, I *hope* he is wrong.’

‘ *And if he is not—?*’ answered Hester, slowly ; and, meeting her sad but gently steadfast eyes, Kit read her thought therein clear, ‘ as pebbles in a brook.’

A long silence followed ; only broken once or twice by a heavy, impatient sigh from Sir Christopher. Then he uttered, pleadingly,

‘ Hester, I will try, so far as in me lies, to do all you may wish—— But spare me for a little while. Remember, *I have only just seen you again !*’

Hester trembled, but commanded herself.

‘ You and I are growing middle-aged

people now. Is it not time for us to live for others, not for ourselves?’

‘You have done so for years. It was through me you were forced into that hideous life of slavery,’ cried Kenyon, impetuously. ‘Do not you condemn me, and through me another to the same, if a less horrible bondage.’

‘You might make Uda happy. Surely that knowledge, and a new life begun with a young glad girl-wife, would go far to make you as happy, too, as most of us can be on earth?’ urged Hester, still gathering firmness as she spoke.

But Kenyon mutely, mournfully shook his head.

‘Even that could not make me resigned. Ah, you know I can never care for another woman. Hester, why will you ask me to raise a new barrier between us two?’

‘Because I wish to see you with different hopes, new interests, with your children about your knees. Because you must

not blind yourself with any false, utterly hopeless thoughts of me,' returned Hester, quick-breathing; and turning pale, then flushing again, while her pulses thrilled in her emotion. She craved for strength, for her woman's nature was weak, and well-nigh failed in that moment. 'You and I can never be more to each other than we are now. Mark may be old, but he is strong—all the stronger since his intellect has weakened. There is no reason in nature why he should not live to be a very old man; and while he lives I am bound to him. But I may not have long to live. *Dear Kit*—you and I must not be selfish.'

'As you will,' replied Sir Christopher, slowly and heavily. 'If you tell me to do so, I will marry Gertrude Armytage—after a little while.'

He had hardly ceased speaking, when a confused hum of voices both had been too much preoccupied to notice till now, though

the sound had been increasing for the last few minutes, became nearer and louder. The voices of Mrs. Doggett and the other maids could be distinguished in the hall. These were followed by gruff tones of countrymen and a scraping and shuffling of heavy boots. There came a tap at the door, and a discreet hush fell outside.

‘Oh, it is some news!—they must have heard of *him*,’ uttered Hester, springing up, startled, to meet Aunt Bessie and the young rector, who entered with a subdued, strange expression on their faces.

‘Yes, dear; you are right,’ said Mrs. Armytage, coming forward hastily. She put her arms round Hester, whose whole being seemed suddenly instinct with quivering fear like a hunted creature, and drew the trembling figure close to good Bessie’s broad, comfortable bosom.

‘Oh, Aunt Bessie,’ prayed Hester, ‘what new trouble is it? Tell me all—I can

bear anything better than suspense. If only he does not separate me from my child. Oh! tell me!—I must have *something* to love!’

‘He will never trouble you more, dear; never more——! Don’t be very much shocked, my dearest, but Mark Hungerford is dead.’

He was dead indeed. That morning, although the search for the mad squire had been almost given up, Russ and Cowgill, who had made up their quarrel, went, by way of leaving no stone unturned, through an out-lying wood some miles from Helston Priory. The wood was thickly planted with firs; it was not broad, though of considerable length, and was seldom frequented by anyone. After going about seventy yards, Russ gave a hoarse cry of horror, and stood stock still, gazing up into the branches of a tree, whence dangled a lifeless figure. It

was Mark Hungerford, as both recognised at once.

The unhappy man had evidently hanged himself in a most determined way. He had taken off his braces, which he had made so as to hang from one of the branches, while the ends were formed into a noose. Putting on his waistcoat and coat again, he must have climbed up the tree to a height of about sixteen feet, and placing the braces on a short arm of the tree, and the noose round his neck, had sprung deliberately from the branch on which he stood to meet death.

Zachary Cowgill—who had given the alarm, and brought the news to the rectory—told how he was ‘pure sorry for Mester Russ, who had lain down on the grass, and sobbed like a child.’ Without doubt, the steward’s dog-like loyalty to his dead master was unfeigned, and, in its rugged way, even touching. When the body was brought to the Priory, Russ begged that

he, and no other, might perform the last offices to the dead. Mark Hungerford must have exercised a strange power over this coarse nature; for while, when living, Russ not only guarded him in his darkest moments, but also was ready to lie, and spy, and do a crime at his bidding, so even in death the master was not deserted by the servant.

‘Let me stay by him till he is buried, and then do with me what you and the law likes,’ Russ gruffly asked, as a sole favour, of Mr. Smith. ‘I’ll take my trial, and expect no mercy from Mrs. Hungerford.’

But the steward’s young wife, with her baby in her arms, came in grief to the rectory and threw herself at Hester’s feet, beseeching pity for her husband. She did not plead long, nor in vain.

‘I forgive him for your sake,’ answered Hester, seeming like an angel of mercy to the weeping woman, who was half-

blinded by her tears. 'He must have some good in his heart, for I believe he really loves you and his child. I will not let him be punished for what he did to me, if I can help it. But it will be best if you both go far away. I will help you to emigrate.' And the poor wife, with lightened heart, lifted up her voice, as from of old women have done in strong emotion, and blessed Hester.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HUSH AFTER A STORM.

THE inquest on Mark Hungerford was over, and his funeral had wound down the Priory drive, under the long drooping tree-branches, to the little chapel, where he was laid. The service was performed very early in the morning, just before dawn, so as to avoid any curious crowd of spectators. But few followed the coffin, and of those only Russ the steward was affected by real regret for the dead.

When Edward Armytage had ended his solemn duties, he and Kenyon came out together, and as the others slowly dispersed they two were left in the twilight.

‘What an awful mystery is man,’ said Kenyon, breaking the silence that lay between them and over the yet sleeping woods and earth. ‘This one is suffered to torture the lives of others, yet when he dies we utter words of prayer and hope over him. Would it not be better, if we could think in solemn forgiveness that for such there is not pain nor punishment, but a resolving into nothingness reserved?’

‘Yet may we not rather hope that the fire shall burn up the chaff of each individual grain, and leave good seed-corn behind to spring from every unit,’ said Edward Armytage, dreamily, gazing before him far beyond the furthest visible horizon.

And just then the sun’s rim rose above the dark shoulder of the world, and light shot broadening and brightening in vivifying beams up the eastern sky. And the earth awoke and was glad.

Mark Hungerford’s will was read that day. It was found that it had been made

at the time of his marriage and never since altered. Hester was left the sole guardianship of their child or children ; and the little Nest up in the North country was absolutely bequeathed to her as Hungerford's wedding-gift. Perhaps, indeed, it was the only one ever made by him to his wife that she valued.

With a great sigh of relief, poor Hester, who had been pale as lily-leaves till then, caught up and clasped little Ada to her mother's yearning heart. Each night since Hungerford's death, she had suffered from terrible dreams that she and her child were forcibly torn asunder. Often she awoke shuddering with the frightened belief that her deliverance was all a mistake!—*that Mark was alive!* Sometimes she could hardly persuade her waking senses that her dream was the false belief, so painfully had the yoke galled her shoulders and the iron entered into her soul.

The rest at the rectory did all they could to prevent the now widowed victim being pained by gossip, and the nine days' wonder which was of course excited in the country. Nevertheless, Hester said to them that she felt it would be happiest for her to go away. She would go with little Ada up to the Nest; and there, in the old home, feeling her native air blowing over the mountains, she should more easily forget the past, and learn by degrees how to be happy again.

But, before Hester left, there was still a trouble that lay with strange, new perplexity on her mind.

Kenyon and she had not met since he had last given her, with difficult pain, his promise to marry Uda. But Hester knew that, after hearing of Mark Hungerford's death, he had not gone away. She alone guessed, with a fluttering tremor, to which her heart had long been strange, *why* he yet stayed; as she alone had been told of

his intention to go away. Mr. Smith and others came and had interviews with her continually, advising and consulting during those few days; of the funeral and will; and of future steps to be taken as regarded the occupation, or not, of the Priory; of deeds, and trusts, and monies.

The talk seemed to flow around Hester's ears; although the men of business complimented her on her calm of understanding and her quickness of decision. But, all the while, she was keenly aware of an undercurrent, even a second train of thought in her mind, that kept intensely absorbed far the most part of her true interest.

Kit was still here—and why? That went rhyming on and on in Hester's head, and would not be banished, however hard she tried. She felt ashamed of herself, troubled and perplexed. For Kit's promise to marry Uda, if she, Hester, so bade him, was always in her ears; the scene as they

two had last parted was always before her eyes. She seemed disloyal to poor Uda, to Aunt Bessie in heart, because that her tongue had as yet refused to speak on the subject that might give back peace to them both, if she willed it. But now!—would it be right so to will it? Hester well knew such words would, in their changed situation, be condemning Kit to an unhappiness that might last for life. Would he, indeed, now obey her? Or was she merely a selfish woman, trying to persuade herself that what her heart whispered small and low in its inmost secret chamber was right?

Then Hester would pass quickly and quietly, when released, to her own room; and snatch up little Ada, covering her with kisses.

‘No, I do not want to be selfish!’ she would say to herself. ‘I have my child at least for a consolation. That, and the love of all these other dear ones; freedom and

blessings richly restored to me. Why should I wish for more—unless it be right to do so? I am—I would be content, if needs be, even without *his* love.'

Thus several days had passed, till now Hester felt urgent to go away, and said to Mrs. Armytage, a little piteously,

'You will forgive me, if the child and I leave you very soon, perhaps the day after to-morrow. It seems to confuse my head to have so much life and bustle around me just now—and it is so strange *not to mourn more!* that—well, I shall be better away up at the old home. Then you will come and see us soon there, dear Aunt Bessie? Promise me that! though indeed you must promise to come often, as I hope to live there for always. I cannot bear the thought of ever coming back to the Priory, to be near the tower and that wood.' (She shuddered slightly, yet the wood was under sentence to be felled near the fatal spot for two acres space,

that none might point out the suicide's tree.)

Bessie Armytage only patted her niece's shoulder, and answered, with a shrewd little smile, to Hester's great surprise,

'Well, and *I* hope you will not live so long at the Nest, dear, but somewhere still better—perhaps at the Court near Westcliff.'

'Oh! no,' cried Hester, while a blush hot as any of her most youthful days flushed her face. 'Don't say that, Aunt Bessie. Edward has told me himself of Uda, and I—I—indeed I should be glad to see her happy.'

'Not at your expense and Kit's—never!' said Bessie Armytage, with dignity. 'Dearest Hester, don't for a moment think of spoiling your two future lives by attempting any false generosity. I am sorry for my own child, of course; but, if poor Edward is right, Uda must get over her little trouble. It can only be a passing fancy,

without cause on his side ; let us do Kit that justice.'

There was a moment's silence between the two women ; but then, Bessie's heart yearning a little, she said, rather weakly,

'I can foresee the future for you, now, and another with great hopefulness. Oh, my dearest, at eventime it shall be light ! You and Kit have both suffered so much ; and you have really been widowed these two years, so there is no true need to shrink from a thought of happiness. But still . . . do you think you could just give Uda a word of advice, Hester ? She might be so truly happy, if she would only take Edward, and my heart aches to see my child looking so moping. She would believe you if you gave her a wise word or two ; but she rather thinks her old mother a goose in such matters.'

So Hester, though much hesitating, asked Uda to come by-and-by to her room that evening, if she had a few spare min-

utes. And Uda agreed with a sullenness that tried hard to be humility; so evidently thinking her own lot the saddest and most disregarded on earth that Hester almost smiled to herself, thinking, 'Poor child!' with amused pity.

'Can I help you in packing?' asked Gertrude, coming in after a tap that had some unwillingness in its very sound. 'I would have offered to do it all for you before; only that you have so many other people to help you, I thought you would not want *me*.'

The speech was rather jealously ungracious. Yet Hester, looking closer at her young cousin, forgot her own feelings, which still thrilled sensitively at any roughness of speech, and only noticed that Uda's dark round eyes were dulled, while her eyelids had a purplish tinge, and her fresh colour was turning sallow. She knew, too, how dearly Uda loved making herself the central figure of the domestic group,

whether in directing or taking care of some of the rest, as housekeeper, or nurse, or general adviser. Poor Uda, under her mother's wise rule, had found herself somewhat a nobody lately. And, when Hester re-appeared among them, all the rest were so eager to surround their restored prisoner with loving care that Uda, who would have liked to be first with her cousin, felt jostled, and so retired with a hurt feeling into the background.

'You can help me better than by packing my box, dear; for you can, I hope, make me go away with a mind more at rest about your own self,' said Hester, in a tone of such tenderly affectionate interest in the girl she looked at, that Uda, a little confused, and reddening with some premonition of what might be coming, yet seemed softened.

'You are not very happy, dear child. I have seen it, and been sorry for it; ever since I came back among you all. And

poor Edward, too—don't start, dear—he told me of his disappointment, and I am so sorry for him, too.'

Uda, on this, instantly began dissolving in tears.

'Don't cry so, dear,' urged Hester, much distressed. 'Some people *must* suffer, you know, and he will try to bear it bravely, like a man. It is a great pity indeed for both your sakes if it cannot be. Still even a steadfast girl like you, Uda, may change her mind with time; and it is right that men and women should so change with good reason. So—I trust to see you very happy yet, some day.'

'No, no; never,' came chokingly from Uda, as she gulped down big, thick, following sobs. 'And I think it most *un-unkind* of you, Cousin Hester—I do!—to talk of my being happy, when Edward can't be.'

'But be reasonable, Gertrude. Though I meant to hope for my own part that you and Edward would yet come together;

still, if you feel you cannot really love him, he would not wish to prevent your happiness with some other man whom you may never yet have seen. And Edward, too—seeing this wish is impossible—will very likely form another attachment in years to come. It is human nature, dear. You would not wish him to be sad and solitary, as Sir Christopher Kenyon has been; who because of one past sorrow has had no heart left, even for any girl who might care for him out of pity,' said Hester, very low, anxious not to seem to touch on the girl's secret love with the least jar. But Uda, rubbing back her tears, looked up in amazed indignation.

'Oh, as to Sir Christopher—no, indeed! I hope Edward would not be like him. I beg your pardon, Cousin Hester, for perhaps you think him perfection, like everyone else, but I call him a most unpractical person.'

'But, Gertrude, forgive me, dear,—for

indeed I only ask for your own sake. Was it *not*, then, because you cared more for—well, some one else, that you refused Edward?’

‘No, no. But because mother . . . she said Edward and I were too great friends, we were talked about. She didn’t like it! And I would *never* go against her least wish, never; I would rather die,’ uttered Uda, half-choked and almost washed away in her sobs.

‘My dear child, it is all a mistake!’ cried Hester, so relieved suddenly she could have laughed aloud at the absurdity of the situation. ‘Why, Aunt Bessie told me yesterday there was nothing she would have liked better than to see you and Edward happily married; but that you had refused him, she did not know why.’

Uda raised up her face, which somewhat suggested an anomaly in nature: the appearance of a crimson setting sun washed by violent rain. In her astonish-

ment, she could only gasp an incredulous,
'No——?'

'But yes; yes, indeed!' cried Hester, kissing her. 'There—go and be happy.'

Gertrude rose slowly.

'I hope that Sir Christopher will not be hurt,' she said, with a solemn childishness. 'Will he *mind*, do you think, Cousin Hester?'

'No, no: certainly not: not at all,' replied Hester, with an almost unnecessary measure of cheerful assurance in her tones, as she had nodded her head with quite the old lightness of her youthful days. 'It was only poor Edward who supposed it *must* be him, you see. And Edward told me . . . There, dear; do go and take a turn in the yew-tree walk to cool your cheeks. Just slip out here through this window. No one will see you.'

No one did. But a few minutes later the young rector might have been seen going towards the same yew-tree walk

from the house with long strides; as if impelled by some secret knowledge or joyful hope that hurried him forward in more than even his usual rapidly awkward haste.

That evening, after supper, Edward Armytage felt it would be so selfish to keep all his new satisfaction to himself that he hurried off to the 'Three Choughs,' where Sir Christopher still lingered; and told his friend of the misunderstanding that he himself and Uda had cleared up in the yew-tree walk. Kenyon sprang up and wrung his hand, so overjoyed he could not control himself.

'I am so glad—my dear fellow, I can't tell you how glad I am!' he kept repeating.

'I think I can understand it,' said Edward, with a dry smile. 'And when shall you go up to the lake country?'

Kenyon paused; and silently offered his

friend a cigar. After they had sat down a few minutes and smoked, he frankly answered,

‘Not just yet. She would not like it, I am afraid—but I shall be counting the days till then . . . Adrian Vignolles is coming down with me to Westcliff; and helping him in his future as an artist will pass the time; though even so it will be weary. Poor boy! with all his ardour now, I doubt that he will never be a Royal Academician. But who knows?—He may marry Ada, though, in the future, and live at the Priory.’

‘Who knows——?’ repeated Edward, laughing.

So Hester and her little girl went up to the old home; the little cottage with its crumpled thatched roof, and mantle of flowering creepers, that lay near the shining lake. The mountains, standing so immovably as of yore with their heads

communing with the clouds, but their bases planted deep in old earth, were like friends who had never altered. The army of bulrush spears round the lake-margin seemed to look on Hester as if they knew no change in her since she was a child. And, as she showed her own little child where the water-lilies and the purple loose-strife used to blow, and that they played together for sunny afternoons among the cushions of heather on the cliff-side, Hester awoke by degrees to feel herself still young. The past rolled back from her mind like a dark curtain; a thousand, mute, little associations revived her thoughts and wishes, as the trees swell and bud in April. Hester had not only dared to be happy, while her laugh mingled with that of her child, but she dared more—at least, she almost invited other thoughts of a delicious doubting trouble to steal into her heart and suffuse the sunlit haziness there. And yet she knew

all the while that it was only playing at being sad—to make her present happy time, that was like a peaceful rest, all the happier! She knew Kenyon would come to her.

And so, one afternoon, he appeared. He had only written a few brief words beforehand, ‘I am coming; will you see me?’ But (without waiting an answer), on the afternoon named, he was there. Hester met him outside, in the cottage porch, holding Ada by one hand, even whilst she gave him the other in a welcome that was perhaps a little more dignified because she felt so tremulous. Kenyon, looking in her face, saw and understood in a moment. He lifted Ada in his arms, and kissed her. And the child, who had learnt to love Kit at the rectory, nestled close to him; but, with the imperious fondness of her royal age, instantly remarked between her caresses,

‘You said you would bring me a little bird that would sing whenever I did turn

a handle—Have you got a bird for me? You were a very long time coming.'

'Yes; of course I have brought your bird. I could not forget such a thing,' said Kenyon, as he carried her in his arms into the house after her mother; and then added, with a smile, to Hester, 'You see what fast friends Ada and I are. She even trusts me.'

'She is quite right,' replied Hester, with a smile that illumined her face like a ray of happiness borrowed a moment from heaven.

Then, as Sir Christopher, putting the child gently down, stood looking at her with a sudden flush of joy suffusing his features; the more so that his bronzed complexion had been somewhat pale when he had arrived, she went on, in gentle confusion,

'You are tired now—you must be so, after your journey. You shall rest a little, and have some lunch with us. Then—'

perhaps you would like to walk round my old home, and see it—again?’

The last word came low.

Kenyon answered as quietly,

‘Yes.’

So, an hour or so later, they two left the Nest together. And without hardly a word said between them, silence being sweetest, their steps strayed of mute accord up the hill, through the wooded paths, till they reached the stile overlooking the cottage down below, and the lake, and the far mountains. At this spot they had twice met at, the most fateful moments of their lives. Kenyon stood still.

‘*This is the very place; is it not?*’ he asked. Then, as she signed rather than murmured that it was so, he came close to her; and said, with deep emotion in his voice, ‘We have parted here twice, Hester, as we thought for ever! Now it is the third time—Surely we shall never part again while we both live?’

‘Never more, I trust,’ was all Hester could find breath to say; but she looked up in his face. Then, as they drew close together with full mutual love, they felt that, however stormy the mornings of their lives had been, now blessed sunlight was around them. In spring-tides, they had twice parted almost broken-hearted. Now, in the autumn, both had found peace at last.

THE END.



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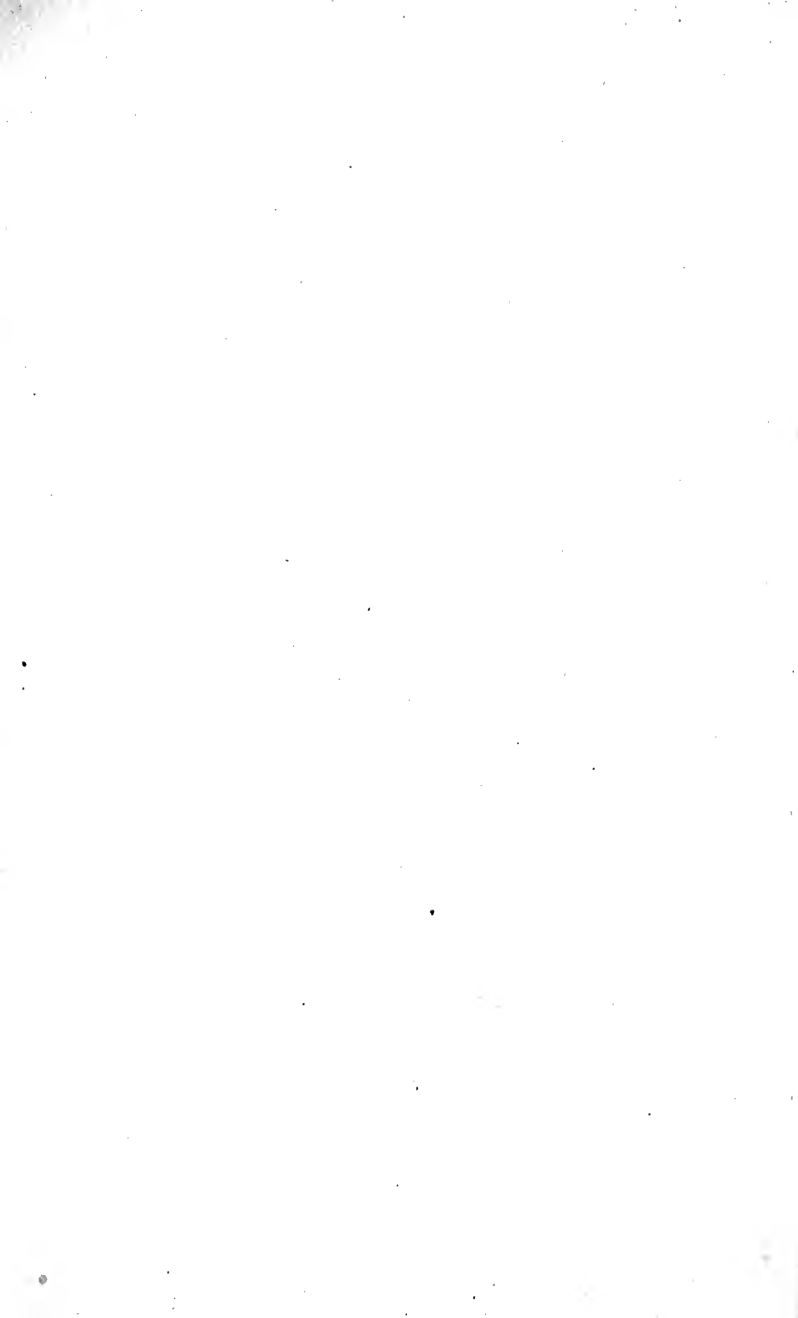
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