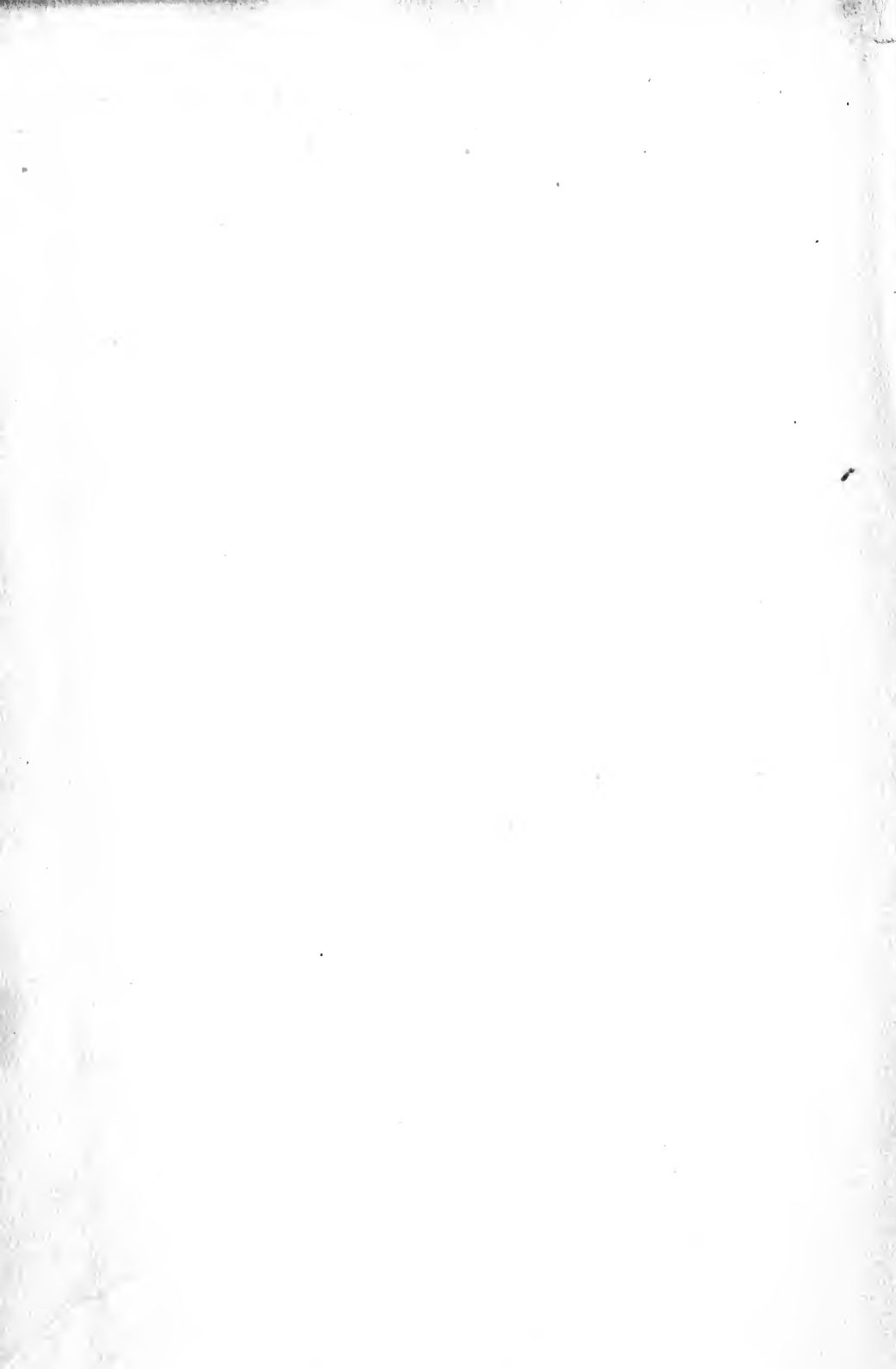


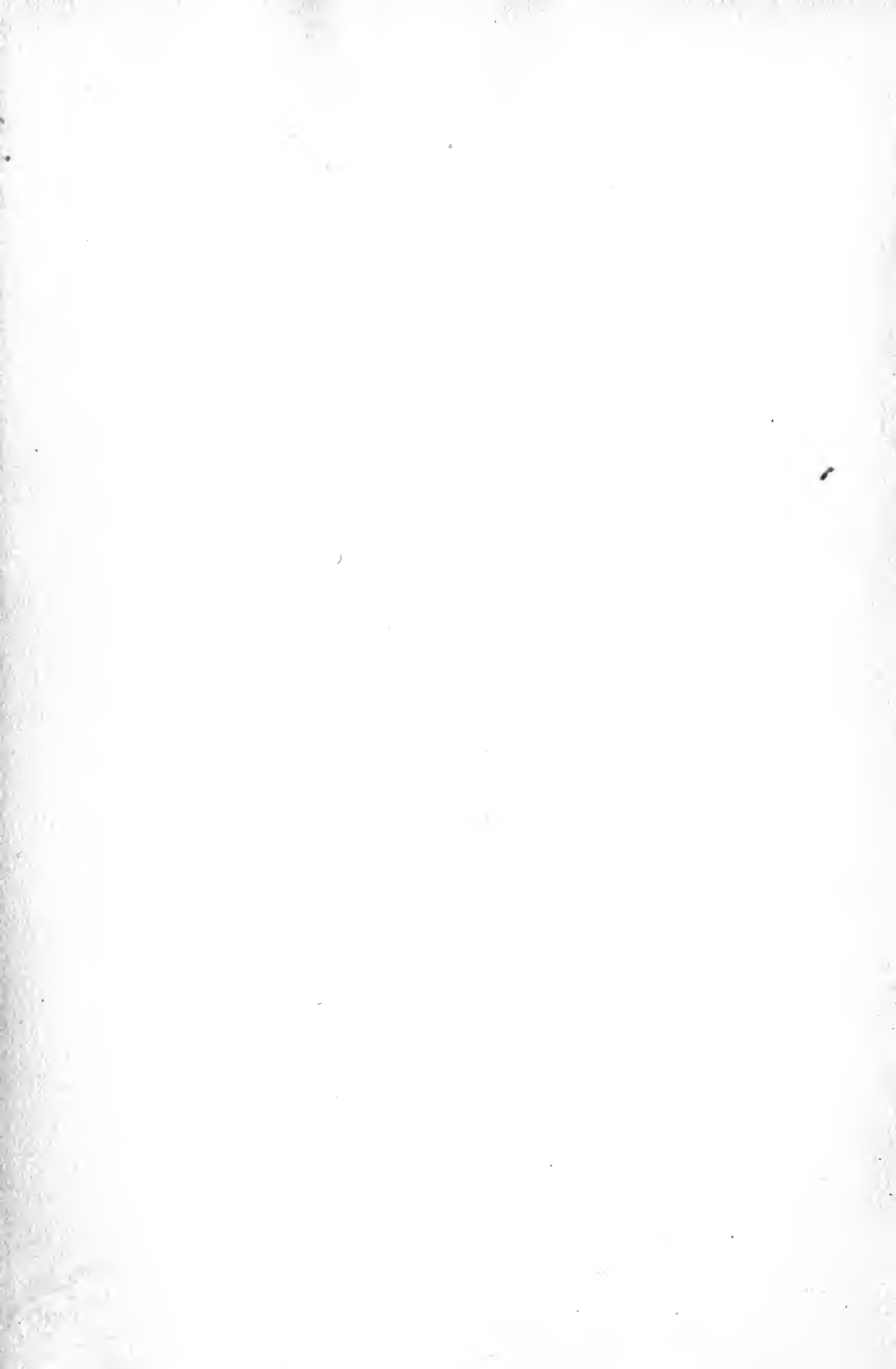
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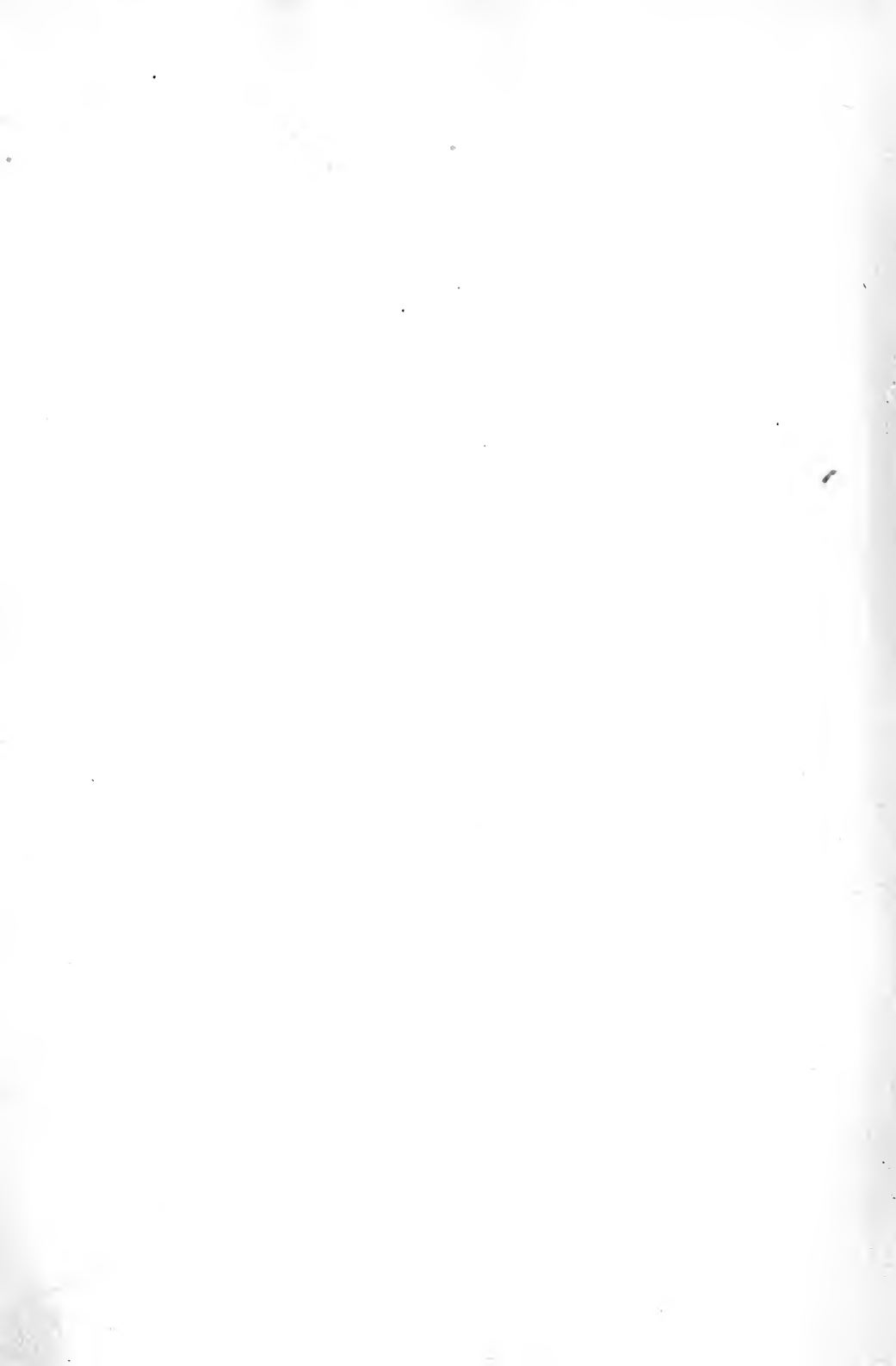
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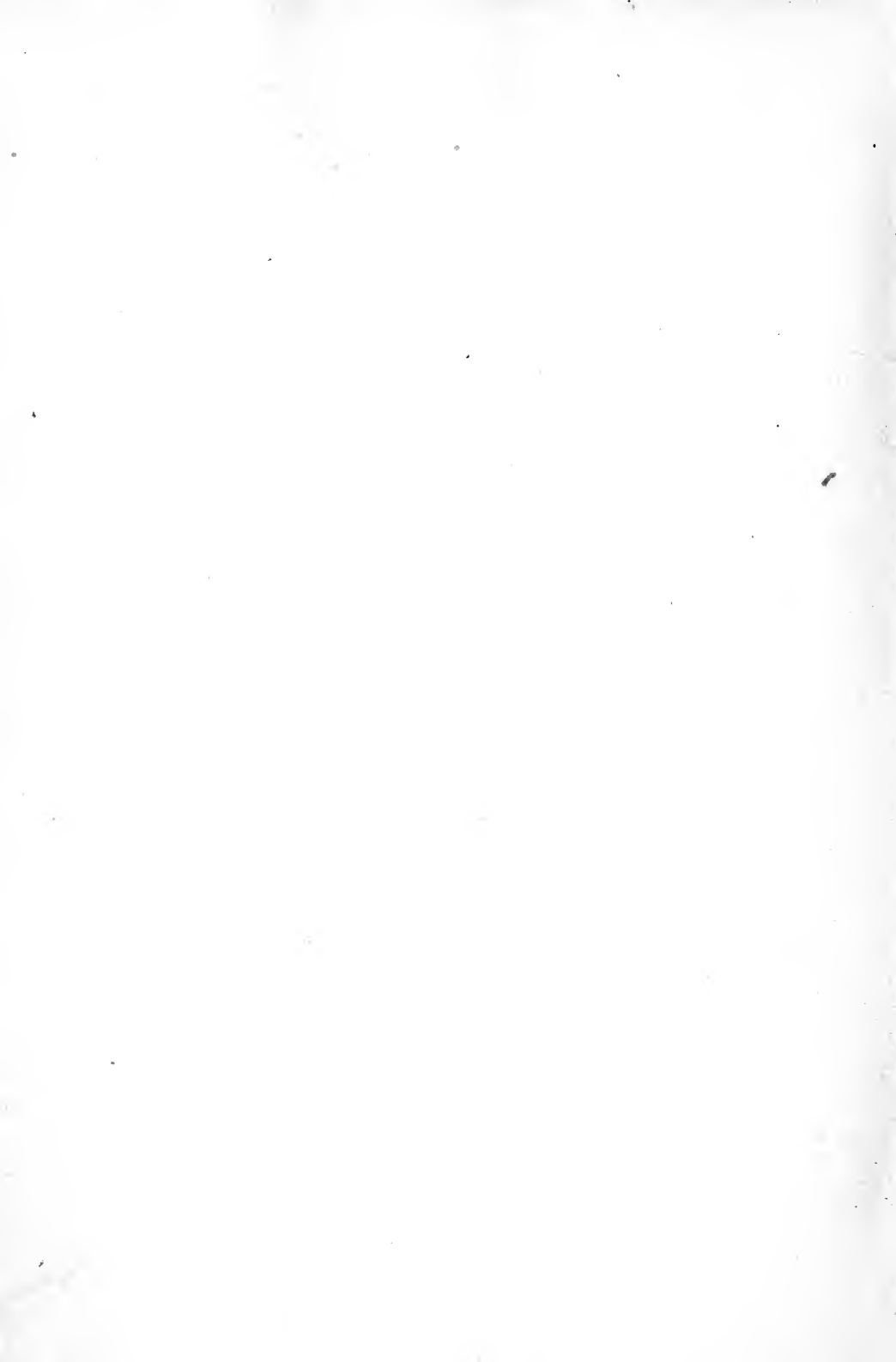


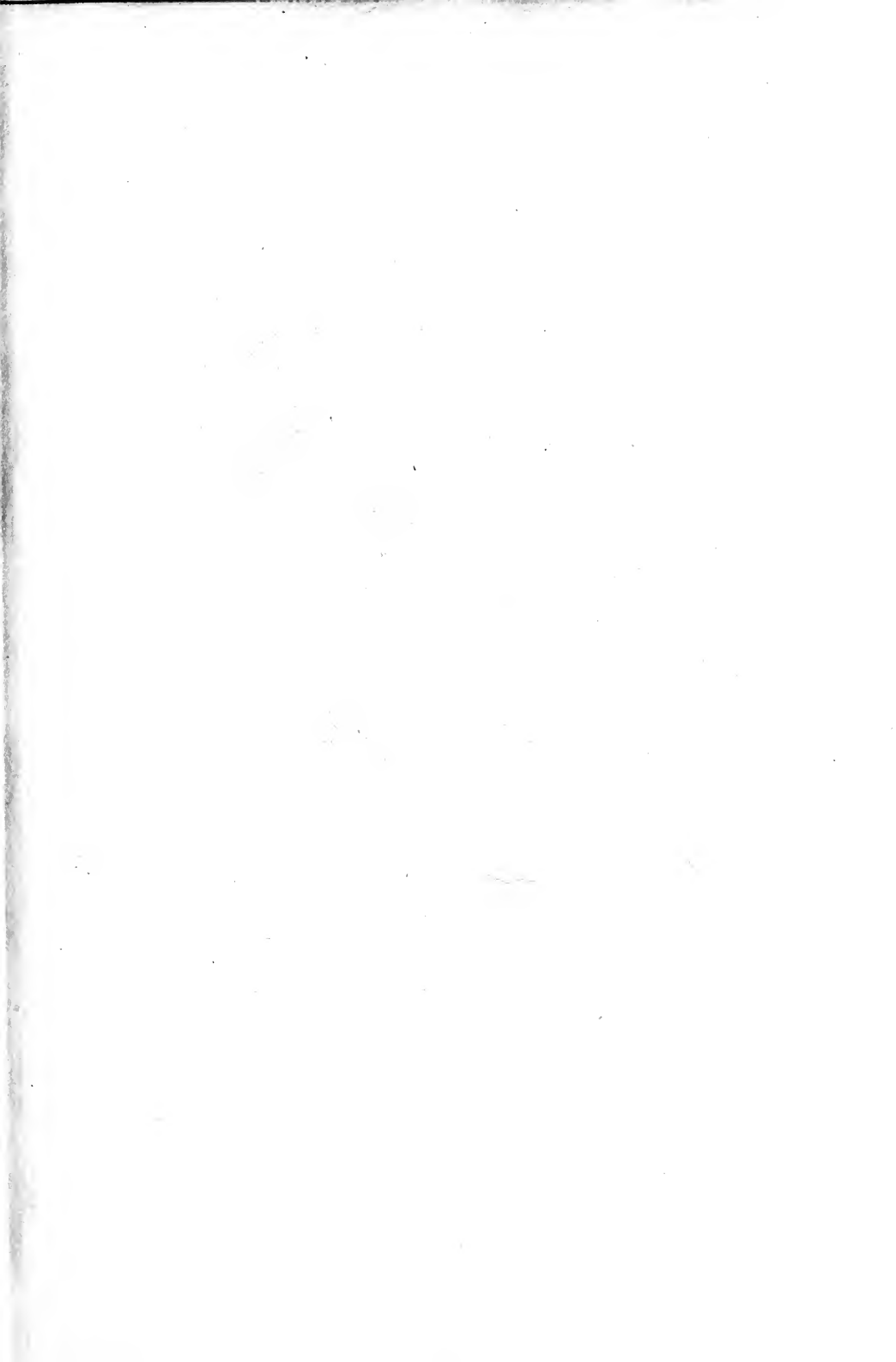






THE
MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON
VOLUME V







The Works of
George W. M. Reynolds

Caroline Walters
The Mysteries of the Court
of London



Privately Printed

For Members of

The Oxford Society

London

Boston

"THE MONARCH COVERED HIS FACE"

Photogravure from original by Merrill.



"THE MONARCH COVERED HIS FACE"
Photocut from original by Merrill.

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George W. M. Reynolds

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THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON

CHAPTER I

THE SECRET CONCLAVE

It was about six o'clock in the evening, three or four days after the occurrences just related, that four persons were absorbed in earnest conversation in a small but well-furnished parlour in Bury Street, St. James's.

One was a venerable-looking old man, with white hair, and a demeanour that was at once imposing and calculated to inspire a profound respect. He was dressed in a somewhat old-fashioned style, but with a remarkable precision and neatness; and in the buttonhole of his lapelling double-breasted coat he wore the ribbon of a foreign order.

The second individual in this group was a fine, tall, handsome man, in the prime of life, but with a certain air of dissipation and debauchery beneath the gentility of his appearance. His manners were those of a polished courtier; his apparel was in the best possible taste; and yet there was a something about him, which, to the eye of the keen observer accustomed to look deeper than the surface, denoted the accomplished rake and finished voluptuary.

The third was a still younger man, of equally aristocratic appearance with the two individuals just presented to our readers, dressed as fashionably and as elegantly as the second, and having all the seriousness of countenance which characterized the first. His age could not have exceeded thirty; and yet his discourse was as measured, his air as

grave, and his demeanour as imposing as if he were far more advanced along the pathway of life.

The first mentioned individual was the Marquis de Saint Croix, the second was the Marquis de Bellois, the third the Duke de Villebelle, and the person who made the fourth in the little knot of deliberators was the reader's old friend, Mr. Page.

The three first were French noblemen who had been compelled to fly from their native land, on account of their aristocratic station and their political opinions. The Marquis de Saint Croix was the one who had lent twenty thousand pounds to the Prince of Wales a few months previously, at the instigation of the Amazon; the Marquis de Bellois was the object of Mrs. Fitzherbert's passing amour during that lady's temporary residence in France; and the Duke of Villebelle was an enthusiastic young nobleman, devoted to the lost cause of royalty in France, and whose immense estates had been confiscated by the Republican government of that country.

The room where these refugee nobles were assembled in company with Mr. Page formed a portion of the lodging rented in the house by the Marquis de Saint Croix; and the motive of the conference was none other than to devise and project certain schemes for raising once again the Royalist banner in France. The deliberations were chiefly conducted in English, with which the noblemen happened to be tolerably well acquainted; otherwise Mr. Page would have found himself unable to take part in the proceedings, he being utterly ignorant of the French language.

"My lords," said the Marquis of Saint Croix, addressing his two fellow countrymen, "I will now repeat in the presence of our English friend everything that I have learned from his lips, and which I have already made known to your lordships, so that should I have either misunderstood or exaggerated any portion of the important communications for which we are indebted to Mr. Page, he can at once set us right upon the subject. I believe, then, that I am correctly informed when I state that Mr. Page is deep in the confidence of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, and that his Royal Highness is most anxious for an attempt to be made in favour of the restoration of royalty in unhappy, distracted France. Is it not so?"

“ Your lordship has stated the matter exactly as it stands,” replied Mr. Page, assuming the grave and solemn air that was proper to the deliberations. “ Not only does his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales feel the necessity of restoring order in France and rebuilding a legitimate government,” he continued, adopting the detestable cant terms and smooth-sounding phrases which are used as a cloak for the most damnable tyrannies and a pretext for all anti-democratic proceedings, “ but the whole royal family of England and our blessed aristocracy partake in the sentiments of the prince. Under these circumstances his Royal Highness instructed me a fortnight back to throw myself in the way of the most eminent French refugees now residing in London, and sound their views and intentions. Accident led me in the first instance to address myself to his lordship the Marquis of Saint Croix, and secondly to my lord the Marquis of Bellois — ”

“ And then we communicated with your lordship,” added Saint Croix, glancing toward the Duke of Villebelle; “ and your lordship, with characteristic patriotism, hastened to respond to our appeal.”

“ God speed our aims, my friends,” said the duke, his pale but handsome countenance flushing with ardent hope.

“ The interest which his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales takes in the affairs of our unhappy country,” continued the Marquis of Saint Croix, “ is not only most grateful to our feelings, but likewise prompts us to behold the character of his Royal Highness in a new and very favourable light. I must confess that until I became acquainted with Mr. Page, I had experienced some cause to mistrust his Royal Highness and doubt his integrity; but after all the explanations which Mr. Page has given me in his wonted honest and straightforward manner, and especially after hearing how deeply the prince is interesting himself in the affairs of distracted France, I have learned to form a better opinion of the prince.”

“ Your lordship had been tutored to think ill of him by that infamous and notorious character, Lady Lade,” observed the ex-bagman; “ and the statements she made to your lordship appeared to receive confirmation from the fact that his Royal Highness did not immediately restore the money your lordship had placed in his hands. But when I assure your lordship that the prince will in a few days — ”

“No more upon that subject, Mr. Page,” exclaimed the Marquis de Saint Croix. “I deeply regret that I should ever have listened to the insidious and malignant representations of that woman to whose faults my late friend Sir John Lade was so unaccountably blind. I am sorry also that I should ever have persecuted his Royal Highness for the return of money which I did not precisely want, and which I never should want again if the legitimate monarchy were restored in France.”

“His Royal Highness has been enabled to glean much valuable information, I believe, respecting France, from the English Minister of Foreign Affairs?” said the Duke of Villebelle, addressing himself to Mr. Page.

“Such is the fact, may it please your Grace,” returned the ex-bagman. “The English government has for a long time past employed numerous secret agents — or in plainer terms, spies — to travel through some parts of France and fix their abodes in other districts, for the purpose of ascertaining the true feeling of the French people with regard to the existing institutions of the country. The reports that are received at the Foreign Office are numerous and interesting; and their contents are regularly, though privately, communicated to the Prince of Wales. From those reports his Royal Highness has gleaned the most encouraging information with regard to the cause of monarchy in France; and he feels convinced that if the Royalist banner were raised amidst the fields of La Vendée, hundreds of thousands would enthusiastically flock around it.”

“Then hurrah for La Vendée!” exclaimed the Marquis de Bellois, who, being a man of desperate fortunes and as dissipated as he looked, was ready for any enterprise that seemed to promise an amendment of his circumstances. “Your lordship,” he added, turning toward the Duke of Villebelle, “has managed to bring over a large sum from France, and that will be enough to commence the undertaking. Money constitutes the sinews of war; and your fifty thousand pounds sterling now existing in good English bank-notes, if changed into French five-franc pieces, will raise an army of ten thousand men in a short time. Then the Royalists will rush to our banner; their treasures will be drawn forth from the places where they are concealed or buried; and the accursed Republicans will have to rue the

day when a Villebelle, a Saint Croix, and a Bellois put themselves at the head of the movement."

"But if we were to resolve upon quitting England and passing into La Vendée," said the Duke de Villebelle, "we should not be so rash as to take all the available funds with us. We must leave them deposited with some trustworthy individual in London, to be sent after us by the best possible means, so soon as we found that we were really certain of receiving the support of the leading men in La Vendée."

"His Grace speaks wisely and prudently," observed Mr. Page. "That is the proper course to pursue."

"Well, my lords," said the Marquis de Saint Croix, "are we resolved upon making the attempt? Shall we at once come to the decision of repairing without delay to our own native land, at all perils and at all risks? For my part, I will be the first to give my vote in the affirmative."

"And I have already intimated my readiness to join in the expedition," observed the Marquis de Bellois. "We will either restore the throne or give our heads to the guillotine."

"Amen," said the Duke of Villebelle, solemnly. "And now, my lords, we have two points to determine upon. The first is, when shall we set off? And the second is, to whom shall we entrust the money which I have at present lying in a London bank?"

"With regard to the first point," said De Bellois, "I should advise that no unnecessary delay take place. In fact, I am prepared to start to-morrow morning."

"I may as well observe," exclaimed Mr. Page, "at this stage of the proceedings, — I mean, since the money question is about to be touched upon, — that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales authorized me this very day to assure the Marquis de Saint Croix that the twenty thousand pounds due to his lordship shall be paid in a week's time. I was about to mention this fact just now, when his lordship bade me speak no more upon the subject. But the incident becomes of importance at this stage of the proceedings, inasmuch as I shall cheerfully hold myself bound to undertake a trip to La Vendée and convey to his lordship the marquis the sum of money to which I am referring."

"Your conduct, Mr. Page, is most admirable," exclaimed

the venerable Marquis de Saint Croix, seizing him by the hand and pressing it warmly. "You also, then, must feel profoundly interested in our cause, as well as your royal patron, the Prince of Wales."

"I will throw myself heart and soul into it," said Mr. Page, affecting the fervour of enthusiasm. "It is the cause of order against chaos — justice against anarchy. You may command me, my lords, in all respects, — humble an individual though I be."

The Duke of Villebelle and the Marquis de Bellois followed the example of the venerable Saint Croix by offering due acknowledgments to Mr. Page for his seeming devotion to their cause; and then the three nobles began to converse together for a few minutes in their own native language, but not without having previously apologized to their English companion for this temporary exclusiveness in the deliberations.

"Mr. Page," at length said the Marquis de Saint Croix, when the discussion in French was brought to a conclusion, "their lordships and myself have come to the determination to solicit, through your medium, a particular favour of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. I have recommended this proceeding in order to convince his Royal Highness of my deep repentance for having persecuted him with demands for the repayment of the amount due to me at a time when the prince was really unable to meet my claim; and the Duke of Villebelle is anxious to afford his Royal Highness a proof of the importance which we attach to his countenance and coöperation in the projects now under discussion. In a word, then, Mr. Page, do you think that his Royal Highness would consent to become the guardian of the Duke of Villebelle's funds, until such time as we may have settled all our plans in La Vendée?"

"I could not possibly take it upon myself to return a positive answer," replied the ex-bagman, shaking his head gravely. "But if your lordships be anxious to have the point cleared up without delay, I will hasten to Carlton House at once and endeavour to obtain a few minutes' audience of his Royal Highness previous to the dinner hour."

This proposal was welcomed with thanks; and Mr. Page immediately took his departure. But instead of repairing to Carlton House at all, he entered the nearest tavern, where

he ordered and discussed a pint of sherry; and having thus whiled away about half an hour, he returned to the noble refugees at the Marquis de Saint Croix's lodgings.

For the benefit of those who are not acquainted with London, we may as well observe that Bury Street was not more than five minutes' walk from Carlton House; and therefore Mr. Page had been quite long enough absent to induce a belief that he had succeeded in obtaining an interview with the prince. He accordingly found the three noblemen on the tiptoe of expectation concerning the result of his mission; for they flattered themselves that the course which they had adopted with regard to the prince would lead him to afford their cause all the assistance he might be enabled to vouchsafe it.

"I have succeeded, my lords," said Mr. Page, on returning to the apartment; "but not without some degree of difficulty. The prince would not listen to the proposal at first; he declared that he would never again become the custodian of any foreign refugee's funds. But when I explained to his Royal Highness how necessary it was that some trustworthy treasurer should be found for the money, inasmuch as no London banker could at present undertake to remit large sums to France, especially in a secret manner, and when I assured his Royal Highness that I was willing to convey the money over to La Vendée when the proper time should arrive, even though I might be compelled to undertake three or four journeys backward and forward for the purpose, then did his Royal Highness yield to my representations and empower me to return to your lordships with an affirmative reply."

"We owe you a deep debt of gratitude, Mr. Page," said the Duke of Villebelle. "It is a material point gained. But did his Royal Highness specify a time when I may wait upon him and deposit the funds in his hands?"

"To-morrow evening, at six o'clock, my lord," answered the ready-witted Mr. Page, who was the last man in existence to be at a loss for a satisfactory reply when one was needed.

"Thus far, then, are our plans settled, my lords," said the Duke de Villebelle. "We will now arrange the time of our departure from London and the route we shall adopt to enter France."

"I will therefore take my most respectful leave of your

lordships," observed Mr. Page; "inasmuch as his Royal Highness has given me an important commission to execute for him, and my humble advice will not be needed in respect to the points which your lordships are now about to discuss."

The ex-bagman accordingly took his departure; and this time, on issuing forth from the lodgings of the Marquis de Saint Croix, he bent his way direct to Carlton House.

CHAPTER II

THE HEIR APPARENT AND HIS AGENT — SHICKSTER SAL

It was now eight o'clock in the evening, and the Prince of Wales had just quitted the dinner table, for he was aware that Mr. Page was to call upon him at that hour. The ex-bagman was accordingly at once shown into the presence of his Royal Highness, whom he saluted with a bow that was as profoundly reverential and as servilely low as an eastern salaam.

"Well, Page, what news?" demanded the prince, pointing to a chair near the sofa on which he himself was seated in a reclining posture.

"I have two pieces of excellent tidings for your Royal Highness," answered the busy, bustling, obsequious individual who had managed to thrust himself into the service of the prince. "But first, may I be permitted most humbly to inquire whether your Royal Highness is at liberty this evening for a few hours?"

"Your letter of this morning contained a promise which induced me to put aside every appointment," returned the prince. "Tell me, then, in a word, will Pauline be mine to-night?"

"Beyond all question, may it please your Royal Highness," was the immediate response.

"Egad! it does please me infinitely, I can assure you, friend Page," observed the heir apparent. "And now, what of the refugees?"

"They have fallen completely into the views which I have studied to develop to them, your Royal Highness," answered Page. "It is not proper for a man to sing his own praises; but I flatter myself that I may take credit for having managed this business with no ordinary degree of tact and judgment.

The Marquis de Saint Croix firmly believes that it was by mere accident I addressed myself to him in the first instance — ”

“ And the Marquis de Bellois? ” exclaimed the prince, interrogatively.

“ His lordship lies under a similar impression, ” rejoined Page: “ that is to say, he supposes that it was without any sinister design that I fixed upon him as one of the most proper and fitting refugees to be sounded relative to the proposed incursion into France. ”

“ And when I saw you the day before yesterday, ” observed the prince, “ you told me that those noblemen had taken a third into their confidence, the Duke of Villebelle. Is he also without suspicion? ”

“ Entirely, great prince, ” exclaimed the ex-bagman. “ And of this he will afford your Royal Highness a sterling proof to-morrow evening, by depositing forty or fifty thousand pounds in your hands. ”

“ The devil he will! ” ejaculated the prince, literally bounding upon the sofa with joy. “ But how has this been brought about? ”

Mr. Page now explained all that had just taken place at the lodgings of the Marquis de Saint Croix, not omitting to state how he had absented himself for half an hour on pretence of obtaining the consent of his Royal Highness to become the depositary of the duke’s treasure.

“ You have managed the business in a masterly style, ” exclaimed the heir apparent, rubbing his hands gleefully. Then, after a few moments’ pause, he said, “ But how did you arrive at the conviction that I would agree to become the treasurer of these refugees? ”

“ If I have done wrong, ” answered Page, with a smile of sly significancy, “ I implore the pardon of your Royal Highness. ”

“ No, no, my good fellow, ” cried the prince, laughing, “ you have not done wrong — very far from it. But you are a man of keen penetration. ”

“ Somewhat so, illustrious patron, ” returned Page. “ Your Royal Highness condescended to inform me that you were anxious to be avenged upon the Marquis de Saint Croix for persecuting you on account of that paltry sum which he placed in your royal hands; and that the same vindictive

sentiment was extended toward the Marquis de Bellois, for a reason which your Royal Highness did not explain, and which I of course do not attempt to penetrate. Well, when I found that these noblemen had fallen so admirably into the snare laid for them, and that they had so innocently drawn the Duke of Villebelle into the meshes spread out to catch themselves, I thought within myself that if some one must profit in the long run by being the depository of the duke's wealth, your Royal Highness should be that fortunate individual. Therefore, I took the liberty of declaring that your Royal Highness would accept the trust."

"I again repeat that you are a man of great penetration," said the prince; "and I may add that you will do honour to the order of knighthood."

The ex-bagman rose from his seat and made three distinct bows, each more profound than the former.

"And now tell me about Pauline," exclaimed the prince.

"For the first time since the removal of Octavia a month ago and upwards," replied Mr. Page, "Pauline has begun to exhibit a neighbourly feeling; and my excellent wife has persuaded upon her to take tea with her this evening. The poor thing has doubtless begun to experience an intolerable loneliness; and she looks upon Mrs. Page as a kind-hearted well-meaning creature, who can sympathize with her."

"Then she does not entertain the least suspicion that you were instrumental in procuring the confinement of her sister in a private madhouse?" said the prince, interrogatively.

"She could not possibly have formed the remotest conjecture on the subject," returned Page. "It was all done so cleverly. A few guineas obtained the necessary certificates from a couple of drunken, profligate doctors, named Wigton and Smanks, who happen to be acquaintances of mine; and they will not let the cat out of the bag for their own sakes. Then there is Doctor Burton, the keeper of the lunatic asylum, who is still more directly interested in maintaining a profound secrecy relative to the transaction; for he would not like to lose the three hundred a year which I have undertaken to pay him on your Royal Highness's behalf, for the maintenance of Miss Octavia."

"And has Pauline given up wandering about the vicinage

of the asylum where her sister is shut up?" asked the heir apparent.

"Scarcely a day passes that she does not take a hackney-coach and repair to Stoke Newington to call at Doctor Burton's establishment and inquire for Octavia," responded Page. "But the doctor invariably assures her that some few weeks may yet elapse ere her sister's mind will be so far restored to a state of equanimity as to justify him in permitting an interview between them. And Pauline feels herself so utterly powerless in the matter, and has discovered that the law is so completely on the side of the course which has been adopted, that she now appears to have yielded resignedly to the progress of those events against which she can offer no effectual resistance. Ah, it is a capital law which allows an obnoxious or dangerous person to be locked up for life, on the certificates of a couple of bribeable doctors!"

"To be sure it is," exclaimed the prince. "I do not know how we should get on in the world without the aid of such laws occasionally. The rich and the powerful, the titled and the great, Mr. Page, must have some means of keeping their enemies in subjection and disarming dangerous individuals of their sting."

"Your Royal Highness argues with the most perfect wisdom," said the obsequious Mr. Page. "But it is now getting on for nine o'clock," he observed, looking at his watch, "and Julia — that is to say, Mrs. Page — will presently make the young lady so safe that your Royal Highness will find no trouble in enjoying a blissful triumph."

"What do you mean?" demanded the prince. "How does your wife intend to proceed?"

"At nine o'clock the supper tray is to be taken up," answered the ex-bagman, lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper; "and whether Miss Pauline should fancy a glass of port, or a glass of sherry, or only a tumbler of mild porter, the result will be all the same; for our servant-girl is in the secret. She is trustworthy, and we can rely upon her."

"I comprehend you," interrupted the prince, the blood glowing in his veins as he feasted his salacious imagination upon the charms which he hoped that night to defoliate of their virgin innocence. "Come, let us be gone!"

The prince accordingly summoned Germain, whom he directed to order a plain carriage to be got ready without

delay; and in the course of a quarter of an hour his Royal Highness and Mr. Page were rolling along in the vehicle toward the Edgeware Road.

It was about half-past nine when the carriage stopped within a short distance of the ex-bagman's residence in Paradise Villas; and Mr. Page entered the house first, to ascertain whether the contemplated treachery had been put into execution. The prince remained in the vehicle; but he was not kept waiting many minutes, for his obsequious agent soon returned with the welcome intelligence that Miss Pauline Clarendon was in a condition that left her entirely at his mercy.

The prince, scarcely able to restrain his joy at the idea of experiencing the speedy consummation of all his lustful hopes in that quarter, now alighted from the carriage and followed Mr. Page into the house.

The vehicle, according to orders previously issued, then drove away.

In the meantime a scene which we must here pause to relate was occurring in the immediate vicinity of Mr. Page's abode.

Seated at a table in the tap-room of a low public-house the Gallows' Widow, the Kinchin-Grand, and Carrotty Poll were engaged in an earnest conversation, which they carried on in whispers. They were alone together in that room; and the landlord of the house was none other than their old accomplice Briggs, who by means of an immense wig and a pair of green spectacles was enabled to defy the penetration of the keenest thief-taker in the metropolis. The two women and the Kinchin-Grand therefore felt perfectly at home at the sign of the Black Boy; but the habit of caution, combined with the fear of being overheard by any chance customer who might enter the house, prompted them to conduct their deliberations in a low voice and a guarded manner.

The Kinchin-Grand was as shabby and ill-looking as ever; and the naturally vixenish temper of Carrotty Poll appeared to have derived a keener edge from the misfortunes which had overtaken her sire, the Big Beggarmen, who was then in gaol awaiting his trial for piracy, murder, and Heaven only knows how many other crimes. As for the Gallows' Widow, the reader may rest assured that she was not rendered more amiable or forbearing toward her enemies by the position of

her paramour the Magsman, who was in a predicament precisely similar to that of Stephen Price. She had for some time past abandoned her mourning garb, and was attired in a plain unassuming manner, not altogether deficient in neatness.

"Well," said Carrotty Poll, after a glass of hot spirits and water had been passed around, "we are now at length in a fair way to be revenged somewhat on those cursed Pages, and also to get a certain high personage completely into our power."

"And if everything turns out as we expect," observed the Gallows' Widow, in her usual quiet way, "your father, Poll, and my flash man will be certain to be got off some how or another."

"Now, my fair friends," said the Kinchin-Grand, exultingly, "you'll admit that I was the chap to give you the advice which has put things in such a glorious train. When you wanted to cut the throats of that scoundrel Page and his precious wife Julia, didn't I tell you that it was no good risking your necks for sichlike scum? And didn't I say that if you'd only plant a spy upon 'em, they was such intriguing, cunning, money-making folks, you'd soon find out somethink about their proceedin's worth turnin' to your own account? I'm glad you gave way to my advice in the matter; and now you'll reap the benefit of it. Ah! it was a capital dodge making Shickster Sal dress herself up neat and nice and apply at their house for a sitiuation as a maid of all work. There never was a better spree in all the world; and then the false character which she got made everything right at once."

"Well, well," interrupted Carrotty Poll, petulantly, "what is the use of reminding us of all that has been done in the matter? We don't deny that your plan has worked well, Bill —"

"On the contrary," said the Gallows' Widow, "we give you all possible credit for it. Indeed, if things turn out to-night as we expect, it will be through having adopted your advice that we shall save Poll's father and Joe Warren from swinging at Execution Dock. So you perceive, Bill, that I at least am not unmindful of the great service you will have rendered us. I suppose your young woman can be fully relied upon?"

"Like bricks and mortar," answered the Kinchin-Grand.

"There isn't a better gal in all the world, though I say it, than the Shickster. Why, you may judge for yourselves, I think. Hasn't she given us every information of all wot has been passing at the Pages' house for the last month, — indeed, from the first day she succeeded in getting herself taken into their service as a maid of all work; and isn't it through her that we're awake to the dodge that's being practised to-night at their house? Ah! Mr. Page little thinks that the dirty drab he once saw with her arms around my neck at the Kinchen-Ken in Grub Street is the same neat and tidy-looking gal which has been in his service for the last month. And it was a lucky thing, too, that Julia and Shickster Sal had never knowed each other. But here she is, by jingo!"

This ejaculation was elicited by the entrance of that same young creature whom we introduced to our readers in a very early chapter of this narrative and whom we represented at the time to have received the flash name of Shickster Sal from the circumstance of having been tenderly brought up until she was enticed away from home and plunged into the loathsome vortex of profligacy. Her appearance was now much altered; she was apparelled with neatness, her person was cleanly, and she was far from being an ill-looking young woman. The respectable nature of her early training had enabled her to take with a prompt aptitude to the duties of the domestic situation which she was now filling in Mr. Page's house; and her blind infatuation toward the Kinchin-Grand rendered her a suitable agent to carry out the designs of those who had suggested her introduction into that establishment.

"Well, my dear Sal," exclaimed her paramour, welcoming her with a caress; "what news?"

"It's all right," returned the young woman. "Miss Clarendon partook of the drugged wine, and the prince has this moment arrived."

"Then there's no time to be lost!" said Carrotty Poll, springing from her seat. "Lead the way, Sal, — there's a dear, — and we'll follow at a little distance."

"You'll come around to the back gate, mind," was the injunction now given by Shickster Sal; "and don't be more than a couple of minutes after me."

She then hurried away, and the three accomplices whom

she left behind in the tap-room exchanged looks of exulting triumph.

“Isn't she a regular blessin' to a man, that gal?” demanded the Kinchin-Grand, who was far more proud of her than he would have been were she a paragon of moral excellence.

The Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll both passed some compliments upon the dexterity, astuteness, and fidelity of Shickster Sal, and the Kinchin-Grand was hugely delighted at the encomia thus lavished upon his mistress. He and the two women then quitted the tap-room, nodded significantly to Briggs as they passed by the bar where he was serving his customers, and issued from the public-house.

Skirting the row of gardens attached to Paradise Villas, ran a narrow lane into which the back gates of those little enclosures opened; and along this alley did the trio proceed at a rapid rate. On reaching the gate belonging to Page's garden, they found Shickster Sal waiting for them; and with the utmost caution did she introduce them into the house.

CHAPTER III

THE INTRUDERS

It was now past ten o'clock; and lights were burning in a bedchamber at Mr. Page's abode.

Upon the couch in that apartment lay Pauline Clarendon, completely dressed, but with her luxuriant hair all dishevelled. Having been prevailed upon by the treacherous Julia to take a glass of wine at supper, she had almost instantaneously fallen into a condition of complete stupefaction; and in that state was she borne up to the bedchamber by Mrs. Page and Shickster Sal, who had apparently lent herself with willingness to the infamous designs of her mistress.

Yes, upon that couch reposed the defenceless maiden, utterly unconscious of the perils which environed her. Nothing could be more graceful than the total abandonment as it were to which her form was surrendered up; for precisely in the same position in which she had been deposited by Julia and the servant was she now lying on that bed. Her garments, the least thing drawn up, revealed the well-shaped foot and the rounded ankle as far as the robust swell of the leg; her arms reposed in the motionless grace of a gentle curvature; and her lips, slightly apart, afforded glimpses of the pearly teeth.

And over her leaned the Prince of Wales; over that sleeping, almost inanimate form he leaned, his eyes devouring her charms with a gloating avidity. As the boa-constrictor holds its prey in its hideous coils for a long time ere it appeases its appetite with the luscious festival, so did the reptile voluptuary feast his imagination with the delicious banquet of beauty that lay before him. His looks wandered slowly from that flood of dark brown hair which covered the pillow with its glossy luxuriance to the cheeks that were

deeply flushed by the influence of the narcotic; thence to the snowy neck that was slightly arched as if softly yielding to the weight of the drooping head, as the stalk of a tulip retains a gentle curve even when snapped from its root and lying upon the ground. And from that beauteous neck of such dazzling whiteness, the sensuous eyes of the prince wandered to the bosom, the rising and falling of which were so long and slow, as if measured, and likewise so little perceptible. But he devoured with his satyr looks as much of those round white globes as Pauline's modest dress left revealed; and the undulations which the dress itself took from the rich contours of her bust enabled him to finish and complete in his imagination the fine proportions of those hills of snow. In sooth, the entire spectacle of that exquisitely modelled form, stretched with all the abandonment of its flowing length of limb upon the couch, was enough to overcome the scruples of a saint, much less excite almost to madness the furious desires of that royal voluptuary.

For several minutes did he contemplate the lovely being whom he now fancied to be entirely in his power; for several minutes did he gloat over the glorious creature whom he looked upon as a sure and certain victim to his burning lusts. He stooped down, he was about to fasten his lips to that mouth which was so rich in its moist redness, he was on the point of sucking in the pure fragrance of the breath that came slowly and heavily when, hark! a sound is heard — the handle of the door is turning — that door which he had forgotten to fasten.

But even while still bending over the sleeping beauty, he paused and listened, without absolutely raising himself to his wonted upright carriage; for he fancied that his ears must have deceived him. Another moment, and the door opens, and footsteps are stealing in. He starts, he springs to an upright posture, he turns hastily around, and he beholds intruders of no welcome aspect entering the apartment.

"Away with you!" exclaimed the prince, advancing toward Carrotty Poll, the Gallows' Widow; and the Kinchin-Grand. "Depart this moment, or I will give the alarm that thieves are in the house."

"You don't dare do it, Prince of Wales," said Carrotty Poll. "If so, you'd only be exposing yourself."

"But who are you? And what do you require?" de-

manded his Royal Highness, who had stamped his foot with vexation when the red-haired young woman's words showed that he was recognized by the intruders. "You want money, doubtless? Well, I will give you a few guineas —"

"No, we want to have a conversation with your Royal Highness on very particular business," interrupted the Gallows' Widow.

"With me? and to-night? Impossible!" ejaculated the prince, glancing toward the bed, on which Pauline Clarendon still lay steeped in unconsciousness.

"We mean with you, and we also mean to-night," said the Gallows' Widow, in her quiet but resolute tone. "In plain terms, our presence here just at the very moment when you thought of being happy," — and she flung a significant look toward Pauline, — "is not a mere accident. It is altogether a planned and prearranged thing."

"What! has that scoundrel Page been playing me false?" cried the prince, now trembling for the safety of the other secrets of which the ex-bagman was the depository. "By Heaven! I will be signally avenged for this!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Carrotty Poll, petulantly. "Page has got nothing at all to do with it. On the contrary, he and his wife are safely and securely locked in the parlour down-stairs, and their own servant-girl is mounting guard over them with a horse-pistol. So your Royal Highness perceives that all proper precautions have been taken."

"But once more, who are you? And what do you want?" demanded the heir apparent, every instant becoming more and more troubled by the mysterious words and self-sufficient manner of these intruders.

"I'll speak fust, most illustrious prince," said the Kinchin-Grand, taking off his hat with mock ceremony. "Know, then, that I'm a sort of prince in my way: that is, I'm captain of as jolly a pack of juvenile rogues and rascals, prostitutes and thieves, as ever was met together in this blessed country. They call me the Kinchin-Grand; and I'm wery much at the service of your Royal Highness, if you ever want anything done in my way."

"Enough, sir!" ejaculated the prince, turning from the young reprobate in loathing and disgust. "Now, my good women, who are you? And what do you require of me?"

Be explicit and brief, and let us put as speedy an end as possible to this business."

"My name is Mary Price," said Carrotty Poll; "and I am the daughter of a certain Stephen Price, better known in some places as the Big Beggarman."

"And I am the mistress of one Joseph Warren, better known as the Magsman," observed the Gallows' Widow, keenly watching the effect which this announcement would produce upon his Royal Highness.

The prince had started visibly when the name of the Big Beggarman, which was far from unfamiliar to his ears, had been mentioned by Carrotty Poll; but his features indicated a still more profound trouble at the words of Elizabeth Marks, the Gallows' Widow.

"And what is it that you require of me?" demanded the prince, summoning all his presence of mind to his aid; for the unpleasant nature of the position in which he now found himself was full of peril and perplexity as well as of annoyance.

"We will explain ourselves in a few words," said the Gallows' Widow, taking upon herself the office of spokeswoman. "Stephen Price, the father of this young woman, is now in gaol, waiting his trial for piracy and murder. My man, Joe Warren, is exactly in the same difficulty, and, indeed, in the same place. The evidence will be tolerably strong against them; and besides, their previous characters will be quite enough to get them found guilty and condemned to death. But they must not die, their lives must be spared, even though upon the condition of transportation for the rest of their days. You see, prince, we do not ask too much, we are moderate in our demands —"

"Well, well," interrupted his Royal Highness, hoping to get rid of his present petitioners by means of a promise that he never intended to fulfil, "your wishes shall be complied with, and I pledge myself to procure a commutation of those men's sentences, whenever the trial may take place."

"We are much indebted to you, prince," said the Gallows' Widow.

"And we'll do you a good turn some day or another," added the Kinchin-Grand.

"Well, now our business is ended, worthy people," exclaimed his Royal Highness; "and you can take your

departure as quickly as you came. Upon my promise you may rely — ”

“ But we would rather have it in writing, prince,” observed the Gallows’ Widow, with her wonted imperturbability of manner; “ and we should like the document sealed with that signet-ring which your Royal Highness wears upon your right hand,” she added, pointing to the jewel itself.

“ What! you will not take my word — my solemnly pledged promise? ” cried the prince. “ Then be off — depart — I defy you! ”

“ Ah! but we are not to be defied, most illustrious Highness,” exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand. “ Page’s servant-gal is my blowen, and ’tis she who has put us up to the whole business about that young lady there,” he added, looking toward Pauline, who still remained buried in a profound lethargy.

“ That is true, prince,” said the Gallows’ Widow, speaking without any excitement in her manner, and yet with a certain ominous significancy in her tone. “ The entire proceeding is known to us in all its details; and I ask you, prince, what the world would say if we were to raise an alarm and bring a mob to see how his Royal Highness employs people to administer narcotic drugs to innocent young ladies, in order that he may have an opportunity of ravishing and deflowering them.”

The royal voluptuary was staggered, and a mortal pallor overspread his countenance, for he saw that he was entirely in the power of a set of desperate characters. Resistance was vain, refusal was useless, and exposure was to be averted at any sacrifice. He could not make his position much worse by giving the required promise in writing. It would be a more prudent alternative than that of leaving the wretches then present to have recourse to any extreme measures which they might choose to adopt. For were his conduct toward Pauline Clarendon made public, he would be irrecoverably disgraced in the national estimation, if not altogether ruined in his prospects as heir to the throne. The situation was grave and serious, and he inwardly cursed his folly in allowing his brutal passions to hurry him into such a dilemma. But regrets were now useless; and he must make the best retreat he possibly could from a most ignominious and perilous difficulty.

"You require a written pledge to the effect that I will interest myself on behalf of those men whom you have named?" he said, after a few moments' hurried communing with himself.

"That is what we require," exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand.

"Hold your tongue, Bill," cried Carrotty Poll, in her sharp vixenish tones; "and let Lizzy Marks conduct the business."

"We not only require such a pledge as your Royal Highness has mentioned," said the Gallows' Widow, "but likewise a positive undertaking that its object shall be carried into effect. In plain terms, we demand and stipulate that you shall guarantee us the lives of Stephen Price and Joseph Warren. More we cannot ask for. We do not insist upon free pardons; those, we are well aware, you could not procure, all prince though you are. But we feel assured that you can obtain a commutation of the death sentences which are certain to be passed —"

"And we will agree that my father and Joe Warren shall be transported for life," added Carrotty Poll, seeing that the Gallows' Widow hesitated for a moment. "But we won't let them be hanged."

"Egad! you are usurping powers which I cannot pretend to possess myself," exclaimed the prince. "But I will give you the written undertaking, notwithstanding —"

"Sealed by your signet-ring," remarked the Gallows' Widow. "Otherwise you may deny your handwriting to-morrow morning."

"And here are pens and paper all ready," said Carrotty Poll. "We brought them with us to prevent any delay from taking place. There is an inkstand upon the mantel."

"Affairs of this kind are multiplying thick upon me," thought the prince within himself, as he remembered the agreement which he had been compelled to sign in favour of Tim Meagles a few days previously; but anxious to put an immediate end to the present scene, and fearing lest Pauline should be awakened and thus escape his libidinous intent, the royal voluptuary sat down at the table and hastily drew up in writing the promise that was demanded at his hands.

While he was thus engaged, Carrotty Poll whispered to the Gallows' Widow, "What shall we do when he has fin-

ished the document? Are we to leave Miss Clarendon in his power?"

"Can you think of such a thing for a moment?" asked Lizzy, in the same subdued tone as that in which the Big Beggarman's daughter spoke. "Has not Lord Florimel behaved in the handsomest manner toward us? Did he not give us five hundred pounds on account for the services we were to perform? And will he not reward us with a proportionate liberality when we tell him how we rescued Miss Pauline from the embraces of that wretched voluptuary? His lordship is out of town now; but he will doubtless return shortly —"

"I am sure I don't want to help the prince in any of his tricks," interrupted Carrotty Poll. "He is one of the people's worst oppressors, and I hate him on that account. Besides, as you say, it is more to our interest to keep right with Lord Florimel."

"And in addition to all that," interposed the Kinchin-Grand, who listened attentively to the whispered dialogue of his female accomplices, "you know that Shickster Sal pleaded on behalf of that Miss Clarendon, who, she says, is a nice young lady and oughtn't to be harmed. Sal has taken quite a fancy to Miss Clarendon; and we mustn't do anything that will displease the Shickster after she's behaved so well in all this here business."

"Then we'll just put a stopper on the prince's proceedings," said Carrotty Poll, "the moment we've got the document safe in our possession. And then we'll deal with those cursed Pages —"

"And take an instalment of our vengeance," added the Gallows' Widow, with an ominous look, as much as to imply that a far deeper retaliation than any which they this night sought would be vented in the long run against the ex-bagman and his wife.

"Now, I have finished this paper," suddenly exclaimed the Prince of Wales, who had several times, while engaged in writing, observed with uneasiness the low and earnest whispering that was going on amongst the three intruders.

"Let us read it," said the Gallows' Widow; and taking up the paper, which was duly signed and sealed, she perused it with deliberation, the Kinchin-Grand reading it over her shoulder on one side and Carrotty Poll doing the same on the

other. "That will do," she observed, calmly folding it up and securing it in her bosom; "and now your Royal Highness can take your departure."

"Take my departure!" ejaculated the prince, struck with dismay. "You mean that you are about to take your departure."

"Indeed, I mean no such thing," said the Gallows' Widow, coldly but firmly. "Come, no more words, but be off! We are here to protect Miss Pauline Clarendon, and not to aid in her ruin."

"But this proceeding on your part," urged the prince, "is not calculated to ensure my countenance and support."

"Perhaps not," returned Lizzy Marks, laconically. "But this paper will do so," she added, laying her hand upon her bosom.

"Can nothing move you?" demanded the prince, in a tone of the bitterest vexation. "Money, any amount you require, — a hundred guineas —"

"A hundred fiddlesticks!" ejaculated Carrotty Poll, in an acrid tone of contempt. "For every guinea you can offer us to betray Miss Clarendon, we shall receive two for protecting her. So one word is as good as forty; and if your Royal Highness was to stand there arguing with us for an hour, it would be no use."

"Not a ha'porth," added the Kinchin-Grand, by way of clenching the argument.

"Then I shall not condescend to argue the point any farther," said the heir apparent, trembling with a rage to which he dared not give vent.

And stalking forth from the chamber where his anticipated triumph had been so signally changed into the bitterest disappointment, he hastily descended the stairs, put on his hat and cloak in the hall, and quitted the house, smarting under a sense of the most painful humiliation, and cursing his unlucky stars which appeared to be so completely in the ascendant.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION OF THE SCENES AT MR. PAGE'S ABODE

THE moment the prince had taken his departure, the Gallows' Widow approached the bed and shook Pauline gently by the shoulder. The slumbering maiden was only partially aroused; and, turning around upon the other side, she sank back again into a deep lethargy. The Gallows' Widow then proceeded to bathe her forehead with water, and Pauline began to revive slowly.

As consciousness returned, she opened her eyes and gazed vacantly upon the countenances of the three forms that stood by the couch. Then a vague terror seized upon her, and a faint scream escaped her lips, as her features displayed all the signs of that alarm which had taken possession of her soul. But the Gallows' Widow hastened to breathe reassuring words in her ears.

"Do not be frightened, young lady," she said; "we are friendly disposed toward you, and the proof is that we have just delivered you from a terrible danger of which you have been wholly unconscious."

"A danger?" murmured Pauline. Then, pressing her hand to her throbbing temples, she strove to collect her scattered ideas and arrange her confused reminiscences. "Ah! I recollect," she suddenly cried, raising herself to a sitting posture in the bed; then, flinging a hasty and agitated look around, she said, "Where am I?"

"In a chamber at Page's house," returned the Gallows' Widow. "You have been the object of a foul conspiracy and nothing could have saved you from falling its victim also, if we had not come to your rescue. The wine you drank at supper was drugged, and you were sold to the Prince of Wales!"

“ My God! ” ejaculated Pauline, with a cry of terror.

“ It is as true as that you have escaped his clutches, ” continued the Gallows’ Widow. “ Now, compose yourself, young lady, ” she added, perceiving that the maiden was trembling all over and that she still contemplated the countenances of the three intruders with a vague suspicion. “ We were appointed by Lord Florimel to watch over and protect you, and we have done our duty. ”

“ Lord Florimel! ” exclaimed Pauline, a sudden glow of pleasure animating her features and bringing back the vital colouring to her cheeks that an instant before were pale as alabaster. “ Is it possible? Oh, if it were — ”

And she stopped suddenly short, as the idea that she was still beloved by the young nobleman and that she had perhaps treated him with harshness awoke feelings of mingled tenderness and remorse in the depths of her soul.

“ It is possible, and it is true, young lady, ” said the Gallows’ Widow. “ Lord Florimel loves you devotedly, and is cut to the quick because he declares that you have taken offence toward him without any real or just cause. He says that a fancied misconduct on his part has led to the bad opinion you formed of him; but he does not love you the less on that account. Very far from it; and, fearful that you would become the object of conspiracy and persecution in other quarters, he appointed us to discover where you lived and watch over you during his temporary absence in the country. ”

“ Poor Gabriel, ” murmured Pauline, the tears trickling down her cheeks, for she was profoundly moved by the communications thus unexpectedly made. “ But who are you, my friends? And to whom am I under such deep obligations? ” she inquired, as she descended from the couch and seated herself in a chair by the side, for she still felt the oppressive influence of the narcotic she had imbibed.

“ No matter who we are, young lady, ” responded the Gallows’ Widow. “ Our appearance may not be to your liking, ” she added, speaking rather with reference to the Kinchin-Grand and Carrotty Poll than to herself; “ but we are staunch and true to Lord Florimel and yourself, at all events. ”

“ Yes, ” exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand; “ and what is more, the locking up of your sister was only a piece in the conspir-

acy against you. It was a dodge to get her out of the way, and prevent her from blabbing about the treatment she has received from the prince. Ah, you see that we know all about it, miss," he cried, observing the look of astonishment that Pauline fixed upon him; "and so you can go to the madhouse and compel the rascals to let your sister out again; or else you can apply to the beak — the magistrate, I mean — and he'll deuced soon give you justice."

"Ah! now you have filled me with hope and joyfulness," exclaimed Pauline, clasping her hands fervently. "But how can I reward you, my friends? I do not possess much money —"

"We won't take anything from you, young lady," interrupted the Gallows' Widow, her whole policy in the representations she had made to Pauline, the light in which she explained the circumstances of the maiden's deliverance, and her refusal to accept any recompense all being based upon the certainty of receiving a handsome acknowledgment from Lord Florimel. "You will only annoy us," continued the Gallows' Widow, "if you persist in speaking of reward."

"Then I shall not do so any more," said Pauline. "But did Lord Florimel make you acquainted with the circumstances relative to my sister?" she asked, somewhat shocked and more astonished at the idea of her lover having been guilty of such indiscretion, even with a good motive in view.

"He never opened his lips upon that head, young lady," responded Lizzy Marks; "but Mr. Page's servant-girl is a spy of ours, whom we got introduced into his service that she might keep a better watch over your safety, living as you do next door."

"And Lord Florimel is in the country, you say?" observed Pauline, interrogatively. "Do you know whether he has gone? that I may write and thank him for his kindness," she added, a blush suffusing itself over her beauteous cheeks and pouring a flood of tender lustre into her swimming eyes, her heart all the time beating rapidly and joyously at the thought that the path to reconciliation with her lover was now so completely open.

"His lordship is at Dover," returned the Gallows' Widow. "I have called two or three times within the last month at his house in Piccadilly; because I wanted to tell him that

we had discovered your residence. But he is detained, I was told on each occasion, by particular business at Dover."

"And did you not write to him?" demanded Pauline, her tone now assuming an accent of reproach.

"That is not our way of doing business, young lady," replied the Gallows' Widow. "We never commit anything to paper, unless it's absolutely necessary; and as we have been in hopes that Lord Florimel would return to town, we thought it most prudent to await his arrival. It will now be for you, miss, to write him at Dover."

"And is it possible," exclaimed Pauline, another thought now coming uppermost in her mind, "that Mr. and Mrs. Page, who have affected such sincere friendship and deep commiseration toward me, are the vilest and most perfidious of traitors?"

"They are indeed, Miss Clarendon," cried Carrotty Poll. "Page is nothing more than a rascally schemer, and his wife was lately a common prostitute at the East End of London."

"Great Heaven!" ejaculated Pauline, shocked by this disclosure. "And I have been the companion of that woman."

"But you did not know her, miss," said the Gallows' Widow; "and so you can't blame yourself."

"Oh, but what will Lord Florimel think? What will he say?" cried Pauline, recoiling more and more from the thought of the pollution with which she had been brought in contact.

"His lordship need never know who or what Mrs. Page is," observed Carrotty Poll, "unless you choose to tell him."

"I should not think of acting with any disguise or duplicity toward him," said the young maiden, firmly. "But all this does not regard you, my friends," she immediately added. "And now that I feel sufficiently recovered to quit this house of infamy and danger, I shall take my leave of you, but not without renewed thanks for your intervention in my behalf."

And the generous Pauline extended her fair hand to the Gallows' Widow, and then offered the same testimonial of her gratitude to the Kinchin-Grand and the Big Beggarman's daughter. They accompanied her down-stairs, and she regained her own dwelling in safety.

The two women and the Kinchin-Grand now knocked at the door of the parlour on the ground floor of Page's house; and they were instantaneously admitted by Shickster Sal, who held a pistol in her hand. The ex-bagman was seated moodily enough in one corner of the room, and his wife in another, their servant-girl having mounted guard over them while the preceding scenes were taking place up-stairs. On the entrance of the three intruders, all of whom were known but too well to the ex-bagman, he gave a sudden start and flung looks of mingled terror and entreaty from one to the other; but Julia appeared to remain unmoved by their presence.

"Now, old feller," exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand, as he placed himself with his back against the door and received the pistol from the hands of his paramour, "we have got you at last."

"But you will not murder me?" said Page, rising from his seat and then sinking back again into it; for his limbs trembled as if he had been suddenly seized with an ague.

"Well, all that depends upon the way you behave yourself," responded the Kinchin-Grand. "Not that I suppose you'll drive us to extremes —"

"Then, what do you demand of me?" inquired Page, his voice as tremulous as his limbs, and a hideous alarm depicted in every lineament of his countenance.

"Listen," said the Gallows' Widow, fixing her eyes with a cold and reptile-like look upon the miserable man. "You have been our deadly enemy, and all the misfortunes which have overtaken Stephen Price and Joe Warren may be attributed to your persecution of them and the treachery of your wife. But we were resolved to revenge ourselves; and we decided upon adopting these means to get you into our power. Your servant is our agent, and all your proceedings are known to us. The prince has likewise got into our clutches, and we intend to keep a firm hold upon him. Miss Pauline Clarendon has been rescued from his designs, and she will to-morrow demand and procure the release of her sister. Thus, a portion of our revenge has been to defeat all your schemes and treacheries. We now come to the second act in the tragedy, — for a tragedy it shall prove in the long run," she added, with a sudden lighting up of her

usually impassible features, as she darted a glance of tigress-like ferocity toward Julia.

"A tragedy?" groaned the unhappy Mr. Page, cowering as it were beneath the dreadful menace, while his wife now began to show symptoms of uneasiness, although she said nothing.

"Yes, a tragedy," echoed the Gallows' Widow, stirred by her vindictive feelings to a pitch of excitement that was rare indeed with her. "But we have not come to that stage in the drama yet. For the present we mean to content ourselves with all your money and all your valuables. So you would do well to produce them willingly, or we shall take them by force."

"I have but a few guineas in my purse," murmured the wretched Mr. Page. "I don't know how much Julia may have in her pocket —"

"There! that's all!" ejaculated his wife, petulantly, as she flung a purse upon the table.

"Four quid, two bulls, a half-bull, a kye-bosh, and three tanners," said the Kinchin-Grand, as he emptied the purse into the palm of Carrotty Poll's hand, and thus elegantly and classically enumerated the four sovereigns, the two crown pieces, the half-crown, the shilling, and the three sixpenny pieces, which formed the contents.

"Now make him open his writing-desk," exclaimed Shickster Sal, pointing contemptuously toward her master. "But stay, I'll fetch it," and she hurried from the room.

In a few moments she returned, bringing with her the writing-desk, which Mr. Page was compelled to open; and while the Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll were ransacking it, he looked on with the air and feelings of a man who is about to be hanged.

"Ah, there's the flimsies!" ejaculated the Kinchin-Grand, as Elizabeth Marks drew forth a bundle of bank-notes. "How many is there of them delicate-looking bits of paper?"

"More than a thousand pounds altogether," replied the Gallows' Widow, after deliberately examining the notes. Then, as she secured them in the bosom of her dress, she turned toward Shickster Sal, saying, "Where else are we to look?"

"You're taking the plate, of course?" observed this

young female, and, without waiting for a reply, she once more quitted the room.

"You see, Julia," exclaimed Mr. Page, wringing his hands, "that they are going to despoil us of everything we possess."

"I see it all sure enough," returned Julia, flinging a look of diabolical hatred upon the two women and the Kinchin-Grand.

"Then why don't you do something to prevent them?" cried the ex-bagman, without pausing to reflect upon what he said in his mingled rage and despair.

"Why don't you?" demanded Mrs. Page, now darting a glance of unmitigated contempt upon her husband. "I always thought you were a sneaking coward, and now I am convinced of it."

"Don't vex me, Julia, I can't bear it," exclaimed Page. "I'm wretched and miserable enough as it is. But surely our kind friends here will have some mercy upon us?" he added, turning with an air of appeal toward his merciless spoliators.

"Kind friends indeed!" ejaculated Julia. "It is now a war to the knife between them and me," she muttered, in a voice audible only to herself.

At this moment Shickster Sal returned to the parlour, with the plate wrapped up in an apron. This portion of the plunder was entrusted to the guardianship of the Kinchin-Grand; and Mr. Page groaned with a most ludicrous misery as he beheld his silver forks and spoons consigned to the depths of the young reprobate's pocket.

"Now their watches and rings," exclaimed Shickster Sal, exultingly. "Ah! I owe them a spite for many a harsh word and mean and stingy prying into the larder to see if I'd eaten too much."

"Your watch, earrings, and finger ring," said the Kinchin-Grand, accosting Julia with the pistol in his hand.

Mrs. Page divested herself of her jewelry with a calmness that was ominous as the lull which precedes the outburst of the tempest's rage; but her husband fell upon his knees and implored that his personal decorations might be at least spared. His plunderers were, however, remorseless; and Mr. Page's jewelry followed his wife's trinkets into the custody of the Big Beggarman's daughter.

“ Now, is there anything else worth taking? ” inquired the Kinchin-Grand, who was hugely delighted with the work of spoliation.

“ Not that I can recollect, ” answered Shickster Sal.

“ This will do for the present, ” observed the Gallows’ Widow. “ And now, ” she continued, addressing herself to Mr. and Mrs. Page, “ if you dare to attempt the slightest retaliation in any way, we shall unhesitatingly give information against you for drugging the wine that was to make Miss Clarendon the prince’s victim. She would in that case be compelled to come forward and bear testimony against you; and her evidence would be enough to transport you both for the rest of your days, if not hang you. ”

Mr. Page groaned once more, as if he already felt a halter tightening around his throat; but Julia affected the most complete indifference.

The Gallows’ Widow, Carrotty Poll, the Kinchin-Grand, and Shickster Sal now took their departure, two by the front door, and two by the back way, the better to escape observation; and the ex-bagman remained alone with his wife, to deplore the immense loss which they had just sustained.

Early on the following morning they quitted their abode at Paradise Villas; and in the course of the day a van arrived at the house which they had thus abruptly vacated, to remove their furniture to some other dwelling.

CHAPTER V

SUICIDE OR MURDER?

IT was about eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and the Earl of Desborough was seated in the library at Stamford Manor. A book lay open before him; but although his eyes remained mechanically fixed upon its pages, his thoughts were travelling away from the subject of the volume.

For he was reflecting upon the many grave and saddening incidents which had occurred in his household, alike in Berkeley Square and at Stamford Manor, within the last few months; and he felt deeply, deeply for the sorrow and the shame that had fallen upon the head of her whom he adored with so sublime a worship.

So profoundly absorbed was he in his meditations that he did not hear the door open and close again; but he was suddenly startled by feeling a hand laid gently upon his shoulder. He looked up, and he beheld his wife standing close by his chair; but he was instantaneously struck by the mingled wildness, fierce determination, and bitter hatred that were legible upon her countenance. An ominous light burned in those eyes the glory of which was marred by the corrugation of the ebon brows; the lips, whence the rich vital colouring had almost completely fled, were closely compressed; and her countenance wore a pallor that looked all the more ghastly in consequence of the olive tint of the complexion.

"Heavens! what — some new source of sorrow?" exclaimed the earl, starting from his seat and gazing with an intense anxiety upon his wife.

"Say rather, some new reason for a prompt and summary vengeance," replied Eleanor, in a low thick voice; and she gave utterance with difficulty to these words which appeared to choke her.

"Tell me what has happened — do not keep me in suspense!" cried the earl, tortured with the cruellest apprehensions.

"That villain demands another interview with me," answered the countess, her eyes flashing brighter fires than the brightest eyes of woman had ever before shot forth, and her whole form quivering with terrible feelings.

"The miscreant!" ejaculated the earl, clenching his fingers with such spasmodic violence that the nails made deep indentations in the palms of his hands. "But by what means has he conveyed this request?"

"Request," echoed the countess, with an indescribable bitterness; "'tis a command — an imperious command! The villain has had the audacity to send me a letter, declaring that he insists upon seeing me this evening at nine o'clock —"

"Ah! dares the prince make another attempt?" cried the earl, his own countenance becoming pale with rage and his lips growing ashy and quivering.

"No, no, 'tis not for that!" exclaimed Eleanor. "The man whose name I cannot mention has received his pardon through the intervention of the prince, and he therefore defies you and persecutes me."

"But why does he demand this interview?" cried the earl. "Does he not know enough of you to be convinced that you would prefer death, rather than yield again —"

"O God! do not allude to my past frailty, Francis," exclaimed the countess, wildly. "You will drive me mad. But pardon this excitement," she immediately added, in a gentler tone, as she took her husband's hand and pressed it to her lips. "No, the villain does not desecrate the name of love by addressing me in such terms or with such a hope. But he demands money, and he orders me — yes, orders me — to meet him this night at nine o'clock with five thousand pounds, as the only condition on which he swears to leave me unmolested for the future."

"The sum is nothing, Eleanor," said the nobleman, in a musing tone; "but the man's oath —"

"Is valueless," added the unfortunate lady, with a bitter emphasis. "Besides, the excitement is killing me. I cannot live in the constant terror of receiving some new proof of

this man's fiendish villainy or heartless extortion. The dread of his persecution would poison all the little happiness that remains to me in this life; my thoughts by day and my dreams by night would be filled with images of horror conjured up by the knowledge that there existed in the world one individual who could blast my reputation in a moment. Such an existence would be a perpetual torture, a prolonged excruciation, an endless series of maddening agonies. No, no; I cannot endure it, Francis; and either — ”

“Speak, Eleanor,” said the earl, trembling with apprehension beneath the look of awful gloom and sombre determination which settled itself upon his wife's countenance as she suddenly stopped short in her observations. “You were saying that either — ”

“Either that man or myself must die,” answered the countess, in a deep voice; and there was a ferocious glare in her eyes, which showed how terrible were the thoughts that the cruellest combination of circumstances had excited in the mind of a woman naturally so generous-hearted and so magnanimous.

“Holy God! what mean you, Eleanor?” demanded the earl, grasping her wrist with convulsive violence and gazing with horrified looks into the depths of those eyes wherein an ominous light was burning.

“I mean,” she answered, with the measured accents of despair, “that you must now choose between two appalling alternatives. I mean,” she continued, with the emphasis of stern resolution, “that you have now to make up your mind whether you shall follow to the grave the corpse of a suicide wife, or whether that wife shall live, but with the brand of a murderess upon her brow!”

“Just Heaven! has it come to this, Eleanor?” exclaimed the nobleman, trembling from head to foot, as if struck with a palsy.

“I have told you the alternatives,” she replied, with the awful coldness of despair. “That villain and myself cannot continue to breathe the same air. So long as he encumbers this world with his presence, he may cross my path at any moment; and I repeat that I could not live in the constant excitement of such an apprehension. No, either he or I must perish. A crime will have to be committed by my hand; and it is for you to decide whether that crime shall be suicide

or murder. To me it is a matter of indifference; for I have resolved to escape either from his persecution or else from life."

"Oh, you distress me beyond all measure, my worshipped, my adored, my well-beloved Eleanor!" exclaimed the unhappy earl, sinking down upon his knees at her feet, and moistening her hands with his tears as he pressed them with frenzied violence to his lips. "For God's sake, my darling Eleanor, reconsider this dreadful affair! Remember, that if you decide upon ridding your path of that enemy, no subsequent remorse can recall the deed, no after-compunction undo the act. Besides, my love — my angel — my afflicted one, it must not be you who will do this, but I — your husband; and will you make me a murderer?"

"No, not for worlds, Francis," exclaimed the wretched lady, compelling him to rise from his suppliant posture and then throwing herself into his arms.

"Oh, you will reconsider the matter, my beloved?" he cried, straining her to his breast and covering her countenance with kisses and with tears.

"Alas! there is nothing to reconsider, my mind is made up," she said, gently disengaging herself from her husband's embrace. "But I will not permit you to perpetrate a crime, Francis, you who never committed a foul deed in all your life."

"Yes, when I led you as a victim to the altar," said the earl, in a low deep tone of indescribable self-reproach.

"Ah! we will not talk of that now, my husband," exclaimed the countess. "You must consent to yield to those imperious circumstances which have environed me as with a wall of adamant, — circumstances which are rapidly closing in around me, and which will crush me to death unless I clear myself a means of egress by one desperate and decisive blow. Listen to what Ramsey stipulates, or rather, what he commands. He tells me that to-night at nine o'clock I am to meet him in the open field behind the shrubbery, that I am to bring with me the sum of five thousand pounds in notes, gold, or other moneys equally available, that I must proceed alone to the place of appointment, and that if I refuse to yield to these conditions, he will publish the history of his amour with me, — yes, publish everything, and thereby gain by the sale of so extraordinary a narrative

a sum equal to, if not larger than, that amount which he has demanded as the price of his secrecy!"

"He has dared to write all this?" exclaimed the earl, still trembling with rage and terror.

"Nay, read for yourself," cried the countess, and drawing forth a letter from her bosom, she gave it to Lord Desborough, who hurriedly perused the contents. "Now are you satisfied, Francis?" she asked; and, taking back the note, she deliberately lighted a taper and burned it.

"I did not doubt your word, Eleanor," said the earl; "but I was astonished at the villainy — the matchless villainy — of this wretch who seeks to turn into a source of gain and profit the immeasurable injury which he has inflicted upon you. Oh, my dear wife, this is an affair which must be left to me, this is a matter which I alone can settle! And depend upon it that the reckoning shall be terrible —"

"Once more, Francis, and let it be for the last time, I tell you that the affair is mine, and I alone can settle it," interrupted the countess, her voice, her manner, and her looks all denoting an irrevocable decision. "Decide, then, my dear husband, decide: which shall be my doom, — that of a self-destroyer or of an assassin?"

"Great God! we must not have recourse to such shocking expedients," exclaimed the nobleman, shuddering to the innermost recesses of his being. "Let us yield to the wretch's extortion, let us comply with his demands, and let us live on in the hope that his persecution of you has indeed ended. But should he again seek to molest you, Eleanor, then, oh, then, I will urge not a syllable against any course which you may decide upon adopting."

"No reliance is to be placed upon that man," said the countess, in a voice which showed that her resolution was unalterable. "The same diabolical spirit which urges him to practise extortions now will only be sharpened and not appeased, strengthened and not satiated, by our concession. If we yield to-day, we may expect further demonstrations of his power to-morrow; if we show ourselves weak and timorous, he will become proportionately bold and merciless in his demands. No, we must put an end to this state of things, which I at least can endure no longer. There was a time — but a short while ago — when I should have shrunk in dismay from the thought of suicide, and in horror from

that of murder. But now, so desperate have grown the circumstances of my position, I can contemplate them both with calmness. Do not you, therefore, discourage me, my husband; but rather inspire me with firmness, if any be wanting on my part, to perform one of those deeds either of which has become a duty. Yes, and whatever be your decision, you will screen me. If your judgment be self-destruction for me, if you would rather lose your wife altogether, than let her live as a murderess, you will not allow the world to know that I took poison. But if, on the other hand, you decide that I shall live — ”

“ My God! my God! you are driving me mad, Eleanor,” exclaimed the wretched nobleman, as he pressed his hand forcibly to his throbbing brows and leaned against the mantelpiece for support. “ Do not talk thus dreadfully, do not abandon yourself to the fearful thoughts which are whirling you along with their eddies.”

“ Oh, you must be calm, you must be calm, Francis!” cried the lady, taking his hand and pressing it to her bosom. “ Those wild and passionate ejaculations on your part, those entreaties so unavailing in the face of my unalterable resolve, those earnest prayers and anguished cries only add bitterness to a scene which is already a crucifixion of us both. Come, be bold, be firm, be courageous, my dear husband; and prepare to give that decision which now alone is wanting to direct me in one path or the other.”

“ And are you thus determined, Eleanor?” asked the unhappy nobleman, scarcely able to believe in the frightful truth which was now present to his contemplation.

“ I take Heaven to witness that my resolve is unalterable — my mind unchangeable!” answered the countess, in a solemn tone. “ There, feel my hand; does it tremble? No. And my heart palpitates with violence no longer. I am calm, I am tranquil, I am even happy in the certitude of being released, by one means or another, from an intolerable tyranny. And remember, my dear husband, that if you doom me by your decision to suicide, you will yet remain alive to endure that persecution whence I shall have escaped by the avenue of self-destruction.”

“ No, no, my Eleanor, my loved one,” exclaimed the Earl of Desborough, whose feelings were harrowed to a frightful degree of poignancy, “ you shall not die! What,

you, — so young, so beautiful, so full of all the freshness of youth and the vigour of health, — you to die so soon — you to perish thus early, and by thine own hand — Oh, no, it must not be! You shall live, my worshipped Eleanor, live to triumph over this enemy of thine; and since I see that thou art resolute, Eleanor, I will take courage from thy determination, I will acquire firmness from thy equanimity. Live, then, my Eleanor, live!” repeated the earl, with a sort of enthusiastic devotion to the very crime which had horrified him a few instants before; “live, I say and let thine enemy, thy fierce, merciless, diabolical enemy perish as he deserves!”

“Oh, now thou art deserving of all my love!” exclaimed the countess, throwing herself into the arms of her husband.

CHAPTER VI

THE LAST MEETING

SINCE his return to England Tim Meagles had removed his horses from Lady Lade's stables to the mews where he had always been wont to keep them prior to his temporary expatriation; for the Amazon, faithful to her determination of leading a prudential life during the period of her mourning, was unwilling that any circumstance should seem to indicate the renewal of a too familiar connection with Meagles. Hence the removal of his stud back to the mews where he had been wont to contract for their keep.

The proprietor of that stabling establishment was in the habit of letting out post-chaises and vehicles of all kinds; and it happened that about three o'clock in the afternoon of the same day on which the scene in the preceding chapter occurred at Stamford Manor, a gentleman entered the mews and ordered a post-chaise to be got ready to take him to Aylesbury.

Now, at this particular moment Tim Meagles was in the stable where his own horses were kept; and he overheard the instructions just given by the gentleman. The voice instantaneously struck him as being that of Philip Ramsey; and the suspicion appeared to receive confirmation from the fact that the individual was about to visit the neighbourhood of Stamford Manor. Ascending to a loft which had a window overlooking the stable yard, Meagles was enabled to obtain a view of the person whose proceedings had thus suddenly interested him; and he found, as he had suspected, that it was none other than the resuscitated criminal.

"Ah! the prince is doubtless at his tricks again," thought Meagles within himself; "or else this fellow is intent upon persecuting the poor countess in order to serve some private

aim of his own. In either case it behoves me to watch his movements. If he is still employed by the prince, it will afford me the greatest pleasure to thwart his plans; and if he is acting on his own account, I am in a measure bound by the earl's generosity toward me to detect and expose the covert treachery. No, no, Mr. Ramsey, you sha'n't carry on this odious game any longer, if I can put a stop to it. I suppose you have got your pardon safe in your pocket; or else you would not venture abroad in this undisguised manner during the broad daylight. But, by Jove! 'tis almost a pity that you weren't suffered to go back to the gallows, which has assuredly been cheated of a most fit and proper subject for its operations. However, I will put a spoke in your wheel ere long, if you do mean to persecute that unfortunate lady and her noble husband."

Thus musing, Tim Meagles watched from the window of the loft until the post-chaise was got ready. Ramsey stepped into it, the postilion received his instructions, and the vehicle then rolled out of the stable yard.

Descending from the loft, Tim ordered his horse to be saddled immediately; and, mounting the noble animal, he set off in pursuit of the post-chaise. About a mile beyond the suburbs he came within sight of it; and he continued to follow it at such a distance that he stood no chance of being observed by Ramsey, should this individual look forth, from the windows of the vehicle.

Aylesbury is forty miles from London, and as the weather was remarkably fine on the day of which we are writing, the roads were good. The chaise accordingly travelled at the rate of about ten miles an hour; and it was a little after seven in the evening when it arrived in the close vicinage of Aylesbury. But Ramsey had no inclination to enter a town where he was so well known, although, as Meagles surmised, he had his pardon in his pocket. He accordingly directed the postilion to turn into a by-road leading in the direction of Stamford Manor; and the chaise ultimately stopped at the very same wayside public-house where Meagles had put up on the memorable night of his intervention on behalf of the Countess of Desborough.

That Philip Ramsey's designs bore reference to the inmates of the manor, Tim Meagles was now convinced, even if he had previously entertained any doubt upon the subject; and

his first impulse was to repair straight to that mansion, and warn the Earl of Desborough of the presence of the enemy. But a second thought showed him the imprudence of losing sight of an individual of whose aims and purposes he was still so far ignorant as to render it desirable that he should dog him step by step; and Meagles accordingly resolved to continue watching the movements of the resuscitated criminal. Fortunately for his purpose, a lad connected with the public-house passed along the road while Meagles was thus deliberating within himself; and the liberality with which Tim had remunerated the dependents of the little inn on the former occasion of his visit to the neighbourhood had made a sufficient impression upon the boy's mind to lead him now to the immediate recognition of so bounteous a patron. He accordingly touched his cap by way of salutation, and inquired whether Meagles was going to stop at the inn.

"Yes," answered Tim. "But I have come down here on business of a very private nature; and I want to speak to the landlord before I approach any nearer to his house, as he has got a very suspicious character there. Now, my lad, do you go on as quick as you can, and, without saying anything to alarm the inmates of the place, tell the landlord to come to me directly. I shall wait here in the lane."

With these words, Meagles tossed a crown piece to the lad, who hastened away to execute the commission entrusted to him. In about ten minutes the landlord made his appearance, with a somewhat elongated countenance; for the message which the lad had whispered in his ear was not of a very reassuring character.

"My good fellow," said Meagles, leaping from his horse, "you need not be alarmed, as I am here on purpose to prevent mischief. In fact, I am a Bow Street officer in disguise; and I am watching the individual who has just alighted from a post-chaise at your house."

"What! is such a respectable-looking gentleman a bad character in reality?" inquired the landlord.

"He is indeed," returned Meagles. "Did you never see him before?"

"Never, to my knowledge," was the reply. "Who is he, sir?"

"That does not matter now," rejoined Tim. "You may perhaps learn by and by. But what is he doing now?"

"He engaged the private parlour and ordered some dinner to be got ready as soon as possible," said the landlord.

"And is he in the parlour now?" demanded Meagles.

"Yes, sir. He inquired if we'd got anything to read, and I sent him in some old books. I suppose that if he's a house-breaker or what not, he'll remain snug indoors until night-time?"

"That will be his game precisely," answered Tim. "And now you must lead my horse to the stable, while I get around by the back way into the house; and there you must let me have a room which will enable me to keep a strict watch upon the movements of the rascal. But mind and do not breathe a word that will create any alarm in the place or lead the fellow to suspect that he is being dogged."

"I understand you, sir," replied the landlord. "If you go around by the field, you can enter the house without being obliged to pass the windows of the room where the vagabond is sitting; and I shall be ready to lead you to a chamber adjoining the parlour."

These arrangements were accordingly carried into effect; and a good dinner was served up to Meagles, who was prepared to do ample justice to it after his long ride.

At about a quarter to nine o'clock, the landlord stole softly into the chamber to inform Meagles that the suspicious customer had ordered the horses to be put to the chaise at ten o'clock, and that he had stated his intention to step across to Stamford Manor in the interval. Accordingly, the landlord watched until Ramsey sallied forth, which he did in a few minutes; and Meagles lost no time in following him.

It was a beautiful moonlit evening; but the road was bordered by a high hedge on one side, and, favoured by the deep shade thereof, Meagles was enabled to pursue the criminal without being perceived. Stamford Manor was in the immediate neighbourhood; but instead of entering the enclosure for the purpose of seeking the front door, Ramsey struck into a narrow lane leading to the fields behind the garden and shrubbery. Thither did Meagles follow him, still contriving to escape observation; and when the resuscitated criminal entered the meadow where he had desired Lady Desborough to meet him, the wary Tim concealed himself behind a large tree. For by the way in which Ramsey paused and looked anxiously around, Meagles judged that

he had an appointment with some one in that particular place.

Nor was our astute friend mistaken; for in a few minutes a lady, enveloped in a cloak, issued from the shrubbery and advanced toward the spot where Philip Ramsey had posted himself. By the stature and gait of the lady, Meagles had little difficulty in at once recognizing the Countess of Desborough; but if he had entertained any uncertainty upon that score, the doubt was speedily dissolved when the rays of the moon streamed full upon her countenance as she cast a rapid and searching look around.

Ramsey suffered her to advance almost as far as the spot where he was standing, ere he moved a step forward to encounter her; his aim was evidently to assure himself that she had come alone. Accordingly, when he found that no person was following her at a distance, and when his listening ear caught the sound of no footstep besides her own gentle tread upon the dewy sward, he advanced a few paces to meet her. Then, by the light of the silver moon that was filling the atmosphere with so sweet and pure a lustre, did the looks of that vile man encounter those of that desperate woman; and each recoiled from the other with a simultaneous shuddering, because the man felt that he was playing the part of a despicable coward, and to the woman it already seemed as if the murder-mark of blood were already upon her brow.

"Let our interview be short and the business speedily concluded," said Ramsey, with the abruptness of one who can find no apologetic preface wherewith to open the conversation.

"I shall not detain you many minutes, sir," replied the countess, in a cold and measured voice, although the palpitations of her heart were nervously quick and short. "But before I yield to the extortionate demand which you have made upon me —"

"Ah! then you mean to comply with my request, and you will act wisely," interrupted Ramsey. Then, as his looks quailed beneath the flashing eyes of the noble lady whose countenance was ghastly pale, he said, "I know, I feel that I am playing a villainous part; but I have resolved to make war upon the world and spare no one. To a man placed in such fearful circumstances as those which belong to my history, there is but one source of comfort and solace,

and that is money. By the aid of gold I may surround myself with all the luxuries, the elegancies, and the enjoyments of life, and thereby form a barrier against the too frequent intrusion of overwhelming reminiscences. Gold, then, is now the deity of my adoration, — the idol of my worship. Wherever I can obtain it by fair means or by foul, I will joyously welcome its presence. And not from you alone, Countess of Desborough, shall I extort the glittering ore; but even upon higher personages still must the tribute be levied. Yes, I hold the means of enforcing all this — ”

“ And you have chosen to commence with me? ” exclaimed Eleanor, cutting short that long tirade which the wretch was delivering in a vein of malignant triumph. “ Well, be it so, ” she added, resuming that cold and measured tone which afforded not the slightest clue to the real nature of the thoughts that were agitating in her bosom. “ The amount you have demanded of me shall be placed at your disposal. But before we separate, I must so far relieve the intolerable bitterness of those feelings which I entertain toward you by proclaiming, Philip Ramsay, that madly, profoundly, devotedly as I once loved you, so fiercely and intensely do I now hate you! ”

And the words came hissing snakelike from between the lips that were ashy and quivering, and the splendid eyes of the countess darted forth fires at the same moment.

“ Enough of this, ” cried Ramsey, in an insolent tone of authority. “ I came not hither to be taunted or reviled; beware, lady, how I may become the reviler! ”

“ Ah! I see that it is time to put an end to our interview, ” ejaculated the countess, her right arm moving beneath the cloak which wrapped her form.

“ Give me the money, and let me take my departure, ” said the criminal, greedily anxious to clutch the fruits of his extortion.

“ I have brought it in a bag, — gold and bank-notes all mixed together, ” continued Eleanor; “ but by the light of the moon you can assure yourself that the sum is correct. ”

“ I will take your word for it, ” rejoined Ramsey, extending his hand to receive the hoped-for treasure. “ Give me the treasure. ”

“ The reward of your vile treachery toward me? ” exclaimed the countess, in a tone of bitter inquiry.

“Term it what you will,” cried Ramsey, impatiently. “Call it reward if you like, only give it quick —”

“Then take it!” ejaculated Eleanor, abruptly stretching forth her right arm from beneath the cloak; and the sudden movement was followed, rapidly as the eye winks, by the report of a pistol.

A short quick cry burst from Ramsey’s lips, and the next instant, while that death sound was yet piercing the air, he threw up his arms and fell down dead.

The murderess turned and fled precipitately toward the shrubbery whence she had emerged a few minutes before; and Meagles, stupefied with a horrible consternation, remained transfixed to the spot where he had concealed himself behind a tree.

CHAPTER VII

AFTER THE MURDER

SUDDENLY a wild and fearful light flamed up in the mind of Tim Meagles, showing him at a glance all the perils which, in a single moment as it were, had sprung into existence around him. He had followed Ramsey from London, he had watched him at the adjacent public-house, and he had dogged him to the field where the tragedy had just taken place. The corpse of the murdered man would be discovered; and he (Meagles) would be pointed out by an overwhelming combination of circumstantial evidence as the author of the crime.

Roused from his stupor by these harrowing reflections which traversed his brain with the vividness and speed of lightning, Meagles darted in pursuit of Lady Desborough. She was just on the point of entering the shrubbery, when the sounds of those quick steps behind smote like a death-knell upon her ears, and she clung, panting with terror and trembling all over, to the gate of the enclosure.

"Almighty God! what have you done, miserable woman?" demanded Meagles, clutching her violently by the shoulder.

The voice was familiar to the countess, and, turning around with a spasmodic start, she instantaneously recognized her deliverer of the other night.

"Oh, Mr. Meagles, you will not betray me?" she cried, a gleam of hope appearing upon the countenance that an instant before was convulsed with indescribable terror.

But before Meagles had time to utter a word in response to that appeal, a rustling amidst the evergreens of the shrubbery was heard, and the form of a man sprang forth.

"Ah, it is you, Francis!" ejaculated the Countess of Desborough, as the moonlight fell upon the features of her husband.

"Yes, I followed you, Eleanor, thus far on your path of vengeance and of daring," replied the earl, in a voice that was thick and hoarse; "and I remained close at hand to protect you in the event of a struggle with your enemy."

"And that enemy — he is no more," said the countess, in a low, deep, and solemn tone. "But you, Mr. Meagles, how came you here?" she demanded, turning abruptly toward that individual.

"My object was of a friendly nature toward you, unhappy lady," replied Tim, on whose countenance were yet depicted the traces of that horror with which the shocking deed had inspired him. "Suffice it to say that I accidentally learned Ramsey's intention to pay this neighbourhood a visit to-night; and, believing his visit to bode no good to you, I followed him all the way from London and watched him hither. But would to God that I had attended to my own business instead!" he added, bitterly.

"Mr. Meagles," said the earl, taking Tim's hand and pressing it forcibly, "you must not betray this frightful secret. That villain has only met his righteous doom. Alas! you are not ignorant of the fatal power which he exercised over my unhappy wife, you are acquainted with the tremendous secret of that influence. Know, then, in addition, that the miscreant's last act of despotism was the endeavour to extort a large sum of money as the price of his silence; and my wife, unable to endure that continued persecution —"

"God knows that there is extenuation enough for this crime!" ejaculated Meagles. "But terrible dangers now environ me," and he hastily explained the nature of his position, as we have already detailed it at the opening of this chapter.

"Then what is to be done? What would you advise?" asked the earl, trembling from head to foot.

"Oh, do not imagine that punishment shall be allowed to overtake the innocent, Mr. Meagles!" exclaimed the Countess of Desborough, with a sudden presence of mind and a moral courage that sprang from a heroic resolution to dare and suffer all the consequences of her crime. "I have not been bold only to perpetrate the deed; but I will continue bold to avow it!"

"No, never, never!" groaned the unhappy earl, wringing his hands despairingly.

“ And I say never, never also! ” exclaimed Meagles; who, in spite of his horror at the deed which she had just committed, could not help admiring the countess for her resolution to screen the innocent and suffer all the consequences of her turpitude. “ We must remove every trace of the fearful tragedy,” he added; “ and leave the rest to chance. Does your lordship feel equal to the task of assisting me to bury that corpse? ” and his voice sank to a low whisper, which seemed to mingle ominously with the rustling leaves.

“ Yes, I will assist you,” returned the nobleman, scarcely appearing to be aware of what he was saying or doing.

“ Then your ladyship will hasten indoors,” observed Meagles, “ and assure yourself that this night’s proceedings have passed unnoticed and unsuspected.”

“ Let the earl go home,” said the countess. “ I will remain here and assist you in concealing the traces of my own work.”

“ No, no! ” ejaculated Meagles, impatiently. “ Your absence will be remarked, whereas that of the earl will excite no particular attention. Do as I say, madam, or I wash my hands of the business.”

“ You shall be obeyed, Mr. Meagles,” said the countess. Then, grasping his hand and straining it with force, she whispered, “ My honour — my safety — my life, are now in your keeping — ”

“ And they are safe with me,” was the solemn and impressive rejoinder.

As the moonbeams fell fully on the partially upturned countenance of Lady Desborough, Meagles saw that she fixed upon him a look of intense gratitude; and he experienced a cruel shock and a poignant pang at the thought that so splendid a creature had perpetrated such a crime.

“ Now, my lord,” he hastened to exclaim, as he turned toward the earl, “ you must lose no time in procuring a spade, while I will undertake to drag the corpse from the spot where it is now lying to this shrubbery, and there will we bury it.”

The countess took her husband’s arm and led him rapidly away toward the mansion, while Meagles, after throwing a look of piercing scrutiny around to assure himself as far as he was able that the coast was clear, advanced toward the spot where the corpse lay.

Naturally courageous and undaunted though he were, he

could not help shuddering as he approached the inanimate form that lay upon the dewy sward; and a sickening sensation took possession of him as his looks fell upon the pale and blood-stained countenance of the dead. For the contents of the pistol had penetrated the brain of the victim, and the forehead seemed entirely shattered.

But that feeling of mingled terror and sinking of the heart was only transitory; and, with another searching glance thrown around the field, Tim Meagles began to drag the corpse toward the shrubbery. This portion of the task was soon accomplished, and, having opened the gate, Meagles drew the body inside the enclosure.

The Earl of Desborough had not as yet reappeared; and it suddenly struck Meagles that there might be some papers or letters of consequence about the person of the murdered man. He accordingly stooped down and examined his pockets. A packet of documents, tied with a piece of tape, was the fruit of this search; and Meagles unhesitatingly took possession thereof. But neither the purse nor the watch of the deceased did he touch; had Ramsey's pocket been lined with precious stones, Meagles would have shrunk in loathing and scorn from the idea of self-appropriating a single one of such gems.

Almost immediately after he had taken possession of the packet of papers, the sounds of approaching footsteps reached his ears; and the earl returned, bearing a spade and mattock. The nobleman's countenance, as the moonbeams fell upon it, was ghastly pale; and there was a vacant wildness in his looks which showed how terrible an impression the tragedy of the evening had made upon his mind.

"My lord," said Meagles, in an earnest tone, "you must summon all your courage to your aid. Remember that an incautious word, uttered in the presence of a domestic or a friend, may send your wife to the scaffold."

"Holy God, it is but too true!" ejaculated the nobleman, as if startled by the warning into all the poignancy of harrowing convictions. "Let us hasten and perform our dreadful task."

"Does your lordship think that we are secure against observation?" inquired Meagles. "Will none of your lordship's dependents pass in this direction — to lock the gate, or see that all is safe —"

"No, this gate is never locked," returned the earl. "Let us lose no time in hollowing a grave for the wretch who is no more," he added, with feverish impatience.

A spot amidst the evergreens was chosen, and Meagles fell to work. The nobleman, inspired with an intense anxiety to remove all traces of the crime from above the earth, rendered effectual assistance; and in somewhat less than an hour a pit was dug of a sufficient depth for the required purpose. The corpse was then placed therein, the mould was shovelled back, the superfluous soil was scattered over the ground in the vicinity, and the unblest obsequies of the murdered man were concluded.

The Earl of Desborough now seemed to breathe easily for the first time since the enactment of the fatal tragedy in which his wife played the part of heroine. He invited Meagles to enter the manor and take some refreshment after the toils of the last hour; but Tim had an insuperable repugnance to remain longer than was necessary with the earl, for the words which the nobleman uttered when he joined the countess at the shrubbery gate had clearly indicated his complicity in the deed. In plain terms Meagles saw that the earl was an accessory before the fact; and great though the provocation had been, he could not regard the noble couple in any other light than a murderer and a murderess. He accordingly took a hasty leave of Lord Desborough, and retraced his steps to the public-house.

It was now past eleven o'clock, and Meagles found the landlord anxiously awaiting his return. But Tim was already prepared how to act; and, immediately on entering the tavern, he exclaimed, "Well, is that fellow come back?"

"No, sir," was the landlord's reply. "What has happened?"

"I suppose he has smelt a rat and bolted," returned Meagles. "I followed him for a considerable distance; but he evidently saw that I was watching him —"

"Ah! then I am swindled out of the dinner and the wine which he had," interrupted the landlord, in a tone of vexation. "He will never come back — that's quite sure."

"You may put his expenses down in my bill," said Meagles, in an offhand manner, "since it was I who frightened the rascal away from your house. And now give me a glass

of brandy and water, and then show me to my bedroom, for I shall sleep here to-night."

These orders were duly complied with, and the moment Tim Meagles was alone in the chamber to which he had been conducted, he fastened the door and sat down at the table to examine the packet of papers which he had taken from the person of the murdered man.

But how great was his joy and how indescribable his astonishment, when on the outside letter of the bundle he beheld these words:

*Correspondence between Miss Hannah Lightfoot
and Lady Stamford:
together with Important Memoranda and Explanatory
Comments.
In the years 1757 - 1758.*

"By Jove! this promises to be a lucky windfall for me!" said Meagles to himself, as with nervous impatience he unfastened the tape which encircled the packet; and his hands trembled so from acute suspense that he dropped several of the papers upon the floor.

But speedily picking them up again, he addressed himself to the examination of their contents; and in a very few minutes he was involved in the study of the most thrilling, exciting, and interesting correspondence and memoranda that ever engaged his attention.

And through what varied transitions of feeling did his mind pass, as he plunged deeper and deeper into those documents? Now he was absorbed by the most touching pathos, then excited by the most frenzied words of despair; now he was enthralled by fervid appeals, then startled by the wildest ravings of grief. Such were the contents of the letters. But presently he found that the important memoranda were leading him on to the discovery of secrets of a stupendous character, — secrets intimately regarding the King of England, — yes, secrets which bore the closest reference to the honour, character, and position of George III.

With increasing wonder and interest did Meagles turn to the explanatory comments; and from them he gleaned a full and complete solution of the mystery for the development of which the memoranda had already prepared him.



PHOTOGRAPH OF GEORGE THE THIRD
after painting by Ramsay

of brandy and water. "You can show me to my bedroom, for I shall sleep here tonight."

These words were accompanied with such the moment Tim Abagail... the chamber to which he had been brought... the table... of papers which... taken from...

...his joy... his... his... the bundle he...

...between Mrs. Hannah Lightfoot and Lady... Important Memoranda and Explanatory Comments... the years 1750-1758.

...this promise to be a lucky windfall for me!" ... himself as with nervous impatience he unrolled the paper which encircled the packet; and his hands... that he dropped several...

...addressed himself... and in a very few... the most thrilling, and interesting... and memoranda...

...feeling did his... deeper and deeper into those... the most touching... words of despair;... appeals, then startled by... Such were the contents of the... the important memo-... to the discovery of secrets of a... secrets intimately regarding the... secrets which bore the closest reference...

PORTRAIT OF GEORGE THE THIRD
Photogravure after painting by Ramsay

With increasing... the explanatory... and from them he gleaned a... complete... of the mystery for the develop-... of which the... had already prepared him.





Unable to restrain his amazement at the tremendous secret which he had thus discovered, and still less competent to bridle the joy which he felt at having become its depositary, Meagles sprang from his seat; and the dread tragedy of the evening being as completely banished from his mind as if it had never occurred, he paced the room in a perfect transport of wild and ecstatic feelings. For the papers which he had formerly possessed, and which the Prince of Wales had obtained back again from the Amazon, were but "cakes and gingerbread," to use Sancho Panza's remark, compared with the correspondence and memoranda which had now fallen into his hands, and which so closely concerned the King of England.

In a word, Meagles gave way to all the extremes of an extravagant joy; until, gradually cooling and growing collected, he began to recollect that it was far advanced into the night and that he proposed to rise early to return to town. He accordingly went to bed; but some time elapsed ere he could compose himself to sleep; and then his dreams were filled with images of murdered men, stark corpses, and deep graves, all curiously and fantastically blended with scenes in which George III, a beautiful Quakeress, an infant child, and various other persons or ideas connected with the important documents were strangely jumbled. It was therefore a relief when he was awakened by the light of morning streaming into his chamber; and, starting from the couch, he achieved his toilet with all possible despatch.

Breakfast being disposed of, and the bill paid with liberality, Tim Meagles mounted his horse and began to retrace his way to London.

CHAPTER VIII

ANOTHER INTERVIEW WITH THE KING

IN the afternoon of the same day on which Mr. Timothy Meagles thus returned to the metropolis, the king and queen held a grand levee and drawing-room at St. James's Palace. The farce of a parcel of titled fools and vain or silly women decking themselves out in all their splendour for the purpose of attending the royal raree-show was duly performed; and the disgusting display of pomp and ostentation stood forth in striking contrast with the soul-destroying and body-crushing miseries endured by the toiling millions throughout the length and breadth of the land.

That dreadful king, George III, in comparison with whom Nero was an angel and Caligula a saint, and that snuffy termagant, Queen Charlotte, thus received the homage of the vile sycophants and the titled demireps who paid those miserable specimens of fallen humanity a worship which they had not religion enough to offer up to their Maker. The saloons of St. James's were rich, and dazzling, and brilliant with the plunder of the poor man. The produce of his labour was there, while he himself was starving and in rags, and yet that execrable king and that hateful queen bestowed not a thought upon the suffering millions over whom they ruled.

The trumpery proceedings of the levee and drawing-room took place in the usual manner, — proceedings which were more contemptible than child's play, without the innocence of the latter; for the effect of such pompous parade and gorgeous ostentation was inevitably calculated to puff up the principal actors with an intolerable pride, and confirm them in their course of tyranny, oppression, and extravagance. But at five o'clock the whole tomfoolery was over;

and while the queen retired to her toilet-chamber to put off her robes, the king withdrew to an apartment denominated the Royal Closet, where he was in the habit of granting private audiences after the more ceremonial levee.

Scarcely had the king thus retired to that room, when a page entered to announce that a gentleman and lady, who had delivered their cards, solicited an interview in the most private manner possible. The king took the cards and started visibly when he read the name of "Mr. Meagles" upon the first; then, examining the other, he was almost inclined to fly into a rage when he beheld the name of "Lady Lade." He was about to refuse the audience solicited by those persons; but recollecting how vitally important to himself had been the object of their former visit, when he was staying at Windsor Castle, and trembling with apprehension lest some new incident had supplied them the means of coercing him at pleasure, he resolved upon seeing them.

The page was accordingly instructed to lead them by a private passage to the Royal Closet; and in a few minutes Tim Meagles and Lady Lade once more stood in the presence of George III.

For this occasion our friend Tim had habited himself in a complete suit of black; and the riding-whip was dispensed with. Lady Lade wore her widow's weeds, and truly handsome did she appear.

The king motioned the page to withdraw, and, so soon as he was alone with his visitors, he said in a petulant manner, where nervous suspense mingled with irritation, "Well, what is it now — what is it now?"

"May it please your Majesty," returned Meagles, "we have sought your Majesty's presence on business of the utmost importance —"

"And why did you bring her with you? Why did you bring her?" demanded the king, pointing angrily toward Letitia. "You told me last time that she was your wife — yes — your wife — Mrs. Meagles — Meagles. But it was all false — all false. George — I mean his Royal Highness — let me into the secret afterward. He was tipsy one night — one night — I mean he was communicative one night — very communicative — and he told me who the pretended Mrs. Meagles was. How dare you, sir, — how dare you — dare you — bring that woman to me?"

“As a witness to see fair play, your Majesty,” answered Meagles, with an undaunted firmness. “I have been so scurvily treated on a special occasion by your Majesty’s eldest son, and the Home Office plays such queer tricks at times, that I resolved to bring a witness with me. And as the business is of a most private and confidential character, I thought your Majesty would be better pleased if I brought a friend who knows all my secrets, rather than a stranger.”

“Ah! fine talk — fine talk!” ejaculated the king, in that jerking manner which was peculiar to him. Then, as he surveyed the Amazon from head to foot, he said, in a musing tone, “Well, upon my word, she looks as well — yes, quite as well — quite as well in those widows’ weeds as in the male apparel; quite as well. A fine woman — a very fine woman. Pity she’s no better than she should be — no better than she should be,” he added, these last words being inaudible alike to Meagles and the object of the monarch’s musings. “And now what’s the business — what’s the business?” he demanded aloud, turning abruptly at the same time toward Meagles.

“Accident has thrown in my way certain important papers which intimately regard your Majesty,” was the reply, delivered in a firm and measured tone.

“Papers — important papers — what papers?” ejaculated the king, growing more and more nervous. “This is the second time you’ve come to me about papers. More exactions, eh? More nonsense to bother your sovereign about, eh? Come, sir, what are these papers? Come — speak!”

“Correspondence, may it please your Majesty, memoranda, and explanatory remarks relative to a certain lady whose name cannot do otherwise than awaken disagreeable reminiscences in the mind of your Majesty.” And as Meagles thus spoke, his looks quailed not beneath those which the monarch fixed intently upon him.

“Ah! you always harp on the same string — same string,” cried his Majesty, the colour coming and going in rapid transitions on his puffy cheeks, and his whole manner exhibiting a painful nervousness. “What papers have you got, sir? They are all forgeries — all forgeries — and I defy you. Go about your business — about your business,” and the king, turning abruptly away from Meagles and the Amazon, walked to the farther end of the room.

"Hear me, Sire!" exclaimed Tim, raising his voice with firmness and decision. "I am incapable of committing the crime which your Majesty dares to impute to me. I am no forger, no, not half so much as your Majesty is a foul perjurer."

"Eh, what? this to me? this to me?" cried George III, turning rapidly around and stamping his foot with rage, while his countenance became purple. "By Heaven, sir, if you wish to sleep in the Tower —"

"No; your Majesty dares not wreak your vengeance upon me now," interrupted the undaunted Tim.

"Mention the name of Miss Hannah Lightfoot at once," exclaimed the Amazon, "and thereby afford his Majesty a clue to the purport of our business."

"Ah! that name, no, no, don't mention it — don't mention it, good people!" gasped the king, staggering back as if beneath the weight of a blow. "Come, let us talk quietly and tranquilly, without excitement. There, I will sit down," he added, throwing himself into an armchair. "And now, Meagles, — queer name, Meagles, very queer — Meagles — Meagles," reiterated the miserable monarch, who always seemed to grow childish whenever he was much excited, "and now, Meagles — Meagles — tell me what you want and all about it."

"In plain terms, then," said Tim, "I wish to know at what price your Majesty will purchase the correspondence between Miss Hannah Lightfoot and Lady Stamford; together with important memoranda and explanatory comments."

And as Meagles thus spoke, he drew forth the packet of papers and read the endorsement which we have printed in italics.

"Correspondence — Lady Stamford — memoranda — comments," murmured the king, becoming ghastly pale, and sinking back in the armchair; for he saw that he was completely in the power of Meagles and the Amazon, and moreover, reminiscences of a very sad and painful nature were now agitating wildly in his brain.

"We have him, my beauty," whispered Meagles, aside to the huntress.

"He is in our mercy, Tim," responded the handsome

widow, likewise speaking in a subdued tone. "Do not yield under a dukedom, mind!"

"Nothing less," returned Meagles, with a resolute air.

"My good sir," at length said the king, now giving utterance to his words in a slow, solemn, and measured manner, "you have inflicted a deep wound upon my — or rather, you have torn open one which was barely skinned over. I shall not attempt to appear indifferent to the subject which has been brought so vividly to my notice. Doubtless the honour of your king is in your keeping; speak, therefore, without reserve, and fear no interruption from me. Now, sir, what have you to say?"

And resting his right elbow upon the arm of the chair, the monarch covered his face with the hand which at the same time supported his head.

"I am well pleased that your Majesty is prepared to listen calmly and tranquilly to the observations which I am about to make," said Meagles; "and as it will save your Majesty the pain of another interview with us, I will at once proceed to glance at the nature of these documents which I hold in my possession. Your Majesty will then be enabled to judge whether it be worth while to purchase the papers from me, and whether in the remuneration that I seek, I have placed too high a value upon them."

"Proceed," said the king, still retaining the attitude of profound attention and of deep dejection which he had ere now assumed as he sat in the armchair.

"In the year 1756," resumed Meagles, "your Majesty, being at that time his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, fell in with Miss Hannah Lightfoot and became enamoured of her. Your meetings were frequent, but innocent; and you found that the charming Quakeress was too pure to surrender herself to your wishes without marriage, or at least without the semblance or solemn promise of a marriage. Thus compelled to adopt a decisive part, your Majesty — then Prince of Wales, as your son now is — wrote Miss Lightfoot a letter revealing your rank. This was in the month of February, 1757, and although the letter is not in the collection which I now hold, there are many allusions to its contents in other letters which are in this correspondence. In the month of April, 1757, Hannah Lightfoot became your bride in the sight of Heaven, the memorable certificate to

which I need not further allude being the means adopted by you to silence the scruples of the charming Quakeress. Toward the end of June of the same year, Miss Lightfoot found herself in a way to become a mother; and she accompanied Lady Stamford to the manor near Aylesbury. By a strange coincidence it happened that Lady Stamford had likewise just discovered that she was pregnant. Some weeks afterward Hannah Lightfoot returned to London, and you saw her nearly every day. Things went on thus until the month of January, 1758, when you appear to have made up your mind to dissolve the connection. You accordingly wrote a long letter to Miss Lightfoot, breaking your intention to her as delicately as you were able. Almost heart-broken, the unhappy lady fled from London, and sought her friend Lady Stamford at the manor. At that period both Miss Lightfoot and Lady Stamford were in daily expectation of becoming mothers. And, as a natural sequence to that simultaneousness of pregnancy which I have before alluded to they were delivered within a few hours of each other. And now comes the tremendous secret which is contained in the explanatory comments appended in Lady Stamford's own handwriting, as it appears, to the correspondence which has fallen into my possession. But your Majesty is aware of it all. Yes, your Majesty is aware that Lady Stamford's child died in a few hours after its birth, and that with the concurrence of her husband Sir William, she adopted Miss Lightfoot's child as her own."

"It is true, too true, all too true!" groaned the unhappy monarch, writhing in his chair, but still maintaining his hand over his countenance. "Go on — go on. What more do those papers reveal?"

"Have they not already proclaimed enough?" demanded Meagles. "Or do you wish me to repeat to your Majesty how the substitution of your child by Hannah Lightfoot for the child of Sir William and Lady Stamford was duly communicated to you, how you approved of the proceeding as the only means of veiling the disgrace of the beautiful Quakeress and sparing her the crowning ignominy of expulsion from her sect, and how Sir William and Lady Stamford brought up the child as their own, adopted him as their heir, and left him all their property? Does your Majesty wish me to enter into such details as these? And does your

Majesty need to be reminded that your son by the unfortunate Hannah Lightfoot still lives, — yes, lives in the person of that Sir Richard Stamford who has himself been so unfortunate? Ah! no wonder that he bears such a remarkable resemblance to the royal family of England — ”

“ Enough, enough,” exclaimed the king, now starting nervously from his seat. Then, after passing to and fro in a state of dreadful agitation for several minutes, he suddenly stopped short, clutched Meagles violently by the arm, and said in a hollow voice, “ I must have those papers. What is your price? ”

“ It is high, your Majesty,” observed Meagles.

“ Name it — name it,” said the king, impatiently.

“ A dukedom,” was the startling response.

George III was rooted to the spot with the consternation that seized upon him at this demand; and for upwards of a minute he stood with his eyes fixed in vacant wonderment on Meagles, his brows lifted, his mouth half-open, and his whole aspect that of stolid amazement.

“ A dukedom! ” at length he gasped forth; and, turning abruptly away, he renewed his agitated, fidgety walk to and fro in the Royal Closet.

“ Don’t be beaten down, Tim,” whispered the Amazon, encouragingly, “ even though he should offer you a marquisate.”

“ Yes, my beauty,” responded Meagles; “ I will take a marquisate, with ten thousand a year, but nothing less.”

“ Well, nothing less than a marquisate, then,” rejoined Lady Lade, in a tone of decision.

“ Mr. Meagles,” said the king, once more stopping short and addressing Tim in that same hollow voice which indicated feelings profoundly stirred, “ your price is too high. I could invent no possible excuse for conferring such a dignity upon you. But were your views less exalted — an earldom for instance — ”

“ I will not be too hard upon your Majesty,” interrupted Tim; “ and therefore I am willing to put up with a marquisate. And surely your Majesty cannot be very fastidious upon the subject, when it is remembered that there are several dukes in the peerage who have no better nor loftier claim to the distinction than the infamous character of their

ancestresses. I allude to the titled descendants of the filthy strumpets who sold themselves to Charles II — ”

“ Enough, sir, enough,” ejaculated the king, sternly; then, in a more conciliatory tone, he added, “ Well, you shall have a marquise.”

“ Ah! Tim, I always knew you would rise in the world,” exclaimed the Amazon, in a joyous tone. Then, in a low and hurried whisper, she said, “ And you will make me a marchioness? ”

“ What does she say? What does she say? ” demanded the king, his irritability returning, and his habit of reiteration along with it.

“ Lady Lade desires me to bring this interview to an end as speedily as possible,” returned Tim, with the utmost gravity; “ inasmuch as she feels convinced it must prove painful to your Majesty.”

“ Did she say that? Did she say that? ” exclaimed the king. “ Well, well, she’s a good creature — a good creature. And now give me the papers, and you shall hear from me in a few days.”

“ Don’t be such a fool, Tim,” were the emphatic words which the huntress now whispered in her friend’s ear.

“ What does she say again? What does she say again? ” cried the monarch, his nervousness increasing.

“ Lady Lade most respectfully suggests,” answered Meagles with a low bow, “ that it would be much more business-like to exchange the papers for the patent of nobility, and thus settle the whole thing at one and the same time.”

“ Eh, what? You don’t mean to say you can’t believe my word, — my royal word? ” exclaimed the king, becoming purple in the face, and fidgeting about as if he were standing with naked feet upon hot tiles.

“ I am only afraid, may it please your Majesty,” said Meagles, with another low bow, “ that were I to deliver up the papers at present, so trifling an affair as the bestowal of a marquise might slip your Majesty’s memory in the constant hurry, bustle, and excitement of the nation’s business.”

“ Ah! I understand you, sir, I understand you,” cried the monarch, scarcely able to restrain his spite and malignity at the galling humiliation to which he was thus subjected. “ You won’t take my word, — my royal word, — eh? But

this is an insufferable insult, sir. And I am sure you don't want to insult your sovereign, sir, — insult your sovereign? Come, did you ever know me to break my word, sir? Speak — speak, man — I say. Did you ever know me to break my word?"

"Yes, and a woman's heart also," was the dauntless reply given by Tim Meagles.

"My God! this is retribution," murmured the wretched old monarch, as he staggered back and sank once more into the armchair. Then covering his face with his hands, and apparently ceasing to recollect that any one was present to observe or hear him, he exclaimed in a voice of bitter anguish, "Oh, Hannah Lightfoot! Hannah Lightfoot! thou art avenged — terribly avenged now!"

And the scalding tears trickled between the shrivelled fingers of George III.

For, oh, to the memory of this old man came back, with a whelming tide, all the incidents of his early love, — all his false vows, all his unredeemed pledges, all his flagrant perjury. Vivid and blasting, as the lightning flash, came it all back; crushing and annihilating as the thunder-stroke fell the tremendous weight of recollections upon his mind. Monarch though he were, he was compelled to feel as a man; tyrant as he was over his millions of enslaved subjects, enslaved in return was he to the merciless despotism of his own conscience. Miserable, miserable king! How little wast thou then! How insignificant in the bitterness of thy woe!

From the towering height of his lofty station and from the dizzy summit of his insatiable ambition, did he command the attention of the universe, — he who could not command a single one of all the agonizing thoughts that racked him now. He who awed the nations shrank appalled from the ghastliness of his own ideas. The man who had sought to retain the glorious gem of transatlantic power in his own regal diadem, who was even at that moment studying to roll back the portentous tide of democracy which was sweeping over France and threatening to dash its waves against the white cliffs of Albion, who kept his people enchained in iron bonds and sent forth his armies to ride rough-shod over the necks of his wronged subjects when assembling to petition for their rights, — he who did and was doing all this was now crouching, and cowering, and grovelling beneath the spectral shapes

which his own imagination conjured up. Yes, the monarch who lacerated the millions with knotted scourges now felt his own conscience whipped with scorpions; and he who had no remorse for the countless hearts which his tyranny made to weep so bitterly was now himself inwardly shedding tears of blood in the compunction of his soul for the memory of Hannah Lightfoot.

For several minutes did George III thus remain a prey to the most torturing reflections, utterly unmindful of the presence of Tim Meagles and the Amazon, who were all the while exchanging looks of satisfaction at the evident success of their projects. At length the king suddenly recollected their presence; and, ashamed of the emotions to which he had given way, his Majesty wiped away the tears from his cheeks, smothered his harrowing sensations as well as he was able, and, rising from his armchair, said, "Mr. Meagles, you shall have the marquisate as soon as the affair can be arranged."

"With a pension to enable me to support the title?" added Tim.

"Be it so," rejoined his Majesty. Then, after a few moments' deep reflection, he said, "But this matter must be managed without scandal, or rather, with as little scandal as possible. You know that you have no ostensible or apparent claims upon the Crown for any reward or recompense at all; we must therefore invent those claims. Do you understand me?"

"To some extent, Sire," answered Tim. "What does your Majesty propose?"

"I will examine the list of extinct peerages without delay," returned the king, speaking in a slow and measured tone; "and we will pitch upon some marquisate, to which you shall lay claim. The necessary documents to establish that claim can be easily prepared; and when the matter comes before the proper committee in the House of Lords, I will take care that the decision shall be rendered in your favour. This may be an affair of some months; indeed, it cannot possibly be settled until the beginning of next year, and in the meantime —"

"In the meantime the papers shall be sealed up and religiously kept from every eye," added Meagles.

"It is to your own interest to observe that condition of our

bargain," said the king. "Our interview is now at an end."

And bowing slightly, his Majesty turned abruptly away; while Tim Meagles and the Amazon withdrew, overjoyed at the complete success that had attended their second visit to the King of England.

CHAPTER IX

THE SEARCH AFTER A SON — HORROR

EARLY on the ensuing morning the court removed from London to Windsor Castle; and George III, who had exhibited symptoms of alarming restlessness and irritability from the moment of his interview with Meagles and Lady Lade, shut himself up in his own apartment under pretence of having several state documents to examine.

The unhappy monarch now experienced a deep and irresistible yearning to behold his son; not either of those sons whom his wife Queen Charlotte had borne him, but that son who had owed his existence to the amour with Hannah Lightfoot.

The reader may have seen from the terms in which Meagles explained the nature of the correspondence and other papers in his possession, that the king had all along been aware of the substitution of his own child by the beautiful Quakeress for the dead offspring of Sir William and Lady Stamford. Such was indeed the case. From the very first the monarch knew of the circumstance; but as years and years rolled on, he had thought less and less of the fact that he had an unacknowledged son in the world. Hannah Lightfoot carried the secret with her to the grave; and Sir William and Lady Stamford died also without breathing that secret to a soul. Thus when the present Sir Richard succeeded to the title and estates, it was under the impression that he really and truly was the son of the deceased baronet and his lady; and King George III, perceiving how religiously the secret had been kept, never felt the least inclination to enlighten Sir Richard upon the point.

When Sir Richard's misfortunes commenced and he was accused of the fearful crimes recorded in the previous chap-

ter of our tale, the king experienced emotions of sorrow and alarm at the predicament in which that man who was indeed really his son had become involved. But he dared not interfere; and he was compelled likewise to throw a veil over his affliction, or at least attribute it to some other cause. The newspapers of the time had represented the fact of the extraordinary resemblance which Sir Richard Stamford bore to the royal family, and the king often sighed profoundly in secret as those statements recalled so vividly to his recollection all the incidents of his early love and his amour with Hannah Lightfoot. It had been, therefore, with an unfeigned joy that his Majesty, after anxiously watching the progress of events and greedily devouring all that the public prints detailed with regard to Sir Richard Stamford,—it was with an indescribable relief, we say, that the king read at length of the baronet's complete exculpation from the monstrous charges laid against him.

And now that any circumstances connected with the amour of his earlier years was brought back more vividly than ever to the memory of the monarch, now that his interview with Meagles and Lady Letitia Lade had bared the wounds that time had failed to heal altogether, and now that the minutest associations belonging to the history and fate of Hannah Lightfoot were aroused to new life in the depth of his soul, it is not to be wondered at if the miserable monarch were led by those reminiscences and those feelings to experience a strong, a natural, and irresistible yearning at least to behold the man on whom he had stamped his image.

Persons who have offended against the laws of society or of nature are oftentimes moved by singular and irresistible impulses to revisit the scene of their iniquity, even though years and years may have passed away, or else to make atonement by anonymous means to the individuals whom they wronged in earlier days. The undetected murderer is sure to experience a hankering and longing to return to the spot where he buried his victim; and the inscrutable hand of destiny will be certain sooner or later to conduct him thither, even in spite of himself. The man who has gathered gold in the nastiest ways remembers at length the petty sums which he pilfered when a boy from his master's till; and in an anonymous letter he returns the amount, with interest and compound interest duly reckoned, and then his

conscience is satisfied. In the same manner does compunction frequently smite the hearts of men who have succeeded in what is called "defrauding the revenue;" and hence those anonymous remittances to the Chancellor of the Exchequer which are acknowledged day after day in the *Times* newspaper. Such is the wondrous texture of the human mind; and therefore it cannot be a matter for astonishment if King George III now experienced those inscrutable yearnings which prompted him to seek out his son and at least set eyes upon him once in this world, if not to reveal to his ears the tremendous secret of their close affinity.

Throughout the day following his interview with Meagles and the huntress at St. James's Palace, this inclination grew stronger and stronger in the breast of the king. It settled down into one of those invisible longings which so often take possession of the human mind, especially when in a morbid state. It assumed the character of an irresistible craving that would upset the very reason if not gratified.

Hours passed away thus, while the monarch at one time paced his apartment in a condition of fearful excitement, and at another flung himself upon a sofa and gave way to the bitterest anguish. The image of Hannah Lightfoot seemed to haunt him, to stand before him whichever way he turned his looks, to be there, in his presence, even though he shut his eyes with the thought of testing the reality of the apparition. He saw her, young and lovely as she was when he first knew her, but with a melancholy air subduing the captivating sweetness and the winning charms of her modest beauty; he saw her with her sylphlike form so full of the elegance and grace which her sectarian dress set off and did not mar; he saw her with those melting liquid eyes, so full of a mournful tenderness, and with the roses of her lips parted by the saddest smile above the strings of pearls that shone between. Yes, it was thus he saw her now, saw her only in imagination, it was true, but still saw her as plainly, and as clearly, and as visibly as if she were indeed there as a being of flesh and blood.

"Oh, do not haunt me thus, Hannah, do not haunt me thus!" exclaimed the king aloud, in the bitterness of his mental misery. "Ah! I wronged thee — my God! I wronged thee — I know that I wronged thee! But thou wilt forgive me, Hannah, thou wilt forgive me! Oh, do not look

so reproachfully upon me! I will see our son — I will assure myself that he is happy. Ah! now thou seemest to smile, Hannah; thou art pleased by that promise. Well, then, I will propitiate thy shade; thou shalt sleep tranquilly in thy tomb. Yes, I will see our son; and if he be poor, I will enrich him, if he be ambitious, I will ennoble him, if he be in sorrow, I will sympathize with him. But thou dost not require that I shall tell him who he really is? Thou dost not demand that I shall confess to him the secret of his birth? Oh, now thy looks become sombre again! Well, then, I will reveal to him even that; yes, thy shade shall be appeased, Hannah, only do not haunt me thus."

And then the image of the long dead Quakeress appeared to grow fainter and fainter, dying away in a gossamer transparency, until it seemed to mingle with the ambient air.

Then the monarch, considerably tranquillized, but having resolved to lose no time in adopting measures to search for his unacknowledged son, quitted his chamber and joined the royal family at the dinner-table. When the repast was concluded, — it being now about eight o'clock in the evening, — the king retired again to his own apartment, whither he summoned a confidential page.

"Listen attentively to what I am about to say to you," began the monarch, in a calm and deliberate voice. "You have doubtless heard of a certain Sir Richard Stamford, who possessed near Aylesbury a mansion which, as I have been told, he disposed of some months since to Lord Desborough?"

"I have not only heard of that same Sir Richard Stamford, Sire," answered the page; "but I know him well by sight. Indeed, I saw him this morning —"

"This morning!" ejaculated the king; "this morning, eh? Where did you see him, sir, where did you see him?"

"May it please your Majesty, Sir Richard Stamford dwells in the immediate vicinity of Windsor," returned the page; "and he frequently walks in the park. His extraordinary resemblance to your most gracious Majesty's son, the Prince of Wales, is the theme of conversation in Windsor."

"Do you know exactly where he lives?" demanded the monarch, after a few minutes' reflection.

"I do, Sire," was the response.

"Then lead me thither, young gentleman," said the king.

"I must see this Richard Stamford upon business of private importance. And, hark you, sir, take care that no one knows of the visit which I am about to pay him."

The page bowed submission to this command, and he and the king sallied forth from the castle by the most secret means of egress.

The distance which they had to traverse was not very great, and when they arrived within sight of the house which the page pointed out to the monarch, his Majesty bade the youth return to the castle.

A strange feeling now seized upon George III, as he paused for a moment to contemplate that dwelling which stood out, in the solitude of its site, from amidst the scene that was otherwise dimly outlined in the obscurity of the evening; and a sensation which appeared to him like a presentiment of evil gradually crept over his entire frame.

At length, summoning all his presence of mind to aid him in a course along which an irresistible power seemed to be impelling him, the monarch approached the door, at which he knocked gently. The summons was soon answered by the landlady, an old woman of respectable appearance; and, by the light which she carried in her hand, she immediately recognized the king.

"Hush!" said his Majesty, perceiving that he was known; and, entering the passage, he asked, "Is Sir Richard Stamford within?"

"Yes, Sire," returned the landlady. "But —"

"Not another word," said the king, cutting short whatever objection she was about to make. "Which is his apartment?"

"Up-stairs, may it please your Majesty," rejoined the old woman. "I will show your Majesty the way."

"No, I will go alone," he observed. "There, keep the candle for a few moments at the foot of the stairs, and don't follow me."

The landlady saw that the king was much agitated, and, with that habit of passive obedience which is engendered by the servile and degraded condition of all the humbler ranks in this wretched country, she dared not give utterance to the words that were nevertheless trembling at the tip of her tongue. For she knew that Sir Richard Stamford was not alone; and although she was unaware of the name and

high position of the lady who was wont to visit him, but who always came so closely veiled as to defy the most piercing observation to catch a glimpse of her countenance, the old woman nevertheless felt assured that her lodger and his fair companion did not wish to be disturbed, even by the visit of royalty.

But she held her peace through awe and dread of that king whom she had been taught to look upon as a being second only to the Godhead; and even with that debased and servile feeling of mingled terror and veneration was united one of gratification at the thought that her humble abode should be thus honoured by the presence of royalty. Honoured, indeed, a precious honour to have that scrofulous, sanctimonious, bloodthirsty old tyrant crossing her threshold.

However, there she stood, at the foot of the stairs, holding the candle in her hand, while the king ascended with a somewhat hasty step. On reaching the landing he opened the door that immediately faced him; but he was suddenly struck with an appalling consternation at the spectacle which met his eyes. Yet what baleful scene, what terrible aspect had paralyzed and transfixed him thus? Behold! Sir Richard Stamford was seated upon a sofa, and half-reclining in his arms was her Royal Highness the Princess Amelia.

So deeply absorbed were the tender pair in the vows and pledges of love which they were breathing in murmured tones to each other, and in the fervid caresses which they intermingled with their discourse, that they heard not the opening of the door; but all on a sudden it was closed with violence, and an ejaculation of horror blended with a poignant anguish smote simultaneously upon their ears.

They started up, and a stifled shriek burst from the lips of the Princess Amelia as her eyes encountered the ghastly looks of her royal father. Then, throwing herself at his feet, she extended her clasped hands toward him, exclaiming, "Pardon me, pardon me, beloved parent, have mercy upon me!"

"Unhappy girl!" cried the king, fearfully agitated and unable to control his words; "you know not what you have done nor whom you love, for that man is your brother."

"No, no, dear father," exclaimed the princess. "It is only a wondrous likeness which deceives you — this is Sir Richard Stamford."

"I know it — I know it," groaned the unhappy monarch; "but he is my son, — the offspring of Hannah Lightfoot —"

"Oh, horror!" exclaimed the baronet; and, sinking upon the sofa, he covered his face with his hands and gave irresistible vent to the convulsive anguish of his soul.

"Just Heaven! what mean you, father?" cried the Princess Amelia at the same moment, and she sprang from her kneeling posture like a corpse that is galvanized.

"I mean," said the king, staggering beneath the weight of a tremendous affliction and speaking in a hollow voice, "I mean that in my youth I loved and seduced a heavenly creature, and that Sir Richard Stamford —"

"Oh, say no more, say no more!" murmured the princess, tottering to a seat, on which she fell; "he is my brother — my brother — and God will avenge this incest."

"Incest! no — no — do not say that!" exclaimed the wretched king, shivering all over. "You have not been thus far culpable, Amelia? Tell me that you have not."

But the unhappy princess made no reply. Pale as marble, and with arms hanging straight down as if she had lost their use, Amelia reclined back in the chair, her eyes fixed with a vacant wildness upon the ghastly and convulsing countenance of the king.

And now this miserable monarch could no longer repress the groans and anguished sobs that bespoke all the horror of the ideas agitating in his brain, and affording so unquestionable a confirmation of the appalling truth of the tale of incest which had thus reached its crowning catastrophe.

No pen can describe the full horror of the scene; no power of language can do justice to the exquisite agony that was experienced by the baronet, the tremendous remorse and withering self-reproaches endured by the monarch, or the dumb and blank despair that had seized upon the guilty girl. Never, oh, never did the four walls of a room enclose three human beings so utterly stricken by all the most rending or annihilating feelings that the human breast can know; never was the atmosphere of a dwelling-place so laden with passionate ejaculations of bitter misery, or pierced by looks of such wild and fearful meaning. For the word incest had stricken like a moral pestilence upon two hearts that a few moments before were beating with fervid love, and had excited in a third heart all the excruciating agonies

of remorse. Hell seemed to have opened at the feet of those three beings; demons appeared to hold them in their infernal grasp; and their very souls had become bottomless pits wherein their feelings were stinging them like scorpions.

At length Sir Richard Stamford suddenly started from his seat, and, clutching the monarch violently by the arm, he said in a hollow tone, "Is all this true? Or is it a hideous dream?"

"It is true — it is true," sobbed the almost heart-broken monarch. "You are my son, and yet I dare not embrace you, after the appalling discovery that has just been made."

"No, no, you cannot embrace me — I feel that you cannot," groaned the baronet. "But you will not curse me —"

"Holy God! it is for you, Richard, to curse me!" exclaimed the king, writhing in the anguish of his spirit.

"Curse not, neither the one nor the other," cried the Princess Amelia, recalled to sense and recollection by that awful word which fell like the voice of the dead upon her ears. Then, slowly rising from her seat, and fixing upon her father's countenance a look so woebegone and so full of horror that it froze all the blood in his veins and made him feel as if some hideous destiny were impelling him on to become the executioner of his own child, she said in a voice that was tremulous but painfully clear, "Remember that there is still one sorrow and one infamy greater and more terrible than what we already know, and that is exposure before the world."

"True," ejaculated the king. "These very walls may have ears."

"Silence for a moment," said the baronet; and, noiselessly opening the door, he looked forth upon the staircase and listened. "We are safe thus far, and the dreadful secret is known but to us three," he observed, returning into the room and shutting the door. "All is quiet in the house, and besides, the worthy couple to whom it belongs are not eavesdroppers."

"The secret, then, remains with ourselves — and with our consciences," said the Princess Amelia, the accent of despair marking the latter portion of the sentence. "But what brought you hither, father? And does any one suspect or know that I have been accustomed to visit this house —"

"It was no hint or information of that kind which

brought me here to-night," interrupted the king. "Nature's yearnings prompted me to seek an interview with that son who knew not the secret of his birth, and whom perhaps I should not have acknowledged, had not the scene which burst upon my eyes evoked the dread revelation from my lips. But tell me, unhappy children, tell me, are you privately married? Has the ceremony of the Church seemed to consecrate this love of yours?"

"Ah! how could a princess of the blood royal go through such a mock form? And who would celebrate the rite?" demanded Amelia, bitterly. "No, Sire, our love has been in every way unblessed, and now it is positively accursed," she added, sinking back upon the chair and giving vent to her renewed anguish in a flood of scalding tears.

"Weep not, Amelia, weep not, I conjure you!" exclaimed the baronet, himself almost overcome with a fresh paroxysm of bitter feeling. "The past cannot be recalled, nor even expiated," he continued, in a voice convulsed with anguish; "but penitence and deep contrition may atone for somewhat of its enormity. God knows that we sinned in ignorance of these close ties of kinship."

"Come, my unhappy Amelia," said the king, "and let us return home. The prolongation of this wretched scene will only plunge us all into a deeper abyss of woe, if that be possible. Richard, I will see you again shortly, when our minds shall have become more composed."

But the miserable baronet heard not the words which his royal father thus addressed to him. With his head buried in his hands, he sat writhing and weeping upon the sofa, and when he raised his eyes again, at the expiration of a few minutes, he found himself alone.

CHAPTER X

THE MILLINER AND HER MASTER

THE scene once more shifts to Mrs. Brace's elegantly furnished little parlour at her house in Pall Mall; and between ten and eleven o'clock at night we shall find her seated in that room where she had received in her time so many distinguished visitors.

She was not alone upon the present occasion. Mr. Frederick Dray, metamorphosed into a fine gentleman, was her companion; and having just returned from a gambling-house where he had been losing a considerable sum of money, he was in a particularly bad humour. Moreover, the man had felt unwell for the last two or three days, and as it was the first time in all his life that he had suffered from indisposition, he was not very patient under the influence of the disagreeable sensations which he experienced.

The milliner herself was much altered. Her countenance was haggard and careworn, and the rouge upon her cheeks only rendered her aspect the more ghastly. Her eyes, once so fine, were sunken and hollow; their lustre had become dimmed, and the flesh was blue around them. Her figure had lost much of its glorious embonpoint; and although still stout, it no longer wore the appearance of plumpness and firmness which formerly constituted the voluptuous richness of her contours. There were still the same elegant neatness in her apparel, still the same coquetry in her Parisian cap; but the effect was no longer what it was wont to be, and the most careless eye could now perceive that those aids of an exquisite toilet which had recently set off the milliner's charms to the best advantage were now called into requisition to conceal the decay of her fading beauty.

The hue of her lips was less vivid, and although the teeth

were as fine as ever, the smile that occasionally revealed them was sickly and wan. The motions and attitudes of the milliner had lost their buxom graces and their elasticity; they were now languid and drooping. A melancholy inflection had subdued the harmonious joyousness of her voice, care was in every look, woe upon every feature, sorrow in every accent; and the buxom, gay, and wanton Mrs. Brace had become changed in the course of a short time into the fading, broken-spirited, and passionless woman.

The supper was spread upon the table, and two or three bottles of wine stood upon the buffet ready to be decanted if required, when Mr. Frederick Dray entered the room. Tossing down his hat in a corner, he flung himself into an armchair with the unmistakable self-abandonment of a man who is ill at ease alike in mind and body. Then, fixing his eyes upon Mrs. Brace, he said in a savage tone, "Well, always these mournful looks whenever I come home. What the devil does it mean?"

"I have told you over and over again, Frederick," answered the milliner, in a deep, sorrowful voice, "that I am unhappy — very unhappy, and I cannot therefore control my looks."

"Then why don't you drink champagne and drown care?" demanded Dray, brutally.

"Because when the effect goes off and the period of reaction comes," replied the woman, "I feel so miserable that I am afraid to be alone, lest I should commit suicide. This also have I told you before a dozen times, and yet you are always putting the same question to me."

"Because I hate to see you look so cursed unhappy," rejoined Dray. "Wretchedness is catching, and when you're in bad spirits like this I always begin to feel such dismal forebodings. In fact, I don't know what the devil has been the matter with me for the last three or four days; but one thing is certain, that I am deucedly out of sorts."

"Will you not take any supper?" asked the milliner, but only with a sort of mechanical formality and not with any manifestation of tender concern for her paramour's indisposition.

"No, I can't eat," he replied; "and what's worse, I seem to have got a nausea for drinking also."

"The excitement of gambling is killing you," observed Mrs. Brace, coldly.

"Ah! you say that because I have made some tolerably heavy drains upon your purse lately, or rather our purse," exclaimed Frederick; "for we are as good as man and wife, although you won't have the nutpial knot tied. But, however, that doesn't matter much, seeing that we live together just the same as if ten thousand parsons had spoken what they call the marriage blessing. Now, my dear, when I first insisted upon our entering on this pleasant and agreeable understanding together, you prated a great deal about such a step being the ruin of your establishment —"

"I told you, Frederick," interposed Mrs. Brace, with some degree of warmth, "that if you persisted in placing yourself on terms of equality with me and becoming the master of the house, the business would be injured in every way. And my words have come true. All my rich patrons have deserted the establishment in St. James's Square, and day after day the custom of the millinery department is falling off."

"Is it indeed, though?" exclaimed Dray.

"I have already assured you more than once that such is the fact," returned Mrs. Brace.

"Well, perhaps you have," said the man, now resuming his wonted manner of careless indifference; "but I don't recollect everything unpleasant you tell me. As for how the business in either establishment can fall off, I really don't understand; because none of the patrons of the accommodation house in the square could possibly have supposed that you were immaculate, especially as most of them have no doubt enjoyed your favours at one time or another; and why the fashionable demireps who used to frequent the shop and show-rooms should leave you because you now live openly with a lover instead of conducting your little amours on the sly, I can't understand either."

"If I were to explain the matter to you, Frederick," said Mrs. Brace, "you would only be offended, and then we should have one of those violent scenes to which you so readily give way and which have not been the most insignificant causes of the wretchedness that is crushing me."

"'Pon my soul I won't say an angry word if you'll explain yourself," observed the ex-footman. "Somehow or another

I feel in a humour to talk over our affairs to-night. So speak out, and don't be afraid."

"Well, then," resumed Mrs. Brace, "if I had taken a lord or a well-born gentleman to live openly with me, I should not have been deserted by one of my old friends and numerous patrons, no, nor yet by my lady customers in the millinery department. But they will never forgive me for having raised a footman from the kitchen to the parlour."

"Then curse them for all their impudence!" growled Dray, savagely.

"Ah! it is very easy to curse them," exclaimed Mrs. Brace, warming with her subject; "but curses won't replenish the till in the shop, nor put gold into my private purse, and at the rate which you are going on, we shall soon be ruined — utterly ruined. Do you know how much money — hard cash, I mean — you have had of me during the few weeks of our connection in this manner?"

"Oh, I suppose you keep an account, then?" said Dray, gloomily.

"To be sure I do," returned Mrs. Brace, "and I can tell you that between three and four thousand pounds have been lost by you at the gaming-table, in addition to the extravagant mode of living which you have introduced into the house. Things can't go on as they are, and I am therefore glad you are in a humour to talk over our affairs to-night."

"I am infernally out of sorts," said Dray, who really looked very unwell and sat uneasily in his chair, "and I suppose that it's because I am not well that I have got gloomy ideas in my head. Come, I'll forgive you for what you told me about elevating a footman from the kitchen to the parlour, and I'll reason with you tranquilly and quietly over our position and our plans. What would you advise?"

"Let us leave the country and go to America," said Mrs. Brace. "I am sick and tired of England; besides, there is the constant danger," she added, a deep gloom suddenly overspreading her countenance, "of a discovery —"

"Hush! I know what you mean, I should be a fool if I didn't," interrupted Frederick Dray. Then, with a significant look, he added, "And you know, my dear, you had some very serious thoughts of bolting off to America and

leaving me in the lurch, just after that affair of Mobbs; but I surprised you, discovered your secret intent — ”

“ Well, well, we need talk no more of that,” cried Mrs. Brace, impatiently. “ I gave you a solemn pledge to abandon that project, at least until you were disposed to fall into my views, and I have kept my word.”

“ Yes, because I threatened to blow your brains out if I caught you at any tricks again,” observed Frederick, with a renewal of his savage tone and manner.

“ Why treat me thus harshly, when we are discoursing together upon serious matters?” said Mrs. Brace, the tears trickling down her cheeks.

“ Come, come, no whimpering now,” ejaculated Dray. “ It is this cursed feeling of uneasiness which I experience all over,” he added, in a milder voice, “ which makes me cross toward you. I have got a headache, and a general unpleasant feeling throughout my body. But what were we talking about? Oh, I remember, you propose to leave England and be off to America. Well, I am not so averse to that plan as I was some weeks ago. London then appeared full of pleasures to me; but now I am surfeited with them, nauseated, almost disgusted. And since you assure me that the business is falling off — ”

“ You cannot doubt it!” ejaculated Mrs. Brace. “ Three months ago I had eleven young ladies in the establishment, and now there are but three. Rachel Forrester wanted to come back again yesterday, after the severe illness which followed her confinement; and I was compelled to refuse the poor girl’s application. All my economy does not counter-balance your wasteful expenditure; and since Harriet left, I have not engaged another lady’s-maid.”

“ Ah, poor Harriet, she has been confined, too,” observed Dray, with a heartless indifference of manner. “ Let me see, her month is nearly up, and she will be wanting to come back — ”

“ Or else to be well provided for,” added Mrs. Brace. “ Heavens! what trouble that young woman has given me! The coaxings and threats, the entreaties and menaces that I have used, the money I have given her, the difficulty I had in persuading her to leave the house ere her condition became visible — ”

“ Well well, you needn’t recapitulate all these things,

Fanny," interrupted Frederick Dray. "I am not ignorant of what you have had to contend with on that score."

"Yes, and on others likewise," added Mrs. Brace, with a tone of bitter anguish. "Surely you have not forgotten those two vile women who came some weeks ago —"

"Elizabeth Marks and Poll Price, I think they called themselves, eh?" observed the ex-footman. "Well, they asked us about Mobbs, and if it hadn't been for your cursed trembling and stammering, I should have thrown them completely off the scent."

"How absurdly you talk, Frederick," said the milliner, in a low and hollow whisper, "when you must remember that those women already knew too much, that they had heard from Mobbs sufficient to convince them that Grumley had experienced foul play beneath this roof — Nay, more," continued Mrs. Brace, horror convulsing her form and rendering her countenance hideously ghastly, "they said they could even point out the place where Grumley was interred —"

"Well, and you gave them five hundred pounds to make them hold their tongues," interrupted Frederick Dray. "Nothing was more simple: they came to extort money, they had us in their power, your fears confirmed all their suspicions, and so we were obliged to shell out."

"And think you that those women will not come back again?" asked Mrs. Brace. "I tell you that we are surrounded by a myriad dangers, that perils and perplexities of all kinds environ us, and that they will gradually close in upon us in such a manner as to render escape impossible. My God! you see, Frederick, the change that care and terror are working in me. I cannot conceal the truth from myself, I am getting prematurely old, and in a few months I shall become faded, decrepit, and gray as a woman of sixty, — I who am still in the prime of life. Let us leave England, then, ere it be too late; let us proceed to America while we have yet enough left to convey us thither and establish us in some business on our arrival. Here — in this country — we are a constant prey to the extortioner. Those women will return, depend upon it, they will return shortly, and Harriet will likewise prove a drag upon us. Say, then, Frederick, shall we fly together —"

"Give me four and twenty hours to consider upon it,

Fanny," exclaimed the ex-footman; "and most likely my decision shall be in accordance with your wishes. But this cursed uneasy feeling is growing upon me so rapidly —"

"You do indeed look very unwell," observed the milliner. "Shall I send for a doctor? Or will you go to bed and take some medicine?"

"Neither," returned Dray. "I mistrust doctors and can't bear physic. Perhaps it is the excitement of that cursed gaming-table, and a good night's rest will take it all away."

"Ah! a good night's rest," murmured the unhappy woman, with a profound sigh. "Would to Heaven that I might enjoy one! But let me offer you a glass of wine — some of your favourite champagne," she hastened to observe, perceiving that Frederick's brow grew overcast at the renewal of her melancholy musings.

"Yes, give me a glass of champagne," he said, pettishly. "I can but see what it will do for me."

The milliner rose from her seat, uncorked a bottle of Epernay, and, filling a glass, presented it while yet effervescing to her paramour. The man took it in his hand and raised it to his lips, but some indescribable feeling of nausea and loathing prompted him to repel it, and, hastily giving back the glass to Mrs. Brace, he said, in a shuddering tone, "By Heaven! I am very ill."

The milliner now once more urged upon him the necessity of going to bed, and Dray yielded to her persuasion. It was with some difficulty that he could ascend the stairs; a violent headache and an increasing sense of weakness combined not only to distract him but also to paralyze his physical energies. But when once he had laid aside his apparel and had retired to rest, he felt somewhat better. Still, however, he refused to have any professional advice or take medicine, and in a few minutes he fell asleep.

Mrs. Brace, who had assisted him in ascending to the bed-chamber, now retraced her way down-stairs to assure herself, according to custom, that the house was all safe ere she retired for the night. She dismissed the servants to their respective rooms, locked up the plate and wine, and was about to rejoin her paramour, when a low double knock at the front door fell upon her ears.

She started and shuddered all over, for the guilty con-

science is as easily ruffled by the most ordinary circumstances as the aspen by the gentlest breezes; but recovering her presence of mind she proceeded to answer the summons.

On opening the front door, she beheld by the lamplight a black youth dressed in the apparel of a page, and who immediately inquired in a soft musical voice "whether he had the pleasure of speaking to Mrs. Brace." The milliner responded in the affirmative, and the sable visitor thereupon besought a few minutes' private conversation upon a matter of some importance.

CHAPTER XI

RAO AND THE MILLINER

MRS. BRACE at once led the black page into her parlour, where the lights were still burning upon the table; and, having requested him to be seated, she could not help admiring the great beauty of his person. The symmetry of his shape was admirably set off by the livery which he wore; and there was an air of gracefulness and gentility about him which was well calculated to interest even the most callous observer. His hair was of the glossiest sable, but fine as silk; and it showered in a thousand ringlets over his sloping shoulders. His large black eyes beamed with the fires of intellect, and between the scarlet lips the teeth shone like rows of pearls.

Rao, for the reader has doubtless experienced no difficulty in recognizing Lord Florimel's sable page in the person of Mrs. Brace's visitor, — Rao, we say, seated himself in compliance with the invitation so courteously given. But whether he felt somewhat embarrassed at the earnest attention with which the milliner surveyed him from the moment she escorted him into the room, or whether it were a purely accidental circumstance, we cannot say. Sure enough, however, it was that scarcely had he taken a chair when he turned himself around in such a manner as to place his back to the candles. His looks then wandered rapidly over Mrs. Brace's countenance and entire form, and for a moment — a single moment — his dark eyes flamed with the light of malignant satisfaction. But this expression was so transitory, so evanescent, that the milliner could not have observed it, even if Rao's face had been turned toward the candles.

"Madam," he said, at length breaking silence, "I have to

apologize in the first instance for disturbing you at this unseemly hour; but I was led to believe that you are not in the habit of retiring very early, and moreover that the mention of Lord Florimel's name would guarantee me against your displeasure — ”

“ Ah! you are in the service of his lordship? ” inquired Mrs. Brace, who, from old habits and associations, felt herself suddenly cheered by the evident fact that she was not altogether forgotten by one of her best and most liberal patrons.

“ I am not only in the service, but likewise in the confidence of his lordship, ” returned Rao; “ and he has deputed me to wait upon you, madam, to assist in a somewhat difficult and certainly very romantic enterprise in which he is engaged. He moreover charged me to intimate, with all due delicacy, that your reward shall be liberal. ”

“ It is by no means necessary to give me that assurance, my pretty boy, ” said the milliner, with a more sunny smile than any that had played upon her countenance for some time past. “ Tell me how I can forward the views of my dear friend Florimel, and he shall find me as ready and anxious to serve him as ever. ”

“ No doubt, ” remarked the sable page, with a laconic dryness which for a moment struck the milliner as peculiar. “ His lordship, ” Rao hastened to observe, “ has always spoken of you, madam, in the kindest and indeed the most affectionate terms. ”

“ I am charmed to hear that I still retain your master's friendship, ” observed Mrs. Brace, now ceasing to remember the strange tone in which the curt remark of Rao had been uttered a few moments previously. “ I heard that his lordship had been absent from home for some weeks; and I was likewise informed that his lordship had suffered from severe indisposition previous to his departure. ”

“ True enough, madam, ” said Rao. “ And now, with your permission, ” he continued, “ I will give you such explanations as time and circumstances permit. ”

“ I am all attention, ” observed the milliner, forgetting for the moment her cares and troubles in the excitement of a resuscitating spirit of intrigue.

“ I must begin, madam, by informing you, ” proceeded

Rao, "that my master Lord Florimel has become desperately enamoured of a lady —"

"Do you mean Miss Pauline Clarendon?" interrupted the milliner.

"No, madam; his lordship is completely cured of that silly and romantic passion," answered Rao; "and he now loves one who possesses an ardour of temperament and a voluptuousness of disposition quite equal to his own. But the splendid creature who has thus ensnared his heart and gained a complete empire over him is a being shrouded in the deepest and most impenetrable mystery, — a mystery which, for some reasons unknown alike to my noble master and myself, must endure until after the nuptial knot shall have been tied. In plain terms, madam, this lady will not reveal either her name or her countenance until the matrimonial ceremony shall have united her to Lord Florimel by indissoluble bonds."

"What!" ejaculated the milliner, profoundly surprised; "do you mean to tell me that his lordship is in love with a lady whose features he has never seen?"

"Such is indeed the fact, madam," replied Rao, "extraordinary as it may seem. But that she is gloriously handsome, Lord Florimel is convinced; and assuredly a disagreeable countenance never could have been united by nature with such a splendid form. That her features are perfect, however, he entertains no doubt; for in the darkness and secrecy of the boudoirs of love where they have met — alike at Dover and in London — his hand has wandered over her countenance, tracing its configuration and thereby ascertaining the shape of every lineament."

"Then this lady is not a model of chastity and virtue?" said the milliner, inquiringly.

"With that, madam, you and I have no concern," answered Rao. "Suffice it for us to know that she chooses to enshroud herself in the deepest, darkest, most impenetrable mystery, until the bonds of marriage shall have made Lord Florimel her own, and then the imperious necessity which now renders her as it were a living, breathing, loving enigma will exist no longer. The veil will be torn from her countenance as well as from her rank and name, and from all that she has told my master, it appears certain that he will not have to repent of the match."

"But this is the most extraordinary romance that I ever became acquainted with," cried Mrs. Brace, in unfeigned amazement. "Surely no such infatuation was ever heard of before; and for an experienced, intelligent, worldly-minded man like Lord Florimel to have yielded to this enchantment and succumb to what after all may prove a dreadful delusion —"

"Madam," said Rao, now interrupting the milliner with some degree of impatience, "I beseech you to observe that I have not sought your presence for the purpose of discussing these affairs. My object is to learn whether you will aid in conducting them to that issue on which both the lady and my noble master are fully and unalterably agreed."

"I have already given you my assurances in that respect," answered Mrs. Brace. "Proceed, you interesting boy, and I will endeavour to forbear from any further comment upon this adventure, singular and almost incredible though it be."

"Ah! madam," exclaimed Rao, "the world is full of singular and scarcely creditable proceedings; and doubtless your experience will at once suggest many particulars and incidents only too well calculated to confirm the remark that I have just made."

"True, true!" cried Mrs. Brace, somewhat troubled for the instant by the piercing, searching, peculiar look which the black page fixed upon her; but as his eyes were almost immediately withdrawn from her countenance, the effect of that deeply penetrating gaze was as speedily forgotten. "And now, my young friend, in what manner can I assist your noble master's projects?" she inquired. "What is the nature of the service that is demanded of me?"

"To-morrow evening, madam," returned Rao, "Lord Florimel will be in London. His mysterious charmer was to have come back to the metropolis to-day, and no doubt she has fulfilled her intention in this respect. I also arrived from Dover this evening, having been admitted into the confidence of his lordship and entrusted by him with the management of the necessary preparations for the marriage."

"Ah! then the ceremony is to take place shortly?" said Mrs. Brace.

"To-morrow evening, if possible," replied Rao; "and in this house, if you have no objection."

“Certainly not,” exclaimed the milliner, who was now considerably interested in a proceeding which promised a handsome recompense. “But wherefore all this mystery — this privacy? Why should not the ceremony take place at Lord Florimel’s own mansion?”

“Simply because the world must not know that any of that extraordinary mystery and privacy has characterized the affair,” returned the sable page. “When once it is all over and the necessity for that secrecy shall have ceased to exist, Lord Florimel may bear home his splendid bride; and the fact that they are married will be sufficient for society to learn, without suffering any of the contingent circumstances to transpire. Now do you comprehend the motives for pushing the observance of the darkest mystery up to the very last instant that such mystery is absolutely necessary to the circumstances in which the lady is placed?”

“I understand your explanations well enough,” replied Mrs. Brace. “But how is it possible for Lord Florimel to espouse a lady without previously becoming acquainted with her name? The officiating clergyman must know it. It must likewise appear in the special license —”

“Not at all, madam,” interrupted Rao. “A feigned name may be used for the purpose, and the marriage is not invalidated thereby. To-morrow morning I shall procure the license for Lord Florimel, and a portion of the services required at your hands is to secure the attendance of some clergyman who in consideration of a handsome fee will do what he is told without asking any questions.”

“Yes, I am acquainted with a minister who will answer the purpose in all respects,” said Mrs. Brace, after a few moments’ reflection.

“Lord Florimel was certain that you would not be at a loss in this matter,” remarked the sable youth. “And now, madam, if you will undertake to secure the attendance of a clergyman at nine o’clock to-morrow evening, the remainder of the assistance required at your hands is comparatively nothing, for all you will have to do is to place a suite of apartments in your other house at Lord Florimel’s disposal, — I mean in your establishment that looks upon St. James’s Square —”

“Ah! I see that his lordship has been tolerably explicit with you relative to my houses and so forth,” observed Mrs.

Brace, once more smiling with the archness and gaiety of happier times.

"Yes, madam, I know all about your establishment and yourself," said Rao; and the glance which he threw upon the milliner seemed to flash with the vividness of lightning. "But enough on that head," he instantaneously added. "I think that we now understand each other relative to the business —"

But Rao suddenly stopped short, for Mrs. Brace started nervously from her seat as a ring at the street door bell met her ears.

"Excuse my absence for a few moments," she said, immediately recovering herself. "The servants are all gone to bed, and I must answer that summons —"

"Do not hurry yourself, madam, on my account," interrupted Rao.

Mrs. Brace smiled an acknowledgment of the youth's courtesy, and then hastily quitted the room.

CHAPTER XII

THE EAVESDROPPER

“ How changed is this woman — how fearfully altered! ” said the black page to himself, the instant that he was alone. “ And how nervously she started when the tinkling of the bell reached her ears. Ah! crime — crime has done all this! Yes, it is clear as daylight; guilt has changed her thus, and guilt inspires her with sudden terrors. Care alone would be incapable of producing these effects upon the person and the mind of such a woman. Oh, if I could but penetrate into her secrets also and wreak a revenge as terrible as that which will soon overtake him — ”

Then suddenly stopping short in his musings, Rao rose from his seat, glided noiselessly to the parlour door, and listened with a breathless attention.

For it had struck him that he not only heard the footsteps of several persons traversing the passage outside, but likewise that the hissing of the word “ Hush! ” had mingled with the other sounds. And therefore was it that he had suddenly become an eavesdropper; and he now distinctly heard Mrs. Brace say in a whispered tone of entreaty, “ Come into this room, and for Heaven’s sake speak not until — ”

The remainder of the sentence was lost to Rao’s ear.

“ Until you are all alone together and the door is carefully shut, I suppose? ” he however said to himself, thus finishing in imagination the earnest appeal which the milliner had addressed to the persons whom she had just admitted into the house.

But Rao suddenly returned to his seat, for his ear had caught the rustle of a silk gown and the tread of footsteps approaching the parlour door. Nor was he mistaken, for

the milliner almost immediately reappeared; and the rapid glance which the black page threw upon her showed him that she was labouring under a profound agitation, despite of all her efforts to conceal it.

"My young friend," said Mrs. Brace, in a tone penetrated with the nervousness of mingled terror and vexation, "a person has just stepped in upon some very important business, and I was thinking that if you could return in the morning —"

"Madam," interrupted the sable youth, "do not put yourself out of the way on my account. Transact your business, and I will cheerfully await your pleasure, even if it be an hour or two hours. But we must make our arrangements definitely this night, inasmuch as I shall be fully engaged to-morrow until the moment when my presence will be needed here."

"Then if you have no objection to wait a little," said Mrs. Brace, "I will rejoin you in as short a time as possible. Perhaps you will take some refreshment —"

"Nothing, I thank you, madam," said Rao. "This book," he added, as he took up a small volume of poems from a side table, "will amuse me until you return."

Mrs. Brace accordingly withdrew once more; and the instant that she had quitted the room, Rao flung down the book and glided back to his post at the door.

"Ah! I know which apartment she has entered," he said to himself; "I can tell by the direction that her footsteps took. Oh, is not every nook and corner of this accursed dwelling as familiar to me as if I had been brought up in it from my infancy? But I will be bold — I will be adventurous at all risks and at any hazards; for there is something like a presentiment which prompts me to play the eavesdropper this night."

And having thus hastily mused within himself, Rao opened the door so noiselessly that it emitted not even a sound which he could hear; and, stealthily traversing the passage, he approached the door of the apartment which he believed Mrs. Brace to have entered.

But we must now leave the sable page outside that room while we narrate what is passing within it.

The Kinchin-Grand, Carrotty Poll, and the Gallows' Widow were really the persons whom Mrs. Brace had intro-

duced thither; and we shall now behold her standing all ghastly and trembling in their presence, for she not only knew that they came for the purposes of extortion, but also that her very life was in their hands.

"Well, ma'am," said the Kinchin-Grand, the moment she returned to the apartment after arranging with Rao that he was to wait for her in the parlour, "you see that these women here insisted on my keeping 'em company; and as I was rayther anxious to have a special introduction to a lady of your fashion and quality, I wasn't sorry to have sich an opportunity of paying my respects to you."

"What do you require of me?" asked Mrs. Brace, in a hollow tone, as she bent her troubled looks first upon Elizabeth Marks and then upon Carrotty Poll, without taking any notice of their male companion.

"I suppose, ma'am, that you can understand the nature of our business," said the Big Beggarman's daughter. "We are not accustomed to make calls of ceremony and leave our cards at gentlemen's or ladies' houses; but whenever and wherever we do pay visits, it is for a particular purpose."

"Did I not recompense you handsomely some time ago?" observed Mrs. Brace, now sinking upon a seat; "and had I not a right to suppose that you would leave me unmolested in future?"

"We won't argue the point," said the Gallows' Widow, coldly; "because it is not worth while. But we will at once explain the object of our visit."

"Go on — go on," exclaimed the milliner, hastily. "The sooner I know the worst the better. But remember that my death will do you no good —"

"Who the devil seeks your death, ma'am?" demanded the Kinchin-Grand. "For my part, I hope you'll live a thousand years —"

"Cease this jabbering, Bill," interrupted the Gallows' Widow, sternly. "We brought you with us as a protection, and not to play the part of a parrot."

"A protection?" observed Mrs. Brace. "And what made you think that you stood in need of a protection? Were you fearful that I should seek to injure you?"

"Well, madam," replied the Gallows' Widow, who hated the milliner with a rancorous bitterness, and who was therefore inwardly rejoiced at being enabled to give vent to words

which she knew would cut the unhappy woman to the very soul, "since you appear to seek an explanation on that head, I don't mind telling you that Poll Price and myself were somewhat afraid to venture here alone together any more. I mean, we thought it better and more prudent to bring our young friend with us; because there have been people who've come into this house, you know, and never gone out again. In fact, as I told you on the last occasion, it is no secret to us that Peter Grumley lies buried beneath the great flagstone in the back kitchen; and we've no doubt that his partner Mobbs, who disappeared so strangely and so suddenly, isn't very far off."

"My God! my God!" moaned the wretched milliner, writhing convulsively upon her seat, while her countenance was hideous and ghastly with the most frightful workings of the features. "Wherefore recapitulate all this, young woman?"

"Because you wanted to know why me and Carrotty Poll were afraid to come alone into this house," replied the Gallows' Widow. "For it is a house of murder, madam, a house of mysterious midnight assassination — a house the very air of which fills even me with horror!"

"Enough! enough!" exclaimed the milliner, covering her countenance with her hands. "Spare me, spare me, I beseech you, and tell me the business that has brought you hither now?"

"Well, give us your attention," observed the Gallows' Widow, her cold-blooded ferocity now sated with the amount of vengeance which her words had visibly inflicted upon the unhappy Mrs. Brace.

"Proceed, proceed," exclaimed the latter; and the withdrawal of her hands from her face revealed features so stamped with all the horrors of conscious guilt, and all the excruciations of a wretchedness which 'no additional calamity could possibly enhance, that she looked like the corpse of one who had met a violent death and on whose cheeks some hand had plastered the vivid rouge in mockery.

"You must know, ma'am," continued the Gallows' Widow, "that a certain person who bears the name of Warren, and who is not altogether a stranger to you, will be tried in a few days —"

"I know it — I know it," murmured Mrs. Brace. "I have read it all in the newspapers."

"And Mr. Stephen Price, this young woman's father," continued Elizabeth Marks, pointing to her female companion, "will be tried along with him. Well, we are certain that they won't be put to death —"

"How are you so sure of that?" demanded the milliner in surprise, at the confidence with which the assertion was made.

"Oh, because he caught the prince in a trap the other night," responded the Gallows' Widow; "and we compelled him to give us a written guarantee that the men's lives shall be saved. But they will be sentenced to transportation for the rest of their lives; and as me and Poll Price intend to follow them across the water, we thought it would be as well to carry out with us as much money as we can possibly rake together. So we resolved on paying you a last visit and taxing your generosity," added Elizabeth Marks, with a slight amount of irony, "for the last time."

"And how much do you require?" demanded Mrs. Brace, who had somewhat recovered her self-possession while the Gallows' Widow was giving the preceding explanations.

"We can't very well do with less than a thousand pounds," said the Gallows' Widow; "and if you will give us that sum, depend upon it you will never hear any more from us, whatever you may chance to hear of us."

"A thousand pounds!" repeated Mrs. Brace. Then, suddenly recollecting that Frederick Dray had more than half-promised to accede to her proposal for emigration and that they might therefore leave England within a few days, she hoped to gain time by observing, "Well, I suppose I must comply with your demand; but when will you want the money?"

"Now, at once, down upon the nail; there's nothing like the prompt!" exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand.

"I have not a thousand pounds in the house," said Mrs. Brace; "nor anything near that sum. It will take me at least a week to raise it."

"And in the meantime you'll perhaps be off to America," observed the Gallows' Widow.

"What — why — what made you think so?" stammered

the milliner, all in a moment becoming dreadfully confused.

"Ah! then the random remark which I let drop has struck home?" said Elizabeth Marks. "Mrs. Brace, we shall not leave this house until you have produced the thousand pounds."

The whole of the preceding conversation had been overheard by Rao, who was posted outside the door with his ear glued to the keyhole; but he now deemed it better to retire, inasmuch as matters appeared to be drawing to a crisis, and it was probable that the milliner would have to repair to some other room in order to procure the wherewith to satisfy her extortionate visitors. Rao accordingly beat a retreat to the parlour, where he resumed his seat and took up the volume which he had declared should engage his attention during Mrs. Brace's absence.

Scarcely had he thus settled himself, when the milliner reappeared; and, having apologized for keeping him waiting so long, she opened a writing-desk, took something out of it, and then quitted the parlour once more, but with an intimation that she should return again in a few minutes. The sable page did not choose to follow her upon this occasion. He had no difficulty in understanding that, yielding to the threats of the extortioners, she had come to fetch the requisite amount from her desk to appease their rapacity; and he had already gleaned enough to place the wretched woman completely in his power.

"I knew that she was tortured by a sense of guilt and its accompanying fears," said Rao to himself, "but such guilt as that, — my God! such guilt, — who would have expected it?"

And then, with his eyes still fixed upon the volume which he held in his hand, he fell into a profound reverie, from which he was startled by the return of Mrs. Brace to the parlour.

"I have a thousand apologies to offer you, my young friend," she observed, in a voice which she vainly endeavoured to divest of the accents of deep oppression that penetrated it; "but the person who called, and who is an excellent customer of mine," she added, with a sickly attempt at a smile, "kept me talking longer than I had expected."

"Well, madam," observed Rao, without turning his head,

"I sincerely wish you a hundred of such customers, and I can assure you that I should not grow impatient while you were attending to them all."

"Thank you for your kindness," said Mrs. Brace; and as she returned to her seat, she endeavoured to conceal a sob under a short cough.

"Now, I think we have but little more to say to each other, after all," continued the black page. "You fully comprehend, madam, the services and the assistance that are required at your hands; namely, a complaisant parson who will ask no questions and even perform the marriage ceremony in the dark if needs be, and a suite of apartments in your other establishment."

"Your noble master shall be fully accommodated in every way," returned Mrs. Brace. "At nine o'clock to-morrow evening, all the arrangements shall be completed so far as I am concerned."

"Then I will not intrude longer upon your time, madam," said Rao, rising from his seat; "for it is already late."

The black page accordingly took his departure, and the milliner was left alone to reflect upon all that had occurred during the last hour.

CHAPTER XIII

PLANS AND INTRIGUES

At about eight o'clock on the following evening Rao made his appearance again at Mrs. Brace's house; and this time he carried a large bandbox in his hand. The milliner informed him that she had secured the services of a clergyman, who would be in attendance soon after nine; and Rao then requested her to conduct him to the suite of apartments which she had prepared for the reception of the bridal party. Mrs. Brace accordingly led the black page into the house which looked into St. James's Square; and, escorting him through the saloons and bedchambers upon the first and second floors, she told him that any or all of those apartments were at the service of Lord Florimel.

"Good!" observed Rao. "And now, madam, you will be kind enough to inform your domestics that they need not trouble themselves to answer any knock or ring at the front door, as I will undertake that duty myself."

"Be it so," said Mrs. Brace. "And if you require any assistance for any purpose, you can come to me in the parlour where you have already seen me."

"Your services will be needed to give away the bride, madam," said Rao; "but I will fetch you at the proper moment, or else request the clergyman to do so. Perhaps you will hold yourself in readiness about half-past nine o'clock?"

"Certainly, with much pleasure," responded the milliner.

"One word more, madam," added Rao; then, in a solemn and mysterious tone, he said, "The ceremony will take place in the dark, for reasons which I cannot explain now. But I give you this warning, in order that you may not be taken by surprise."

"I am glad that you have mentioned the subject," observed Mrs. Brace, "for it otherwise would have produced a disagreeable impression on my mind."

The milliner then quitted Rao, who, the moment he was alone, proceeded to make a close inspection of the various apartments; and, having selected those which he deemed most suitable, he took possession of a bedchamber for his own accommodation. There he opened the bandbox which he had brought with him, and taking out a white dress, a beautiful veil, and all the usual appurtenances to the complete apparel of a bride, he placed them carefully upon the bed. Then, surveying them with an indescribable earnestness, Rao murmured the monosyllables, "At last!" and an expression of mingled triumph and ferocious vindictiveness swept over his countenance.

Scarcely had his features settled down into their natural placidity, when a double knock at the front door echoed through the house; and the sable page hurried to answer the summons. The arrival was Lord Florimel, who came in a post-chaise which had brought him direct from Dover. He was unattended by any of his valets, having travelled alone in order that his movements might remain unknown and his proceedings unobserved by those whose prying curiosity he was so anxious to avoid. Rao lifted his lordship's portmanteau into the hall, paid the postilions, and dismissed the vehicle, and then escorted his noble master to a bed-chamber.

"Are all the arrangements completed, Rao?" inquired the young nobleman, who was evidently labouring under much agitation and excitement mingled with a painful nervousness.

"All, — everything, my lord," was the answer.

"Then hasten and assist me to dress, Rao," said Florimel. "The roads were dusty, and as the day was hot I was compelled to have the windows of the post-chaise open. Put me out clean linen and such apparel as becomes a bridegroom," he added, endeavouring to speak cheerfully; but the last words of his sentence were rendered tremulous with a sigh that rose from his breast and almost deepened into a sob.

"Does not your lordship feel well?" inquired Rao, in a tone expressive of an affectionate sympathy.

"Yes — no — or rather I should say that I scarcely know

how I do feel, my boy," answered the young nobleman. "It seems to me as if I were about to take a very desperate step; and now that the supreme moment draws near, I ask myself a thousand different questions in a minute, I am tortured by anxieties strangely blending with fond hopes and glowing thoughts of bliss —"

"But your lordship loves this lady whom you are about to espouse?" said Rao, looking from beneath his darkly fringed lids with a strange intentness at his noble master, though all the while affecting to be busied in arranging upon the bed the clean linen and other apparel which he was taking from the valise.

"I love her, yes, I love her, I have already told you so, boy, when I took you into my confidence," exclaimed Florimel, with all the pettishness of one who is agitated by a thousand conflicting ideas and antagonistic feelings. "And yet — and yet," he added, in a more measured tone, "I could almost have wished that it were Pauline Clarendon to whom I am about to bind myself for ever. You are certain, boy," cried the nobleman, turning with feverish abruptness toward the sable page, "that the intelligence you gave me relative to Pauline was correct?"

"I merely told your lordship what I had read in a newspaper ten days ago, when you sent me up to London from Dover in order to transact a little business for your lordship," said Rao. "On rejoining your lordship again at Dover, I deemed it my duty to inform you that I had read of Miss Clarendon's marriage in the paper —"

"Ah! enough — enough!" ejaculated Florimel, in a tone of bitterness. "I deserved to lose her. Yes, I deserved it. Nevertheless, had she remained single, had she continued to love me, and had I been assured that it was only necessary for us to meet in order to be reconciled, I do not think that my Unknown would have sustained her empire over me. But it is done — Pauline is another's," added the young nobleman, in a low musing tone; "and I may as well save my peerage and my fortune by giving my hand to this mysterious being who promises to raise me above all the perils and all the difficulties which now environ me."

Rao fixed his eyes intently upon his noble master as he thus mused in an audible tone; and again did that singular expression of triumph and vindictiveness sweep rapidly over

the features of the sable page. 'Twas but as the shadow which the wing of a bird might throw in its flight, as transitory and as evanescent, and that countenance resumed its placidity again.

Another double knock now echoed through the house, and Florimel started nervously as he exclaimed, "'Tis she!"

Rao instantaneously quitted the room and descended the stairs to open the street door. The Unknown, closely veiled, alighted from a hackney-coach, which immediately drove away. She too came unattended and alone; and in her hand she carried a large bandbox, which Rao took from her and bore into the hall. Then, without saying a single word, he conducted her up-stairs to a chamber, on the threshold of which he paused.

"If you require female attendance, madam," he said, "Mrs. Brace — the mistress of the house — will cheerfully wait upon you."

"No, I can manage by myself, Rao," returned the lady, in that musical voice which was endowed with such siren charms; and taking the bandbox from the sable page, she closed the door of the apartment.

Rao now returned to his master, who inquired anxiously if it were the Unknown that had just arrived. The response was of course in the affirmative; and Lord Florimel heaved a profound sigh, but said nothing more.

In about twenty minutes his toilet was completed, and Rao then conducted him to the saloon where the ceremony was to take place.

"You have procured the special license, boy?" said Florimel, as he flung himself upon a sofa.

"Here it is, my lord," answered the page, drawing the paper from his pocket.

"What name have you had filled in for the bride?" demanded the nobleman.

"Some fictitious one, of course, as I did not know the real one, my lord," replied Rao. "I gave the first that came into my head, but I really forget what it was at this moment —"

The page was interrupted by another knock at the front door; and, thrusting back the special license into his pocket, he hastened to answer this third summons. But as he descended the stairs, he said to himself, "The interruption

was fortunate, and now by a little good management I shall avoid any further questioning relative to this license."

Upon opening the front door, Rao beheld an elderly man whose clerical style of dress at once convinced him that this was the accommodating parson mentioned by Mrs. Brace. A certain sanctimoniousness of look and a rubicund countenance denoted the admixture of hypocrisy and dissipation which constituted the character of the man; and Rao perceived at a glance that he was in every way a suitable instrument for his purposes.

"One word with you, reverend sir," whispered the youth, as he led the clergyman into a parlour opening from the hall; then, closing the door of the room, he said, "Will you favour me with your name?"

"Tobias Colwell," was the response; "Tobias Colwell, at the service of whomsoever I have been invited hither to aid or assist —"

"Well, reverend sir," interrupted Rao, "I presume that Mrs. Brace has already given you some idea of the nature of the business for which your presence is needed?"

"To perform the marriage ceremony for a noble lord and some lady whom he loves, is it not so?" said Mr. Tobias Colwell.

"Precisely," answered Rao. "And you must be pleased to look upon me as the master of the ceremonies, having full power to regulate the same. As a proof of this, I beg to tender your reverence a fee, which shall be doubled if you implicitly and accurately follow out the instructions which I am about to give you," and the sable youth counted twenty sovereigns into the parson's hand.

"You can command my services in any way," observed Mr. Colwell, his rubicund countenance growing brighter than even the gold that he fingered with such ineffable pleasure. "Be it a marriage, a baptism, a burial, a christening, or a churching, it is all the same. I am your man."

"I was sure of it," exclaimed Rao. "And now take this special license," he continued, producing the paper. "You will see that Lord Florimel is one of the parties, and a lady whose name is also given is the other. But you must avoid any mention of the lady's name until after the knot shall have been indissolubly tied; and should it be necessary to

breathe that name during any portion of the ceremony, you must slur over it in such a manner that it may not meet Lord Florimel's ears. Do you comprehend me? And will you act precisely as I require?"

"Yes, to both questions," answered Mr. Colwell. "Anything else?"

"I see that we shall have no difficulty in coming to an understanding with each other," observed Rao. "There is one point more, which is, that the ceremony must take place in the dark."

"I have no objection," replied the reverend gentleman, who did not forget the additional fee which had been promised; "and as for the prayers, I can repeat them as well without a book as with one."

"Good!" exclaimed Rao; "and now please to attend to one more point upon which I must instruct you. Mrs. Brace has undertaken to give the bride away; but her presence is not needed until everything is in readiness for the ceremony to commence. Therefore the moment the bride enters the apartment whither you will be shortly led, you must hasten and fetch Mrs. Brace. She is already aware that the proceedings will be conducted in the mystery and depth of utter darkness, and hence there is no necessity for any further explanation on that head. Do you comprehend me?"

"It is impossible to mistake instructions so precise and intelligible," said the parson. "But assuredly this is the most mysterious affair —"

"Are you afraid of it? Do you wish to retreat?" demanded Rao, impatiently.

"What! with twenty guineas in hand, and twenty more in prospective," exclaimed Mr. Colwell. "Not I!"

"Well and good!" said Rao, in a tone of satisfaction. "And now I must request you, reverend sir, to be pleased to remain here for a few minutes. There is wine upon the sideboard."

"I see it," interrupted the clergyman, his mouth watering; "and I know that Mrs. Brace's wine is excellent. You need not, therefore, be in any hurry, as with that bottle of port I can manage to while away half an hour or so agreeably enough."

Rao now quitted the parson, and hastened back to his noble master in the drawing-room.

"The clergyman is come, my lord," said the page. "But I am instructed to convey to you an earnest prayer from the unknown lady who is about to become your lordship's bride. It is the last scene in the drama of mystery which now approaches its dénouement."

"Whatever be the lady's request, I shall of course agree to it," returned Lord Florimel.

"The bridal veil, my lord," continued Rao, "will not conceal that countenance which must be hidden until the nuptial knot shall have been tied; and, therefore, the Unknown solicits your lordship to allow the ceremony to take place in the dark. I have spoken to the clergyman upon the subject, and he is agreeable."

"Then I can assuredly offer no objection," exclaimed Lord Florimel. "But, oh, how happy shall I be when all this mystery is at an end! What can it mean? What purpose can it serve?"

"I think that I can guess, my lord," said Rao, in a deliberative tone. "The lady's vanity will be flattered by the circumstance that her winning manners, the charms of her conversation, and all the myriad blandishments which she has brought to bear upon your lordship's heart should have succeeded in maintaining their empire until the very last without the necessity of revealing to your lordship her countenance, her name, and her rank; and then she will experience all the exultation of a woman's pride in displaying to your lordship's eyes a glory of beauty such as even in your fondest hopes and your brightest dreams your imagination has never pictured."

"Think you, Rao, that these are her motives?" demanded Florimel, every vein tingling with the fervour thus excited in his whole being.

"I am sure of it, my lord," returned the sable youth. "And I must inform your lordship that I just now caught a glimpse of the lady's countenance as she opened her chamber door and stopped me as I was passing —"

"Oh, is it possible that you have seen her face, Rao?" exclaimed the young nobleman, in a perfect enthusiasm of joyous expectation, mingled with a delicious suspense.

"Yes, my lord," replied the youth. "The veil caught in the latch and was drawn aside for a moment —"

"And is she really so very, very beautiful?" demanded

Gabriel, in a tone of feverish impatience, which was however of no unpleasurable nature.

"The world has never before seen such charms, my lord," responded the page. "I was struck with wonder and amazement at the splendour of that glorious beauty of which I obtained so brief a glimpse. Ah! my lord, you will be well rewarded for your blind devotion to that superb creature!"

"Rao, you have ravished me, you have enchanted all my senses, you have steeped me in a fount of ecstatic bliss," cried the young nobleman, in a voice full of enthusiastic fervour. "Oh! hasten and let the ceremony proceed, and assure my beauteous Unknown that she has but to dictate her will in all things, to render me her willing slave."

"Then I shall extinguish the lights, my lord," said Rao, "and your lordship must consent to remain in darkness until the lady shall have completed her bridal toilet."

"Do so — do whatever you choose — whatever she ordains, Rao!" exclaimed the infatuated nobleman, rendered almost delirious with the ardour of hope and the sense of indescribable bliss.

The black page accordingly put out the candles, and the room was involved in total darkness.

"I shall now introduce the minister, my lord," observed Rao.

Thus speaking he quitted the apartment and returned to the parlour where he had left Mr. Tobias Colwell.

"Now, reverend sir," he said, "you will have the goodness to follow me to the apartment where the ceremony is to take place. Lord Florimel is there, and the lights are already extinguished. Should his lordship say a word to you relative to the marriage license, you will have the kindness to answer that you have it in your pocket, but by no means mention the lady's name figuring therein."

"I shall fulfil your instructions with all due fidelity," returned the reverend gentleman.

Rao then proceeded to escort him to the apartment where Lord Florimel was waiting with such thrilling impatience and ecstatic hope, and, having thus far perfected his arrangements and combined his plans, the sable page repaired to the chamber of the Unknown.

CHAPTER XIV

THE RIVAL

RAO knocked gently, but in a determined manner, and the mysterious lady, opening the door to a little distance, but remaining concealed behind it, said, "Is that you, boy?"

"It is, madam," was the reply; "and I must speak to you immediately."

"Has anything unpleasant occurred?" demanded the Unknown, in an agitated and nervous voice.

"No, madam, nothing new, at all events," responded Rao. "But you will permit me to enter, as it is of the utmost importance I should have a few words with you."

"But I am not half-dressed, Rao," said the lady, in a tremulous whisper.

"It matters not, madam," was the resolute rejoinder; "my business admits of no delay."

"Wait one instant, then," answered the Unknown, and she closed the door.

In about a minute she opened it again, and Rao passed into the chamber, carefully shutting the door behind him.

The Unknown, who had now nearly completed her toilet, appeared before him closely veiled and with a shawl thrown negligently over her shoulders, but scarcely concealing the full and swelling globes which gave such rich luxuriance to her splendid bust.

"Now, madam," said Rao, speaking with an accent of firm decision and casting upon the lady a look that seemed to penetrate her veil and which carried a troubled sensation into the very inmost recesses of her soul, "we have not many minutes to converse, and not a moment to waste in exposition, recrimination, or explanation."

"What mean you, good youth?" asked the Unknown, her musical voice vibrating like the chord of a harp during the few moments that follow immediately after the player's finger has been withdrawn.

"I mean, madam," replied Rao, his looks becoming more and more mysteriously alarming, "that I am here to dictate certain terms, and to prove to you that I have the power of enforcing obedience."

"Ah! is it possible that you meditate treachery, Rao?" exclaimed the Unknown, now trembling visibly from head to foot, and clasping her fair hands entreatingly.

"I am about to behold the consummation of the plans which I have cherished for weeks past, and for which your conduct toward Lord Florimel not only furnished the idea but also the means of carrying it into execution. Madam," added Rao, in a voice of mingled solemnity and imperiousness, "you must abandon all hope of espousing him whom you love so madly, so passionately, so insanelly."

"My God! abandon the only hope of happiness!" cried the lady, in a voice of bitter lamentation. "No, no; it cannot be, Rao, it cannot be! You are jesting, you would not be so cruel. Besides, by what right do you interfere? And what power do you presume to exercise over me?"

"My right, madam, is that of vengeance," was the response, deeply accentuated; "and my power consists in knowing who you are and being able to tear away the veil that conceals your lascivious life beneath the imposture of a tremendous hypocrisy."

"O God! is it possible?" murmured the lady, sinking down upon a chair in a state of utter annihilation.

"And now, madam," continued the implacable Rao, "you will have the kindness to remain a prisoner in this room until after the ceremony, when you will be at liberty to depart. And as for your secret, I promise that it shall be safe, even with regard to Lord Florimel himself."

"The ceremony, you say?" exclaimed the Unknown, springing wildly from her seat, and Rao could observe the rapid heavings and fallings of the lady's bosom. "But how is the ceremony to take place, if I am excluded? Is there a rival? Has Pauline Clarendon regained her influence —"

"There is a rival, madam, but it is not she whose name you have just mentioned," answered Rao.

"Then who is she, boy?" demanded the Unknown, fearfully excited with a thousand maddening, conflicting, wildering emotions and ideas. "Speak! who is she?"

"I!" ejaculated the page; and, tearing open the closely buttoned frock coat at the same instant, the mysterious being revealed the white bosom of a female.

"Heavens! what does this mean?" cried the Unknown, amazement now absorbing all other feelings. "Who are you? Wherefore this disguise? Why that dark hue upon the face and hands?"

"The tale is too long to tell, even if I were inclined to narrate it," said the young woman. "Suffice it for me to observe that in becoming the wife of Lord Florimel, as I assuredly shall within the next half-hour, I am but wreaking a long cherished vengeance."

"This is horrible, detestable, and shall not be," exclaimed the Unknown, with accents of desperation. "Whatever be the risk —"

"You will not run it!" cried Rao. "Hark, madam, a word in your ear! Let me tell you who you are —"

And the disguised female, whom we must still call Rao for the present, whispered something in a low tone.

"Yes — yes — you know me!" exclaimed the siren charmer, in a voice of bitter vexation and her whole form trembling with rage and disappointment. "But I defy your threats — I defy you to prove aught of that lascivious life to which you alluded. Woman, whoever you may be, I accept you as a rival, and again do I defy you!" added the Unknown, goaded to desperation.

"Ah! madam, or rather, my lady," said Rao, in a voice of mingled mockery and triumph, "you will not repeat your defiance, when I tell you that the boudoir of love, of darkness, and of mystery is no secret to me. For I have been there, — yes, been there, when you clasped the infatuated young nobleman in your arms and made him the partner of your frantic pleasures."

"No, no, 'tis false! 'Tis an invention, a calumny, — a foul calumny on your part!" cried the Unknown, quivering with emotions of terrible rage, and maddening shame, and burning hatred.

"'Tis true, my lady, 'tis true!" cried Rao. Then, drawing forth something from her pocket, the disguised female said,

"This piece of drapery matches with that in the boudoir of love and mystery."

"Ah! I am ruined — I am crushed — I am undone!" moaned the wretched woman whose secret deeds had thus so unaccountably come to the knowledge of a stranger. "But you will not expose me — you will not hold me up to the shame, and scorn, and indignation of the world —"

"No; such is not my intention, nor does it in any way suit my interests to injure you by such means," replied Rao. "Your ladyship may rest assured and tranquillize yourself on that head. But my time is precious and I have only now to ask whether your ladyship will remain quietly here until I choose to release you?"

"There is no alternative," murmured the wretched Unknown, falling upon a seat and wringing her hands in all the bitterness of an indescribable anguish.

But Rao, remorseless and implacable, heeded not her grief; and, hastening from the room, the mysterious being closed and locked the door, taking the key away with her.

She then hurried to the chamber which she had appropriated to her own use; and taking a small phial from her pocket, she poured its contents into a basin of water. Then stripping off her page's raiment, she washed her face, neck, and hands with the water containing the chemical fluid; and the flesh which was previously of a sable dye became white, or rather of a natural brunette complexion. Pure, clear, and beautiful was this complexion now; and upon the cheeks was enough of the carnation's tint to enhance the charming aspect of the lovely being who had so long concealed her European fairness beneath the artificial semblance of an Oriental skin.

And now, having cast a look of mingled joy and triumph into the mirror which reflected the lovely countenance of the brunette, she proceeded with marvellous haste to don the bridal raiment that she had prepared. The hair, of such silken fineness, was speedily arranged in the manner becoming her sex; then silk stockings and satin shoes displaced the boots that had hitherto imprisoned the well-shaped legs and concealed the admirable symmetry of the ankles; and when she had put on the white nuptial robe, she placed a wreath of white roses on her hair and threw the snowy veil over her head.



"SHE PROCEEDED TO DON THE BRIDAL DRESS."
Original etching by Marcel.

The scene of Raol's matches with that in the boudoir

"I am crushed — I am undone!"

she murmured, whose secret deeds had thus

been made known to the knowledge of a stranger.

"You will not hold me up to

contempt and indignation of the world —"

she said, nor does it in any way

injure me by such means," replied Raol.

"I will be quiet and tranquillize myself

as best I can, for my life is precious and I have only now

to live — I will remain quietly here until

you return."

she murmured the wretched

girl, wringing her hands in all

anguish.

She then, however, heeded not her

words, fastening upon the room, the mysterious being

locked the door, taking the key away with her.

She then passed to the chamber which she had appropri-

ated, and taking a small phial from her

table, she poured the contents into the lady's basin of water. Then

she dipped her handkerchief in the water, and washed her face, neck,

and arms, and then she dried herself with a towel.

Her complexion became

more beautiful than ever. Pure,

and glowing with the carnation's tint to enhance the

charming aspect of the lively being who had so long concealed

her face behind the artificial semblance of

an Ethiopian.

She then, with a look of joy and triumph

in her eyes, proceeded to the wardrobe, and, with the

utmost haste, to find the

bridal dress. The hair of such

was dressed in the manner becom-

ing to the occasion, and satin shoes

of the most beautiful quality adorned her feet.

She then proceeded to the wardrobe, and, with the

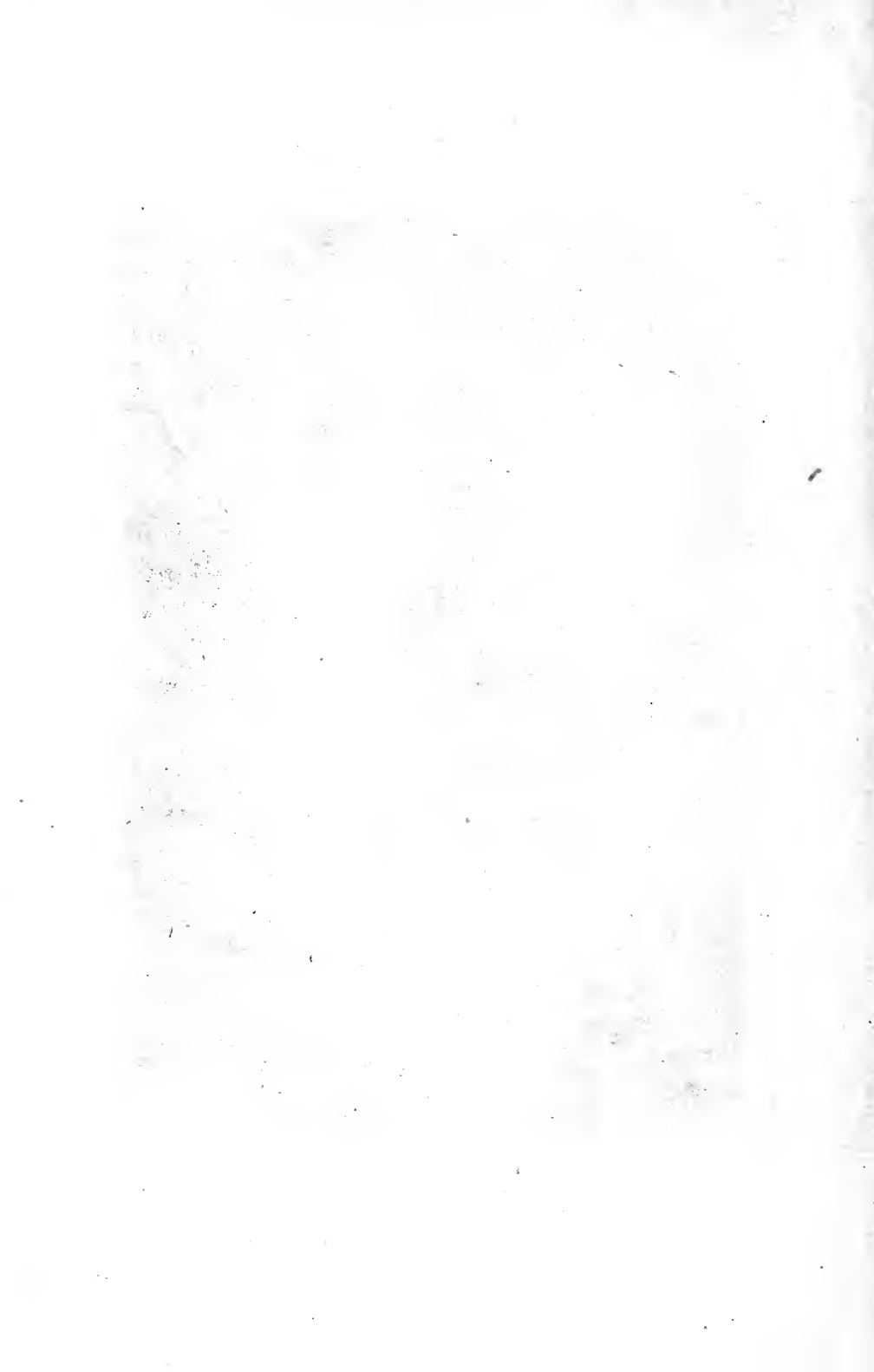
utmost haste, to find the

bridal dress. She then, with a look of joy and triumph

"SHE PROCEEDED TO DON THE BRIDAL DRESS" placed

Original etching by Marcel. the snowy





Never was marriage toilet performed with such expedition, and yet not a sign of this precipitation was visible in her appearance when the process was completed. Charming she was, and charming she looked, save, perhaps, that there was a slight air of masculine decision and Amazonian firmness in her looks, which somewhat marred the soft sensibility and winning grace peculiar to her sex.

And now, with rapid footsteps she glided along the passage to the stairs, which she descended with equal speed; and, after pausing for a moment at the door of the saloon, as if to summon all her presence of mind and courage for the final scene, she passed into the room.

The interior was pitch dark, but the rustling of her dress following immediately upon the opening and shutting of the door made Florimel aware of the presence of the bride, and he hurried to meet her. Their hands met, and he retained hers in his grasp, as he whispered in a tone of profound tenderness, "A few minutes more, and you will be mine."

"Yes, my well-beloved Gabriel," she murmured, in a voice so low that he could not possibly observe in it anything different from that of the Unknown.

"Now, reverend sir," exclaimed Gabriel, leading his fair companion toward the vicinage of the table, where he had previously noticed that footstools were placed, "be pleased to hasten and fetch Mrs. Brace, since you have told me that she has consented to bestow my bride upon me."

But the clergyman, in pursuance of the instructions so precisely given to him by Rao, was already hurrying to leave the room as Florimel thus spoke; and the nobleman was now left alone with her who had so strangely and adventurously usurped the place of the siren charmer.

The circumstances in which Rao now found herself suddenly placed were awkward to a degree. She had nevertheless foreseen them, and was prepared how to act; for dangerous as her position now was, and immense as she knew the risk of detection now to be, it was impossible for her to have avoided this dilemma by any other mode of directing the progress of her deeply ramified intrigue.

But of what nature was the peril which now menaced her with discovery and the consequent explosion of her scheme? The reader will remember that the Unknown was tall and endowed with charms voluptuously luxuriant

and full, whereas Rao was short in stature and slightly formed. If, then, Lord Florimel should seize her in his arms or otherwise attempt to caress her during the temporary absence of the clergyman, he could scarcely help discovering the cheat that was being practised upon him. Nor was this all; for should Rao be compelled to speak at any great length, there was the additional chance of her voice betraying the fact that she was not the siren unknown.

Therefore, the instant that the clergyman had quitted the room, Rao said in a hasty whisper, "I have forgotten something; excuse me one moment, dearest Gabriel!" and, abandoning his hand, she sped to the door. This she opened, made her dress rustle, as if she were passing out, and then closed the door again. But she did not leave the apartment at all; on the contrary, she stood motionless and breathless as a statue in the close vicinity of that door.

"Adorable creature!" exclaimed Florimel, the instant he fancied that he was alone, "how ardently I long to gaze upon that countenance which Rao assures me is so gloriously handsome. But I was always convinced that thou art of a rare beauty; I never doubted that thy features were as faultless as thy form is superb. And now, oh, now the moment approaches for elucidating all that is dark and mysterious in thee! I shall behold thy countenance and learn thy name; thy rank and position will be revealed to me, and from all thou hast at different times told me, I need not fear that the alliance will be one for which I shall have to blush. Oh, what an empire hast thou gained over my heart, inscrutable, incomprehensible! Thou more than woman — thou goddess of a myriad fascinations — who canst thou be? And whence dost thou derive the power of saving my peerage and my fortunes from the grasp of the claimant that has sprung up? But in a few minutes I shall know all this; and there is an Elysian ecstasy in the very suspense that I now feel, — a blissful charm in the uncertainty that envelops me as profoundly as does the darkness of this room."

Thus mused aloud the enthusiastic and infatuated young nobleman, until the door suddenly opened and the clergyman reëntered, escorting Mrs. Brace. Almost immediately afterward Rao opened the door again, made her muslin robe rustle, and then closed the door promptly, so that the effect pro-

duced was really just the same as if she had actually returned to the apartment.

Again was Lord Florimel by her side in a moment, and again was her hand locked in his own. With hasty steps they felt their way back to the vicinage of the table, where they knelt down upon the footstools.

The ceremony then commenced immediately; and there — in the midst of the utter darkness which prevailed — did the accommodating clergyman begin to recite the service for this most strange, most mysterious, and most romantic marriage.

CHAPTER XV

THE INVALID

WE must now return to Frederick Dray, who, as the reader will recollect, was labouring under a severe indisposition when he retired to rest on the preceding night. He had slept with his wonted soundness until a late hour in the morning; and his first feelings, on awaking, were such as to induce him to believe that his illness had passed away. He however resolved to take his breakfast in bed; and Mrs. Brace accordingly carried it up to him as soon as she had prepared it.

But the moment he placed the tea-cup to his lips, he experienced such a sudden nausea and sickness at the stomach, attended by an equally abrupt access of headache, that he was compelled to decline taking any refreshment; and imagining that he had either eaten something which had disagreed with him, or that it was a bilious attack under which he was suffering, he consented to allow the milliner to procure some medicine. This he took, and he likewise determined to remain in bed the whole day.

The milliner duly recounted to him all that had occurred on the previous evening, — how the extortioners had paid another visit to her house and compelled her to give them a thousand pounds, and how Lord Florimel's page had called for the purpose of making those arrangements with which the reader is already acquainted, and which Mrs. Brace succinctly explained to her paramour. The visit of the Kinchin-Grand and his two female companions irritated and annoyed Frederick Dray to a much greater degree than the purpose of Rao's call pleased him on the other hand, inasmuch as the latter business did not promise to be so productive as the former one had proved detrimental to the state of the milliner's finances. His vexation was therefore only mitigated

and not altogether appeased by the Florimel affair; and throughout the day he continued to toss about uneasily in his bed, a prey to a mental irritability which appeared to aggravate his physical indisposition. Toward evening, however, he grew somewhat more calm, and at length sank off into a profound slumber, — a circumstance which permitted Mrs. Brace ample leisure to make the arrangements agreed upon between herself and Rao.

When Frederick Dray awoke again, he found a light burning on a table by his bedside. He called for the milliner, but no one answered him. He raised himself in the couch, and fell back on the pillow, under the influence of the most torturing sensations. The nausea in the stomach was now intolerable to a degree, his head ached with a positive violence, and a general feeling of uneasiness pervaded his whole system. He experienced a burning thirst; and, reaching out his hand, he filled a tumbler with toast and water which had been placed upon the night table. But so dreadfully did his heart appear to heave against the cooling beverage, that scarcely had he placed it to his lips when an irresistible impulse prompted him to fling away the glass from his hand, as if a sudden spasm had shaken his arm with a violent convulsion.

“What the deuce can be the matter with me?” he murmured in a ferocious tone to himself, shuddering all over at the same time, though without knowing why, and indeed without as yet entertaining the slightest suspicion of the awful truth.

The thirst which he experienced was now intolerable; but he loathed the idea of making another attempt to stay it with the toast and water. It struck him that some tea would now do him good, and he likewise fancied that he ought to take a little sustenance. For he had eaten nothing the entire day, and he reasoned himself into the belief that the nausea which he felt at the stomach was nothing more than faintness for want of food.

He called out again for the milliner; but no answer was returned. He reached the bell-rope, and it happened that the impatient jerk which he gave the cord detached it from the wire without ringing the bell.

“Perdition!” he exclaimed, now actually foaming at the mouth with rage. “Am I to be left here to perish like a dog?”

Then all in a moment the thought flashed to his mind that Mrs. Brace, taking advantage of his illness, had abandoned him and fled from the metropolis.

"Yes, by Heaven! it must be so," he cried aloud, in a savage tone, and with a sort of subdued howl like that of a wild beast. "She has long had a hankering to bolt to America, and I remember that last night she talked a good deal about it. Perhaps, after all, those stories concerning the Gallows' Widow's party and the visit of Lord Florimel's page were only pure inventions, damnable lies, in fact, to throw me the more completely off my guard and make me think that in the first place her finances were utterly beggared, and in the second place that she had plenty of business on hand at the moment to occupy her attention. Yes, yes, I see it all. The wretch has bolted. And who knows," added Frederick Dray, another strong spasm shaking his entire form with convulsive violence, "that she has not poisoned me? By Heaven! I feel as if I was poisoned. This nausea, this headache, these uneasy sensations — Oh, the vile woman, she has poisoned me!"

Then, after arriving at this horrible conclusion, the unhappy man lay motionless and silent for several minutes, pondering on the presumed treachery of his paramour and what he believed to be his own hopeless condition. But, suddenly raising himself up in the bed, he resolved, if possible, to ascertain the worst; and, staggering forth from the couch, he with pain and difficulty drew on some clothing. Then, enveloping himself in a dressing-gown, he took the light in his hand and quitted the room.

Sustaining himself by the balusters, he slowly descended the stairs, his feet appearing to be as heavy as lead and all his veins tingling with uneasy sensations. The nausea at the stomach still continued, and the violence of the headache was unabated. Several times he thought he must sink down on the steps, or fall headlong; but he clung to the railings with one hand while he held the candle in the other; and in this manner he at length succeeded in gaining the bottom of the stairs.

Entering the parlour where Mrs. Brace was accustomed to sit, he found the wax candles burning upon the table, her work-box open, and a glass with some wine in it standing near. His fears that she had abandoned the house were therefore

dissipated in a moment; but the impression that she had poisoned him still remained fixed upon his mind.

Ringing the bell furiously, he asked the servant who responded to the summons where the milliner was. The domestic replied that Mrs. Brace had passed only a minute or two previously into the adjoining house.

"Very well. You may retire," exclaimed Frederick, savagely; and as soon as the servant had hurried off, amazed and frightened at the invalid's brutal manner and ghastly appearance, Dray muttered to himself, "I'll seek her out and accuse her of poisoning me, though all the lords and bridal parties in the universe have met together this night beneath our roof."

And half-maddened with the most torturing sensations of mind and body, the wretched man proceeded as quickly as he was able into the more private part of the spacious establishment. The hall was deserted, — the usual attendant there having been relieved from his post on the present occasion in pursuance of the instructions given by Rao to Mrs. Brace; and without encountering a soul, did Frederick Dray drag himself up the handsome staircase.

On reaching the landing he made straight for the best drawing-room, where he expected to find Mrs. Brace and the bridal party; and it was just after the commencement of the marriage ceremony as described at the close of the preceding chapter, that the door was suddenly burst open, a light streamed into the saloon, until that moment involved in such utter darkness, and the ghastly form of Frederick Dray, enveloped in the dressing-gown, appeared upon the threshold.

A shriek burst from the lips of the bride, an ejaculation of anger from those of the bridegroom. The parson stopped short, and Mrs. Brace was struck speechless and motionless with dismay, her eyes fixed on the spectral-like form of her paramour.

But at the next moment a louder and wilder exclamation thrilled from the tongue of Lord Florimel, as his looks fell upon the person of the bride. For he saw at a glance that it was not his Unknown, — that she was shorter and thinner; and tearing away the veil from her countenance, he started back in mingled amazement and affright as he instantaneously recognized the countenance of Caroline Walters.

It is impossible to describe the scene of confusion which followed. Mrs. Brace, who was likewise struck by this sudden revelation of the features of the young woman, was seized with a panic terror, and, throwing herself upon a sofa, she fainted. The Reverend Tobias Colwell, fearing that Lord Florimel had discovered some treachery and fancying that he should be punished as an accomplice, stole away from the room and beat a hurried retreat, while Frederick Dray advanced into the apartment, holding the candle in his hand, and flinging wildly inquiring looks upon the milliner, the nobleman, and Caroline Walters.

"Good Heavens! I comprehend it all!" cried the enraged Florimel, seizing the young woman violently by the wrist. "Fool that I have been! dolt, idiot, maniac, not to have seen through the cheat ere now! Ah! and was it thus to ensnare me into a marriage with you, Caroline, that you assumed the guise of a black page? And was that mysterious Unknown nothing more or less than your accomplice? Or was it some deeper vengeance still which you meditated? Speak, tell me, confess everything. But, ah, a thought strikes me," he exclaimed, his whole form quivering with the fury that filled his breast. "My papers — my documents — my valuable title-deeds — 'twas you who stole them!"

"And if I took a few paltry sheets of parchment from you, my lord," said Caroline, in a cold, contemptuous tone, as she fixed her dark eyes intently upon him, "what was that theft in comparison with the foul robbery which you perpetrated in regard to me?"

"A robbery in regard to you!" cried Florimel, with blended amazement and indignation.

"Yes, you robbed me of my honour and of my happiness, my lord," returned Caroline. "You filched away my heart and trampled it underfoot. You won my love and made it a curse to me instead of a blessing. Ah! my lord, you have been guilty of a flagrant infamy toward one who would have died for you; but I will yet be terribly avenged."

And as these words fell from her lips, she turned away so suddenly and sped from the room with such a spirit-like celerity, that the door closed behind her ere Florimel had even time to advance a pace in pursuit or extend an arm to hold her back. He rushed after her; but as his fingers

touched the handle of the door, he heard the key turning in the lock, and he found that he was a prisoner.

What could this mean? What aim had Caroline Walters now in view? What further treachery was she meditating? These questions, rapid as thought alone can be, suggested themselves in a moment; but the answers were beyond all power of conjecture. Florimel stamped his foot with rage; and, turning away from the door, he beheld Mrs. Brace gasping with the pain of returning consciousness as she lay stretched upon the sofa, while Frederick Dray, still holding the candle in his hand, was contemplating her with an expression of such intense hatred and savage ferocity that the young nobleman gave utterance to an ejaculation of mingled affright and horror.

Frederick started at the cry, — started as if he had forgotten the presence of a third person altogether and was only that instant reminded of the fact. Then, as his features became all in a moment convulsed with terrible and ghastly workings, he dropped the light, the room suddenly became involved in total darkness, and a hideous growling like that of a dog fell horribly upon the ears of the young nobleman and Mrs. Brace.

In the meantime Caroline Walters, having locked the door of the saloon in the manner already described, hastened with lightning speed to the chamber where she had made the Unknown a captive. Opening the door, she burst in, exclaiming, "Fly, my lady, fly, if you wish to escape detection!"

"What has occurred? And what peril threatens me?" demanded the mysterious siren charmer who had resumed the apparel which she wore when arriving in the hackney-coach. "Oh, you have not been base enough to betray me?"

"No — no!" ejaculated Caroline, impatiently. "But my plot has failed, — failed at the very instant of success. Another moment and I should have been his wife. At a future time, however, I will explain all this, but for the present let me conjure you to fly if you wish to escape discovery and exposure."

"Thanks, young woman, for your advice," said the Unknown; and without tarrying an instant to exchange another word, or even to take the bandbox in which she had

replaced the bridal dress that was not needed after all, she fled precipitately down-stairs and rushed from the house.

Having thus frightened the Unknown away, so as to prevent her from meeting Lord Florimel again, at least for the present, Caroline Walters sped to the chamber which she had appropriated to her own use; and, stripping off the wedding-dress, — literally tearing it in pieces from her person, in her impatience to be gone, — she resumed the page's livery. But she had no time to colour her face and hands again with the sable dye, even if such a process were any longer deemed necessary; and, congratulating herself on having been able to change her apparel ere the prisoners broke loose from the saloon in which she had confined them, she took her hurried departure.

CHAPTER XVI

A FRIGHTFUL TRAGEDY

MEANTIME a horrible scene was occurring in the room where Florimel, Mrs. Brace, and Frederick Dray had remained together. For immediately upon the extinguishing of the candle as it fell on the carpet, a hideous sound, resembling the savage growling and barking of a dog, burst from the throat of Frederick Dray, and throwing himself upon the floor, he began to rage, and toss, and writhe in fearful convulsions.

"Who is the man? And what is the matter with him?" cried Lord Florimel, horror-stricken at the dreadful scene which was thus taking place in the dark, and yet feeling ashamed to suffer the milliner to suspect that he was really alarmed.

"O God! what ails him? He has gone mad — raving mad!" exclaimed the miserable woman, not heeding the young nobleman's queries; and, groping her way to the bell-pull, she plucked at it with such violence that it snapped asunder.

"You have broken the cord?" cried Florimel, feverishly anxious to escape from a position which was by no means agreeable, and from a scene the horrors of which were aggravated by the darkness.

"Yes, but I have found the other," exclaimed Mrs. Brace, as she pulled the second bell with a little more caution. "Oh, Heavens! what is the matter with Frederick? He is mad — he is mad — and he will betray all our secrets in his delirious ravings!"

"In good faith," said Florimel, now somewhat recovering his composure as the first effect of the sudden tremor was passing away, "I care but little what the fellow can reveal,

so far as I am concerned. But it seems to me, madam, that you must have been a party to the trick which was ere now so recently carried to a successful issue in regard to myself?"

"No, no, my lord, I protest that I am innocent in that respect," exclaimed the wretched milliner. "Oh, horror! how he raves, how he writhes, how terribly he is convulsed! But you must not accuse me, Florimel, you must not accuse me of treachery toward you. I was deceived as well as yourself —"

"I would rather think so, after all our former friendship," interrupted the nobleman. "But in God's name ring the bell again, or I will endeavour to burst open the door —"

At that instant footsteps were heard hastily ascending the stairs, the door was thrown open, and a couple of the milliner's servants burst into the room. They had been alarmed by the violent pealing of the bell which rang down in the kitchen; and hence the coming of two footmen at the same time to answer the summons.

Lights were speedily procured, and then the appalling condition of Frederick Dray confirmed all the horrible ideas which the nobleman and Mrs. Brace had previously conceived of the agonizing nature of the throes that were convulsing him. His eyes glistened with an unnatural lustre, his countenance was ghastly, his features were distorted, all the muscles of his throat seemed painfully distended, and strong spasms, shooting every instant through his entire form, made him writhe, and tremble, and shudder in awful agonies.

"This spectacle is more than I can endure," exclaimed Florimel, dreadfully shocked and profoundly alarmed at a sight which he could not understand; and, hastening from the room, he quitted the house.

Mrs. Brace scarcely noticed his abrupt departure so fevered was her impatience to get Dray removed at once to a bedchamber in order that she might dismiss the footmen from further attendance on the occasion. For when that paroxysm of anguished gaspings and spasmodic convulsions in the throat subsided for a few moments at intervals, the wretched sufferer gave vent to the wildest language and the most insane ravings, mingled with sounds that resembled the barking of a dog; and Mrs. Brace was tortured with excruciating apprehensions lest in his delirious outpourings

he should betray the tremendous secret of the murders that the flagstone in the back kitchen had hitherto so well concealed.

She accordingly hurried the footmen to raise the demoniac — for such he indeed appeared — from the carpet whereon he lay writhing in awful convulsions; and with much difficulty did they carry him to the nearest bedchamber. There Mrs. Brace bade them leave him to her charge, as she would take the necessary care of him; but as she gave no instructions relative to the propriety of obtaining medical assistance, one of the footmen inquired whether he should not do well to fetch the doctor. The milliner dared not reply in the negative to such a demand and under such circumstances. The response was accordingly given in the affirmative, and the two lackeys left her alone with her rabid paramour.

He now became somewhat more tranquil, so that she was enabled to divest him of his apparel and get him into bed. Then, as a burning thirst seemed to be oppressing him, she filled a tumbler with water and presented it to his lips. But, with a hideous yell and with an awful convulsing of the whole frame, he recoiled from the mere sight of the limpid beverage; and the next moment, in a sudden paroxysm of fury, he dashed the glass from the milliner's hand.

The spectacle which the wretched sufferer now presented for some minutes was awful in the extreme. Frightful spasms in the throat appeared to menace him with strangulation, and he writhed with all the convulsive elasticity of a stricken serpent. His eyes glared, his tongue lolled out, and a white foam stood upon his upper lip. Then there was a brief interval of furious delirium, under the influence of which the miserable man besought the milliner in most piteous terms not to murder him and bury his corpse beneath the stone.

Mrs. Brace wrung her hands in desperate anguish. What was she to do? What would be the issue of all this? The thought that she would procure a deadly poison and administer it flashed across her brain; but the next moment she remembered that the doctor had been sent for, and he would not fail to discover the cause of the man's death. She dared not, therefore, murder him, although she longed to do so; and now she cursed herself for having allowed him to live up to the present time.

Wildly she cast around her eyes, as if in search of something that should offer a suggestion how to act in this cruel, this torturing emergency. But no inspiration did she derive from the fevered glance which she thus flung about on all sides. Her bewilderment and perplexity increased every moment. She dared not kill him, and yet she dared not let him live. If she murdered him, the deed was sure to be discovered; if she spared him, he would reveal in his ravings enough to send her to the scaffold. With either alternative her own fate appeared to be sealed. God's revenge against murder now seemed to be approaching with inevitable certainty; her crimes were on the verge of exposure and of punishment. Fate was building up a wall of adamant around her; she could see it rising slowly, slowly, but surely, surely, on every side, as if it were a sepulchre that was closing in upon her.

Oh! no human language can depict the torture which the wretched woman now endured for the space of ten long minutes; no power of description can convey an idea of the excruciating agony which rent her mind as she was forced to look her position in the face. There lay her paramour, writhing in hideous convulsions, like one possessed of a devil; and there stood she, with the ghastly pallor of her cheeks appearing through a rouge which, though so artistically laid on, now appeared to be nought save a mere plaster of dullest red.

At length Frederick Dray grew calmer; but though his ravings sank into low mutterings and his convulsions subsided into a nervous restlessness, he did not seem to recover the full use of his intellect. On the contrary, his brain appeared to be wandering; and his eyes glared wildly upon the countenance of Mrs. Brace as she seated herself by the side of the couch. He did not altogether recognize her, that is to say, he had no distinct idea who she was; but he contemplated her with mingled aversion, terror, and mistrust.

He was in this condition when the door opened gently, and a domestic introduced the medical man who was in the habit of attending upon Mrs. Brace and the inmates of her establishment. As he approached the bed, the invalid's excitement was revived; and the couch shook and creaked beneath his convulsing form. Then, on the doctor's taking

his hand and feeling his pulse, he shuddered and trembled like a spaniel that fears a whipping, and all the time he surveyed the medical man with a fixed look of ferocity and apprehension.

Having felt his pulse, the doctor stepped aside a few paces so as to allow the curtains of the bed to conceal him from the view of the invalid; and beckoning Mrs. Brace toward him, he put several questions to her in a low whispering voice. She explained as well as she was able the symptoms that she had observed; and when the doctor had thus gleaned from her all that she could tell him upon the subject, he said, "Do you know whether this person has ever experienced any hurt or injury of a peculiar character?"

"Not that I am aware of," returned the milliner.

"Does he keep a dog of any kind?" asked the medical man.

"Oh, no," replied Mrs. Brace. "On the contrary, he cannot bear them."

"Then, to speak more plainly still," said the doctor, "are you aware whether he has ever been bitten by a dog?"

"Good God!" exclaimed the milliner, a sensation of sudden horror seizing upon her as the damp of death strikes to the very marrow of one's bones when descending into the crypt or sepulchres of some ancient cathedral. "Yes, I recollect, on a certain occasion, a dog got into the house, and as the invalid was dragging it forth from under the bed, it lacerated his arm."

"Then, madam," returned the doctor, "there is no hope for this person. In a few hours he will be numbered with the dead," he added, in a scarcely audible whisper, and with a grave seriousness of countenance. "You must make up your mind to behold a hideous and shocking death-bed, for there is nought more appalling than the agonies of hydrophobia."

"Ah! then it is really this dreadful malady which has seized upon the wretched man?" said Mrs. Brace, shuddering all over with an irrepressible feeling of horror, which was as painful for the moment as the bitterest affliction could possibly have proved.

"Yes, madam, it is hydrophobia," returned the doctor; "and no earthly power can save that man. His doom is sealed — his fate is unalterable. 'Tis the same as if his

coffin were already made and his grave dug, for in a few hours he will be numbered with the dead."

"But, doctor, doctor," said Mrs. Brace, with a feverish nervousness of manner and an agitated tone, as she laid her trembling hand upon the surgeon's arm, "is it catching? Do I incur any danger by watching at his side? If he were to bite me — if the foam of his lips were to touch me —"

"No harm can arise, madam," was the response; "you have nothing to fear. But now the convulsions and spasms are seizing upon the invalid again, and I must administer some sedative. In a few minutes I will return."

The doctor accordingly hastened away to procure what he required from his own dwelling, which was in the immediate neighbourhood; and during his absence Frederick Dray passed through another fit of furious delirium and excruciating pain. He raved in a manner that was shocking to hear; and he writhed and tossed upon the couch as if invisible serpents had coiled around him. At one moment he besought and implored Mrs. Brace in the most piteous terms not to murder him; then he invoked Heaven's vengeance and hell's curses upon her head. Yet all this while he neither sought to harm her, nor even to move from the bed on which he was racked by such intense and poignant agonies.

The fit had somewhat subsided by the time the doctor reappeared, and he now proceeded to force the invalid to swallow an opium dose. By assuming a commanding tone and authoritative aspect, he succeeded in coercing the miserable wretch, and the sedative soon produced its effect. Dray grew tranquil, and presently fell into a slumber that was apparently easy.

"The moment he wakes up again, madam," said the doctor, "administer another dose. If you have any difficulty in persuading him to swallow it, send immediately for me. But I pray you to understand that this treatment is merely adopted in order to smooth his passage into another world, and not with any hope of prolonging his life in this. His doom is sealed, and no earthly power can save him."

The doctor then took his departure, with an intimation that he would return again at midnight, if he were not fetched before.

"And he may rest assured that I shall not send for him,"

muttered Mrs. Brace to herself, as she resumed her seat by the side of the couch. "Thank my stars that this man," she added in her musings, as she glanced toward the sleeper, "is about to die. It has perhaps saved me the crime of another murder."

Then the milliner fell into a deep reverie, during which all the incidents of the last twenty years of her life rose up in her imagination, vivid and clear as if even those which were most remote had occurred but on the yesterday. She looked back to the time when she was in all the glory and splendour of her charms, she saw herself gradually becoming bolder and bolder in the course of vice and immorality, she marked her career deepening into profligacy, until she became as dissolute as a Messalina, and she could trace the process by which her heart grew callous and hardened, until it was completely ossified against all feelings and emotions of a better kind. Then, as she thus gradually followed her own career along the vista of memory, down to the very time when she was now seated by the bedside of the doomed wretch who was shuddering and moaning in his sleep, she could not help thinking — indeed, the conviction was insensibly forced upon her mind — that had she in her earlier years chosen the paths of virtue and rectitude, she would have been happy, honoured, and respected now, but that having deviated into the ways of vice and debauchery, she had been gradually yet irresistibly led on to crime, and this crime was already opening a yawning gulf at her feet.

While these appalling thoughts were uppermost in her mind, Frederick Dray suddenly awoke; and a fit of delirious anguish and spasmodic poignancy, more terrible than the former ones, seized upon him all in a moment. With eyes that glared like those of a tiger, with the foam upon his mouth, and with his features all livid and swollen like those of the drowned, he writhed, tossed, and raved in a manner that was horrible to witness.

"Let me go — let me go!" he cried; "fiends are tearing me with their claws of red-hot iron, serpents are coiling around me and darting forth their fiery tongues in my face. Let me go, I say, let me go. Hell opens to receive me, the eternal gulf sends up its forked flames to enwrap my form. Some demon is thrusting a long sharp wire through my brain — Oh, horror, horror! I cannot endure it! Hell,

fiends, demons, spare me — spare me! Take away these monstrous serpents that encircle me, their touch is pollution, their breath is poisonous. O God! how their coils wind around me, — now cold and clammy — Oh, so cold, so clammy! I can't endure it, I say, 'tis hell — 'tis the eternal torture itself! And now they are searing my brain with red-hot iron, they are tearing my eyes from their sockets, they are stabbing my heart in a thousand places. Just Heaven! can this be my doom? Oh, take away those dead bodies from my sight — remove those cold, cold corpses! I did not do it, no, no, I did not murder that one, nor yet that one. Ah! who says I hanged him? No, no; you lie, you lie, 'twas she who did the deed, 'twas she, — the milliner, Mrs. Brace, the woman whom I loved, whom I coveted, whom I enjoyed, and whom I now loathe! Take her away — take her away! 'Twas she who tempted me; she murdered the first man, and I buried him under the stone in the back kitchen. You will find him there. Ay, and the other, too, they are both there — both — both!"

The wretched man's voice died away in a sound resembling the bark of a dog; and as Mrs. Brace raised her eyes from the convulsing countenance on which they had been fixed in dread and horror during those fearful ravings, she saw the doctor standing before her.

"Ah! madam, I warned you that it would be terrible," he said, shaking his head solemnly. "Alas! for poor human nature! Man — vain man — glorifies himself; and yet he may be reduced to such a wretched, hopeless state as this at last. But you must not suffer this scene to produce too great an effect upon your mind, madam," added the doctor, perceiving that the milliner was gazing at him in mute horror and consternation from the chair in which she was seated.

"Did you not hear what he said?" she at length demanded, in a voice of sepulchral hollowness; and her look grew more steadfastly fixed and more despairingly intent, as if she felt that the answer of the medical man would be the pronouncement of her doom.

"Yes, madam, I heard the terrible things he was uttering in his delirium," said the doctor; "but I am so accustomed to listen to the ravings of disordered imaginations, that they have almost ceased to produce any effect upon me. It is

no uncommon occurrence for the rabid and insane to accuse themselves or others of the most heinous crimes."

"Ah! is it indeed so?" cried Mrs. Brace, greedily catching at the explanation which the doctor gave naturally enough; for he little thought how much truth there was in the last words that he had overheard falling from the doomed man's lips.

"Take her away! take her away!" suddenly yelled forth the wretch, breaking out again. "It was she who incited me, I say, 'twas she who made me do it! The first man was murdered by her hand alone —"

"For God's sake give him opium!" whispered Mrs. Brace, seizing the doctor's arm with nervous violence and upturning toward him a countenance the ghastliness of which terrified him for a moment.

"I will do so," he said; "give me the bottle."

But scarcely had he taken it in his hand, when Frederick Dray flung forth both his arms with a sudden paroxysm of lancinating agony, and the phial was dashed from the surgeon's grasp.

"They shall not hang me — they shall not force me up the steps of the scaffold!" he cried, in an infuriate manner. "No, no, they must not pinion me, they must not fasten the noose around my neck and put the nightcap upon my head! I am not guilty. I did not murder both, — only one! 'Twas she — 'twas she," he yelled forth, fixing his savage glaring eyes upon Mrs. Brace, and extending one arm with pointed finger toward the wretched woman who shrank back shuddering all over in the easy chair where she was seated. "She poisoned the first man, I tell you, and she helped me to hang the second. Then we raised a stone, — it was in the back kitchen, down below, the back kitchen, of the other house, mind, and then we buried them at dead of night, not both at the same time, though both together —"

"Sir, doctor, my dear friend," murmured Mrs. Brace, now recovering the use of her speech and once more clutching the medical man violently by the arm, "you must put an end to this, or it will drive me mad also!"

"Oh, now the serpents coil more and more around me!" yelled forth the rabid wretch; "hell's flames have caught me, I am on fire, I am on fire, I am burning, — 'tis agony, anguish, horror, horror! Ah! now the fiends are bearing me

to the scaffold, they have pinioned me, they have fastened the noose around my neck, they have drawn the white cap over my face — Oh, I cannot breathe, they are suffocating me, and now they have stood me upon the drop, — horror! horror! I hear the bolt giving way — Stop, I will confess! a moment! a single moment! Chaplain, a word in your ear — Hark! listen! This is what you must do: take a crowbar, raise the central flagstone in the back kitchen, and there, buried deep, deep, beneath the mould, you will find the two murdered men! But, ah!” shrieked forth the dying maniac, his whole form convulsing horribly, and his eyes ready to start out of his livid, hideous face, “this is treachery — infernal treachery! Have I not confessed? Have I not told you where the bodies lie? And yet you leave me here upon the drop, with the noose around my neck and the cap over my countenance. Hell! fiends! maledictions! You are going to hang me after all, horror! horror! the bolt is drawing back, the drop is slipping beneath my feet — O God!”

And with a tremendous convulsion that made the bed creak and even the very room shake perceptibly, the wretched man gave up the ghost.

Half-senseless with the awful consternation that was upon her, Mrs. Brace lay back in the armchair; and she had only a dimly vacant idea that her accomplice in crime had breathed his last. Twice did the medical man whisper to her that he was dead, ere she seemed thoroughly to comprehend him; and then, all in a moment, a singular revulsion of feeling took place within her. A sensation of relief suddenly superseded that tremendous terror and blank despair which had almost crushed both her physical and moral energies, and as she said to herself, “My persecutor and tyrant is no more — I am now free!” it seemed as if a load were lifted from her mind and she had regained a lost independence.

This abruptly revived sense of security armed her with a proportionate courage and presence of mind; and, rising from the chair, she flung a rapid look upon the livid and distorted countenance of the corpse. Its appearance was horrible in the extreme. The eyes, stony and glaring in death’s awful vacancy, seemed ready to start from the head, the tongue lolled out, and around the mouth were large flakes of foam speckled with blood.

“He raged dreadfully in his last moments,” said Mrs. Brace, now turning her eyes quickly upon the surgeon, and with that piercing glance endeavouring to read the nature of the impression which Dray’s delirious outpourings had made upon his mind.

“I have seldom heard or witnessed anything more dreadful,” observed the medical man; but his tone and demeanour convinced Mrs. Brace that he attached no importance to the ravings of the deceased, and was consequently very far from suspecting how entirely they were based upon truth.

“What shocking things — oh, what shocking things — appeared to have been uppermost in his mind!” exclaimed Mrs. Brace, now affecting a tone and air of commiseration for the dead.

“Maniacs, or people in a rabid condition such as that which we have just witnessed,” returned the doctor, “frequently dwell upon some particular idea which they conjure up to haunt them. But as my services are no longer needful here, madam, I shall wish you good night.”

Mrs. Brace shook hands with the medical man, who thereupon took his departure; and the milliner hastened to her own parlour, where she immediately partook of a large dram of brandy. She then sat down, though at that late hour, — for it was now past midnight, — to meditate upon the occurrences of this memorable evening.

CHAPTER XVII

MR. RIGDEN'S OFFICE

WE must now return to Caroline Walters, who, it will be remembered, fled from Mrs. Brace's house with considerable precipitation after the sudden explosion of her deeply ramified scheme. She had resumed the page's livery, simply because she would have found it inconvenient to be seen hastening through the streets of London in a bridal dress at that time of night; but it was not her intention to adopt the same disguise which she had hitherto worn. For it must not be forgotten that the fearful accusation of murdering Mrs. Lindley, the midwife, was still hanging over her head; and that the fact of her having escaped from the custody of Grumley, by throwing herself from the window of the house in Fore Street into the Thames, as described in an earlier chapter, would only tend to confirm the general belief in her guilt. For the world did not know that Grumley had connived at that escape; and even if his disappearance had led to any suspicions on that head, they would not in any way alter the circumstantial evidence that pointed out Caroline as the murderess of the midwife.

While thus retrospectively glancing at these matters, we must also observe that though it was generally believed Miss Walters had perished in the Thames, yet this supposition on the part of the public by no means rendered it prudent for her to roam undisguised about the streets of London. Many persons had seen her at the police court when she was examined, the authorities of Horsemonger Lane Gaol were acquainted with her personal appearance, and all the various customers who had visited Mrs. Brace's establishment during the time she was in the milliner's service would be capable of recognizing her. Moreover, Lord Florimel, under the

influence of rage and disappointment at the issue of the evening's adventures and the cheat she had endeavoured to practice upon him, might hasten and inform the officers of justice that Caroline Walters, accused as the murderess of Mrs. Lindley, was now actually in London; and therefore the young woman was environed by a thousand perils.

But she did not despair of surmounting them. She had plenty of money in her pocket, — some of her own, being the accumulation of her wages while in Florimel's service, and some which he had given her to carry out all the arrangements of that evening. Thus provided, she was not at a loss how to act. Taking her way, accordingly, to a shop in Wardour Street where masquerade costumes and fancy dresses were let out for hire, she knocked at the door, for the place was now closed and the shutters were up, it being past ten o'clock. The mistress of the shop answered the summons, and Caroline immediately said, "Do you remember the black page who hired the dress of a gipsy at your establishment?"

"Some months ago, for the great masquerade at Covent Garden?" observed the woman, inquiringly.

"The same," answered Caroline. "Well, you must remember me, then?"

"Oh, yes, to be sure," said the woman. "The black page was only a pretty young girl after all, because I helped to dress her; and you are the same. I thought your face was not unfamiliar to me, and that livery too! Besides, you behaved very liberally to me, and that is another reason why I ought to remember you. Walk in, miss, and tell me what I can do for you."

Caroline accordingly entered the house; and when she was alone with the woman in her parlour, she said, "You have seen me disguised as a black page, you have helped to disguise me as a black page, you have helped to disguise me as a white page. What garb and character can you possibly recommend that will disguise me more effectually still?"

"You are somewhat too short for a young officer in the army, with a nice pair of moustaches," said the woman, in a musing tone, as she contemplated the slender and symmetrical shape of Caroline. "But if I was to put a pair of whiskers on your cheeks, they would at all events give you a masculine look."

“No, I do not fancy the officer’s garb,” observed Miss Walters. “I should seem ridiculously short in that dress, and my appearance would only court disagreeable attention. Think again, and be speedy.”

“A midshipman in the navy,” exclaimed the mistress of the fancy dress warehouse. “You might have a delicate pair of whiskers — I mean a moderate-sized pair, glossy and curled — just to prevent your face from appearing too babyish or too feminine; and the blue garb of a sailor, with the neat little dirk by your side, would not be too glaringly attractive.”

“Be it as you say,” exclaimed Caroline. “But have you such a dress ready at hand and which is sure to fit me?” she demanded.

“I should not have proposed the middy’s uniform if I had not been prepared to supply it, young lady,” said the woman. “And as for the whiskers,” she added, producing a pasteboard box containing a large assortment of those artificial embellishments for cheeks that were virgin of the razor, “here you may pick and choose according to your own good pleasure.”

Caroline accordingly selected a charming pair of false whiskers; and, the uniform being likewise produced, she was shown up-stairs into a chamber, where the mistress of the warehouse aided her in the arrangements of her new toilet. The midshipman’s apparel fitted to perfection, and she seemed a sweetly interesting boy, until the whiskers were fastened with a solution of gum arabic to her cheeks. Then, the dirk being slung to her waist, she looked like a youth of about one and twenty, very short in stature, and of delicate features. To increase the manliness of her appearance — or rather, to diminish its feminine air as much as possible — she consented to allow the woman to cut off a considerable portion of her beautiful hair; and, when this sacrifice was made, she felt as she looked in the glass that she could now defy detection even on the part of the most searching eyes.

Having paid the mistress of the shop a liberal price for the articles thus purchased and the attentions administered, Caroline Walters sallied forth; and, after some little hesitation as to the immediate proceedings which she should adopt, she repaired to a coffee-house, where she called for some

refreshment, together with writing materials. Her orders being obeyed, she wrote two brief letters; one was addressed to the Marchioness of Bellenden, Bellenden Priory, Edgeware Road, and the other to the chief magistrate at Bow Street. She then went out again, put her letters into the nearest post-office box, and returned to the coffee-house. Here she ordered a bed for the night; and on being shown to a chamber, she at once retired to rest.

At about ten o'clock on the following morning, Caroline Walters, disguised in her midshipman's apparel, called at Mr. Rigden's place of business in Featherstone Buildings. On entering the outer office, she inquired whether the attorney was within; and the head clerk, turning to a youth who was busily engaged in copying some deed, said, "Alfred, go and tell the governor that a young naval gentleman wants to see him if he's disengaged."

"You know, sir," replied the youth, who was a pale, sickly, but interesting and intelligent lad of about seventeen or eighteen, and who addressed his superior in a tone of the deepest respect, "you know, sir, that Mr. Rigden is very busily engaged this morning, and has given orders that he will not be disturbed."

"Ah! I recollect," said the principal clerk, in a musing tone. "He's preparing instructions for counsel in that affair of Woodfall *versus* Florimel."

"Indeed, sir!" ejaculated Alfred, with a sudden start; and Caroline observed that the youth's countenance, which was naturally pale, flushed with a glow of animation.

"Yes," continued the head clerk, not noticing that change which had thus struck the attention of the disguised young woman, "Mr. Rigden is deep in that case, and a very important one it is too. I do not therefore believe he will see anybody, unless it is on very particular business."

"My business is very particular," said Caroline. "Please to obtain me an immediate interview with your master," she added, speaking to the youth.

Alfred looked at the head clerk, who nodded his assent; and the boy stepped into Mr. Rigden's private office. He reappeared in a few moments and desired Caroline Walters to enter the sanctum. This invitation she immediately obeyed, closing the door behind her; and when the seeming midshipman stood in the presence of the lawyer, the latter

gazed upon her with the air of a man to whom the countenance of a visitor is not altogether unfamiliar, although he cannot at the moment guess where or when he has seen it before.

"You do not recognize me?" said Caroline, with an arch smile. Then, instantaneously resuming a serious expression of countenance, she observed, "But you remember the young woman who brought you certain important documents a few months ago?"

"Ah! now I know you, my mysterious acquaintance," cried the lawyer, with a partial smile. "But wherefore this disguise?"

"That is my affair," said Caroline, laconically. "I have called to inform you that Florimel has returned to town, and, what is more, that he has guessed by whom the documents were stolen from him. But the individual who took them is beyond his reach, and there is no chance of exposure in that quarter."

"Then our position remains unaltered and safe?" observed Mr. Rigden, inquiringly.

"So far as Florimel is concerned," replied Miss Walters. "But there is a certain lady who exercises a great influence over George Woodfall, the claimant to the Florimel peerage and estates; and I have reason to believe that she would play him false in order to serve her own purposes."

"You doubtless allude to the Marchioness of Bellenden?" said the lawyer. "But depend upon it your suspicions are wholly unfounded. The marchioness is a model of virtue, excellence, and piety, and she would not do a wrong action for the world. Ah! you smile incredulously —"

"Perhaps I am too suspicious," observed Caroline, the sardonic expression still wavering upon her lips. "But I presume that if George Woodfall were to suffer himself to be persuaded by the marchioness or anybody else to quash the proceedings already instituted on his behalf, he has the power, and you could not go on without his assent?"

"Exactly so," exclaimed Rigden. "But you cannot fancy that Mr. Woodfall would be mad enough to abandon a process which he is sure to gain in the long run?"

"Does not a certain Miss Rose Foster reside at Bellenden Priory?" asked Caroline; "and is not Mr. George Woodfall deeply in love with this young lady?"

"Such, I believe, are the facts," said the attorney. "But what then?"

"Simply that Miss Foster lies under the deepest obligations to the Marchioness of Bellenden, and that her ladyship consequently exercises a boundless influence over the girl," continued Caroline. "This influence can of course be brought to bear upon George Woodfall; and now I will ask you, Mr. Rigden, whether you have not found the young gentleman hanging back somewhat during the last few weeks?"

"Well," said the lawyer, in a deliberate tone as he took a pinch of snuff, "since you mention the fact, I must confess — indeed I cannot conceal from myself — that Mr. Woodfall has not appeared so particularly urgent of late as he was at first, and he has moreover hinted that he experienced some reluctance in disturbing Lord Florimel in the enjoyment of the peerage, although he would certainly like to adjust the matter of the fortune in an amicable manner."

"Now, will you believe Mr. Rigden," demanded Caroline, "that some secret influence has been at work?"

"But wherefore should the Marchioness of Bellenden interfere?" cried the attorney. "Is it because I am Lord Montgomery's solicitor and engaged against her ladyship in the memorable case which has been so long pending between his lordship and her, and which now verges toward a close? I can scarcely think that a lady who is so celebrated for her many virtues, her amiability, and her generous feelings can possibly stoop to such meanness as to exercise her influence over Woodfall, simply because chance has made me his professional adviser."

"We will not stop to inquire into motives, Mr. Rigden," said Caroline; "but we will fix our attention upon facts. It is clear, then, that the marchioness has used her influence to some little degree to prevent Mr. Woodfall from being too precipitate in the business —"

"But she has been absent for some weeks," observed Rigden.

"True. Miss Rose Foster has, however, remained at the priory, in the care of a trusty old housekeeper, during the visit of Lady Bellenden to the country," said Caroline; "and Mr. Woodfall has of course visited the girl frequently. The marchioness has no doubt corresponded with Rose, and the advice insidiously conveyed in her ladyship's letters

has exercised, through the agency of Miss Foster, the desired influence upon the mind of Mr. Woodfall. It needs no ghost to afford us this explanation, or enable us to gain this insight into the matter."

"You appear to be admirably well acquainted with all that is passing in certain quarters," said Mr. Rigden, surveying the disguised young woman with mingled curiosity and wonder. "But who could have supposed that the Marchioness of Bellenden possessed such a really petty mind and mean disposition?"

"Perhaps you will know more of her character some day," observed Miss Walters, drily. "At all events I have now told you sufficient to make you aware of the influence which has been exercised over George Woodfall. On my side, I have already adopted a measure which will perhaps induce the marchioness to change her policy in that respect; but I thought it better to give you the hint notwithstanding, because, should you observe a recurrence of vacillation or backwardness on the part of Woodfall, you may know to what cause to attribute the same. I suppose you are up to your neck in business?" remarked Caroline, as she flung a look over the piles of papers which covered the lawyer's desk.

"Yes. What with the case of Montgomery *versus* Bellenden and that of Woodfall *versus* Florimel, together with other important matters," said Mr. Rigden, "I have scarcely time to take either food or rest."

"And who will gain the former suit, think you?" asked Caroline.

"It is hard to say — hard to say," replied the cautious attorney, taking snuff. "I am sadly perplexed with it, I can assure you. The presence of young Lord Raymond Montgomery, the earl's brother, is absolutely necessary to the favourable progress of the cause and I cannot get him up to London. He does not even reply to my letters. But he is a singular character, disappointed in love, and living, I believe, in a most secluded manner. However, I shall take a run down into the country in a few days and ferret him out."

"I see that you have got the Florimel documents all before you," observed Caroline, as she rose to take her departure.

"Hush!" said the attorney, tapping his snuff-box, for while the young woman was yet in the middle of her remark,

Alfred appeared in the room from the outer office, and, as her eyes were fixed at the moment upon the papers to which she had alluded, she did not observe the entrance of the youth.

The lawyer's sudden warning caused her to start and turn her looks toward the door; and as her eyes fell upon Alfred's countenance, she was struck by the conviction that the same glow of ill-subdued joy which she had previously observed again lighted up his features.

A singular feeling arose like a presentiment in Caroline's bosom; and she experienced an uneasiness which she could not explain to herself.

"Who is that boy?" she inquired, abruptly, so soon as Alfred had delivered a message and withdrawn.

"He has been some few weeks in my service," answered Rigden. "But wherefore the question?"

"I scarcely know," said Caroline. "And yet I do not altogether like his appearance. There is something sneaking in his manner and sinister in his look. Take care of him — that's all."

"You really alarm me, young woman," observed the attorney; "for, to tell you the truth, I took him without either reference or character —"

"So did Lord Florimel engage me at the beginning," thought Caroline within herself.

"Yes, contrary to my usual caution," added Mr. Rigden, taking a huge pinch of snuff, "I suffered myself to be over-persuaded by some history of woe and distress which Alfred told me; and being in want of just such a youth at the instant I engaged him. He seems a steady, intelligent, well-meaning lad —"

"Take care of him, I repeat," interrupted Caroline, dogmatically. "I don't like his physiognomy, though Heaven knows I should be sorry to be the means of depriving him of his bread, if he is really honest. I may be deceived, therefore; but once again I say, be upon your guard."

And with these words Caroline Walters took leave of Mr. Rigden.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CHAIN OF EVIDENCE

IN the meantime the chief magistrate at Bow Street had been much surprised by the perusal of a certain letter which was delivered to him by the usher of the court the moment his worship took his seat upon the bench. The letter, which was anonymous and written in a pretty female hand, contained a statement so remarkable that the magistrate knew not precisely how to deal with the case. But after a little consideration, he retired into the private room, and summoned thither the head constable to deliberate over the matter.

“Crawley,” said the magistrate to the individual who thus filled the post which Mr. Peter Grumley’s mysterious disappearance had left vacant some months previously, “what do you think of this?”

The head constable perused the letter which the magistrate placed in his hand, and, after nearly a minute’s profound reflection, he said, “I am quite puzzled, your worship.”

“What sort of a character is borne by the person referred to therein?” demanded the magistrate.

“Gay, and not overparticular, your worship,” was the reply; “used to be much patronized by the upper classes, specially the lords and gentlemen. But I don’t think — that is, I can scarcely fancy — there’s any truth in this piece of information.”

“And yet it is singular — very singular,” observed the magistrate. “If a responsible person had come forward to give private information of such a character, we should at once act upon it and issue a search-warrant. But this anonymous missive, perhaps intended after all as a piece of fun or wickedness — ”

"And still, your worship," remarked Mr. Crawley, "some kind of notice must be taken of the matter. Suppose I just step down there and in a quiet way institute a little inquiry?"

"Yes, that will be best, Crawley," said the magistrate; "and in the meantime let the circumstance of the arrival of such a letter be maintained a profound secret. If nothing comes of it, then the fact of such a serious accusation having been made through sheer wickedness and with a view to injure an innocent person need never become known."

"Just so, your worship," replied Crawley; and putting the anonymous letter in his waistcoat pocket, he proceeded to execute his commission.

A quarter of an hour afterward Mr. Crawley was walking along Pall Mall, when he noticed that he was being followed by a thin, miserable, half-starved mongrel dog; and, finding that the poor animal persisted in remaining close at his heels, he was about to kick it away, when it suddenly struck him that he was not altogether unfamiliar with the appearance of the beast.

"Surely this must be the brute that Mobbs used to have prowling after him?" muttered Mr. Crawley to himself. Then, recollecting the name of the dog of which he was thinking, he said, "Toby! Toby!"

The poor beast instantaneously began wagging its tail with delight; and rising on its hind legs, it began to lick the constable's hand.

Crawley now examined the dog with more attention, and he at length became convinced that it was the identical one which belonged to Mobbs. The discovery of the animal rendered him very thoughtful and serious; and as he walked along, he muttered between his teeth, "Well, there's something very strange in this. It's like another link in the chain, and now I'm more inclined than I was at first to attach some importance to the contents of the anonymous letter."

Thus musing, Mr. Crawley proceeded on his way along Pall Mall, passed Mrs. Brace's establishment, into which he gave a good stare, and sped to a butcher's shop in Bury Street, where he ordered a copious repast of meat to be bestowed upon the dog. Toby devoured the welcome provender with a ravenous appetite, and, having lapped up a suitable quantity of water, he frisked about the con-

stable's legs and leaped up to lick his hand as if in gratitude for the kindness shown him.

"Now, then," said Mr. Crawley to himself, as he sallied forth from the butcher's shop, with the dog at his heels, "we'll investigate this little business."

Retracing his way, the constable was just on the point of turning out of St. James's Square into Pall Mall, when he ran against a gentleman who was coming quickly around the corner.

"I beg your pardon, sir," exclaimed Mr. Crawley.

"No offence, my man," said the gentleman. Then, as his eyes fell upon the dog, he observed, "You must get that beast muzzled as the warm weather comes on. I don't like the look of him."

"Lord bless ye, sir," cried the officer, patting the mongrel as it raised itself against his leg, "I'm not afraid of dogs. On the contrary, I love them dearly, and though I've been bit once or twice, you see I'm not dead of — what d'ye call it?"

"Hydrophobia, you mean," said the gentleman. Then, taking the constable by the buttonhole, he observed in a serious tone, "My good fellow, do not treat the matter thus lightly. If you had witnessed the dreadful spectacle which I saw last night, you would never forget it."

"Was it a case of — what d'ye call it again?" asked Mr. Crawley.

"Hydrophobia," returned the gentleman. "My time is precious, and I dare say yours is too; but it is my duty, as a Christian and a medical practitioner, to detain you for a moment while I give you a warning that may be serviceable. Last night, then, I was summoned to see a person who was supposed to have gone mad. I went, and found him labouring under the influence of hydrophobia. 'Twas a truly shocking case, and in his delirious ravings he uttered language which haunts me still, accustomed though I am to scenes of horror."

"Was this case so very terrible then, sir?" inquired Crawley.

"The most terrible death-bed I have ever witnessed," returned the medical gentleman. "The unhappy wretch died under the belief that he was suffering the last penalty of the law upon the scaffold. He accused himself and a lady

who was by at the time of having committed two most horrid murders; and to show you what dreadful freaks the imagination will play its victim under such circumstances, he actually believed that he was making a confession to the Newgate ordinary as he stood upon the drop. He fancied that the objects of his imaginary crimes had been interred beneath a stone, in a back kitchen — ”

“ Hey? what? ” cried Mr. Crawley, now becoming much excited as well as deeply interested. “ Where, in Heaven’s name, sir, did this affair take place? ”

“ At a house close by, ” answered the medical man. “ Indeed, I have just been to visit the lady herself and ascertain whether she had recovered from the fright. But wherefore do you regard me in this singular manner? ”

“ Because, sir, ” replied Crawley, solemnly, “ I have good reason to believe that the history you have just told me is another link in a chain of evidence — ”

“ Good Heavens! ” ejaculated the doctor, unfeignedly shocked and amazed, “ you do not mean me to infer that there is any foundation for the dreadful tale of the double murder? ”

“ Read this, sir, ” returned Mr. Crawley; and he put the anonymous letter into the doctor’s hand.

The contents were as follows:

“ *To the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street:* — Under the great flagstone in the back kitchen of Mrs. Brace’s house in Pall Mall lie buried the bodies of the two missing officers, Grumley and Mobbs. How they came by their death is for your worship to discover.”

The doctor staggered against the wall for support, as his eyes ran over these few lines. He was seized with consternation and horror at the thought that a woman whom he had professionally attended for years could have been guilty of such hideous crimes or even an accomplice in their perpetration. He knew that Mrs. Brace was not the most immaculate being in existence; but he was utterly unprepared for the discovery that her profligacy as a gallant lady was nothing in comparison with her black turpitude as a criminal.

“ You are astonished, doctor, and well you may be, ”

said Crawley, as he took back the letter and once more secured it in his waistcoat pocket. "I would not believe it at first, although I came to investigate the business as a matter of course. But link after link in the chain of evidence has been supplied, I don't know whether by accident or by Providence —"

"Yes, it is Providence that does all this!" exclaimed the doctor, in a solemn and impressive manner. "I suppose you are an officer of justice?" he observed, after a brief pause.

"Exactly so," returned Crawley. "Be pleased to give me your card, sir, as I may want your evidence presently."

"Unhappy woman!" said the medical practitioner, as he complied with the constable's demand; "to what a pass has she brought herself! Oh, now I remember her agitated looks, her singular expressions, her frightened manner, last night; but far, very far was I from attributing all that trouble and terror to the true cause. It is a painful duty which you have to perform, constable, in taking a woman into custody on such a charge."

"I'm accustomed to it, sir, and my feelings are rather tough," observed Mr. Crawley. "But I shall say good-bye for the present; and when I want you to attend to give evidence, I'll let you know."

The doctor and the officer then separated; and while the former returned slowly and in deep thought to his own dwelling, the latter hastened back to Bow Street to report to the magistrate all that had occurred and procure the necessary assistance for pushing the investigation to the end.

About half an hour afterward, Mr. Crawley, armed with a warrant, and attended by three subordinate constables, — followed also by the mongrel Toby, — suddenly made his appearance at the milliner's establishment in Pall Mall.

The three young females whom Mrs. Brace still kept in her employment were in the shop at the moment when this alarming irruption took place; but the milliner herself was in her favourite parlour, pondering over the incidents of the last twelve hours, and congratulating herself on the death of Frederick Dray.

"Where's the lady of the house?" demanded Crawley of the foremost of the three young women, who were seized

with alarm at the appearance of the constables. "Answer me in the king's name."

This summons made the affrighted girls aware of the official position of the intruders; and so great was their terror that they were unable to answer the question put to them. The constables accordingly pushed through the shop into the house, and Mrs. Brace, hearing the sound of footsteps, came forth from her parlour to ascertain what was the matter.

But the instant she beheld the visitors her conscience told her who they were and why they came; and, with a moan of ineffable anguish, she fell senseless at their feet.

At the same moment the dog sprang toward her, and began barking as if at a known enemy; and Crawley had some difficulty in preventing the animal from snapping at the limbs of the motionless woman. Ordering one of his men to remain in charge of her, the officer descended the kitchen stairs, followed by the other two Bow Street runners whom he had brought with him, and likewise attended by the faithful dog. Entering the servants' room, he ordered those whom he found there to hasten up to the parlour and administer the necessary restoratives to their mistress; and the domestics, who saw full well that there was something wrong, lost no time in doing as they were commanded, but rather to obtain the speedy gratification of their curiosity than through any particular affection for Mrs. Brace.

We must leave the reader to imagine the mingled horror, surprise, and dismay which seized upon the domestics when they heard the tremendous truth from the lips of the constable left in charge of the murderess. In the meantime we shall follow Mr. Crawley and his party to the back kitchen, whither they soon penetrated.

The moment they set foot in that place, the dog Toby bounded forward and began sniffing and whining around the central flagstone.

"You see the instinct of that poor beast," observed Crawley. "He knows his master is buried underneath, and he knew also just now that he owed some kind of a grudge to Mrs. Brace, for he would have certainly bit her if I had not drawn him off. Depend upon it, this here dog was a witness of the murder."

"No doubt," replied one of the subordinates; and pro-

ducing a crowbar, a pickaxe, and a spade from a sack which he carried, he said, "Shall we fall to work, sir?"

"By all means, my man," returned Crawley. "The last link in the chain of evidence lies below, or I am terribly out in my reckoning."

To their task the two assistants went; and the fact that the stone had been recently disturbed was soon proven by the facility with which it was now raised from its setting. Then the circumstance of the earth yielding easily to the shovel was a further sign that the information contained in the anonymous letter and the testimony acquired from the doctor would turn out to be correct. In another half-hour, all uncertainty — if any had still existed upon the point — was at an end; for the livid corpse of Mobbs was first drawn forth from the grave, and then the putrefying body of Grumley was dragged up in its turn and stretched on the paved floor of the kitchen.

Thus did the unblest tomb give up its dead at last; thus did the deep pit surrender its murdered tenants to furnish the last damning link in the chain of evidence against the milliner.

Meantime the unhappy woman had been recalled to consciousness, in the parlour where she had been left to the care of the constable, and whither her servants had hastened at Crawley's bidding. And, oh! to what excruciating memories and poignant convictions was the wretched milliner thus aroused. For an instant, on opening her eyes and gazing wildly around, she had fancied and flattered herself that she was labouring under the influence of a horrible dream; but when she beheld the sinister countenance of the officer, and then read consternation mingled with a morbid curiosity upon the features of her servants, she knew that it was not a vision, but a hideous reality; and as her mental looks were flung forward along the vista of the future, in order to estimate at a glance the consequences which she had to fear or the amount of hope which she might entertain, the prospective view that she thus took was suddenly bounded by the scaffold which rose up, black and ominous, before her.

Oh, we have said elsewhere, and we repeat it now, — for the fact cannot be chronicled too often, — that the folly of crime is, if possible, even greater than its guilt. There is no condition in the world, however deplorable or however

perilous, that can be really and positively ameliorated by wrong-doing. The poor man may become rich by means of a crime; but will his riches, thus acquired, bring him happiness? No, ten thousand times no! There may or there may not be such a secret spiritual thing within us as conscience; but assuredly our own hearts reward or torture us according to our deserts. He who commits a crime lives in constant danger and dread of detection; and such an existence as this hath no enjoyment. Better to eat a crust in the consciousness of personal security, than sit down to the most sumptuous banqueting-board in terror at every knock at the door. Better to walk through the streets without a penny in the pocket, yet fearing no molestation, than to roll in a carriage along the fashionable thoroughfares in the apprehension that every police constable who looks at the equipage is about to stop it and drag forth its owner.

The annals of crime all proclaim these facts. Fauntleroy, the forger, passed years in an unceasing state of mental excruciation; he plunged into dissipation to drown care, but even with the wine-cup at his lip or in the arms of beauty was he haunted by a phantom that ever with extended hand pointed to the scaffold. What did Hocker obtain by the murder of Delarue? And would it not have been better for the Quaker Tawell to have thrown himself upon his knees before his wife and avowed his illicit connection with another, rather than have put that other to death? The result was that his wife not only discovered the amour, but has now to mourn for the rest of her days that she is the widow of a murderer. Again, what did Rush acquire by his wholesale assassinations? Instead of the undisputed possession of his farm, he earned an ignominious death. And what gained the Mannings by their crime? Nothing to compensate them for one single moment of the mortal suspense which they endured until they were captured, or of the hearts' goadings which they must have subsequently suffered till the drop fell beneath their feet on the roof of Horsemonger Lane Gaol.

Now, setting aside the black iniquity of the crimes just alluded to, let us contemplate their folly. Because if a man has not within himself a sufficiency of virtue to deter him from wrong-doing, let us appeal to his more selfish feelings, — his egoism, in a word, — and show him that he is a fool and an idiot to endanger his personal security. Doubtless the

individual who makes up his mind to perform a deed of turpitude hugs the belief that he will remain undiscovered. But experience is against this delusive, this fatal reasoning. Where one criminal escapes, ninety-nine are detected; the few exceptions, therefore, only prove the general rule. Out of a hundred persons who fling themselves off Waterloo bridge, in order to commit suicide, one may be saved by the boatmen from the shore; the remainder succeed in accomplishing their dreadful purpose. But what man in his sound senses would calculate upon those chances, and arrive at the conclusion that if he leaps from the bridge in a frolic he is sure to be the one who will be rescued? Such a proceeding would be utter madness, — bedlamite folly; and so it is with crime.

To return, however, to our tale. In an almost senseless condition was Mrs. Brace borne to a hackney-coach which was procured to convey her to Bow Street; and within an hour or two the whole of the West End was thrown into a perfect consternation and dismay by the intelligence that the fashionable milliner of Pall Mall had been arrested for the murder of the two missing constables.

When placed in the dock at Bow Street, the wretched woman recovered a sufficiency of her presence of mind to make her fully conscious of the awful position in which she stood; and, clinging tenaciously to hope even unto the very last, she proclaimed her innocence with the most passionate vehemence and an abundance of tears.

The testimony of the medical man was given, Crawley deposed to the details relative to the exhumation of the bodies, and the magistrate was about to remand the prisoner until the result of the coroner's inquest should be made known, when the usher of the court informed his worship that there was a female in the waiting-room who had some important evidence to give. The magistrate ordered her to be introduced; and in a few moments a young woman, overwhelmed with grief, pale, care-worn, and having the appearance of one who had only just risen from a sick-bed, entered the court, leaning upon the arm of the usher. In this manner was she supported into the witness-box, where she was accommodated with a seat; and Mrs. Brace at once recognized the wan and altered features of Harriet, her discarded lady's-maid.

For some time the unhappy young woman was so convulsed with painful feelings that she could not give utterance to a word. But at length she grew comparatively tranquil; and then, amidst many heart-wrung sobs and bitter lamentations, she proceeded to state all she knew concerning the murder of Grumley. She detailed how on entering the chamber of her mistress one night, she was informed that a dead body lay in the adjoining bathroom, how she had consented to break the matter to Frederick Dray and obtain his assistance in the disposal of the corpse, and how the murdered man was buried beneath the stone in the back kitchen. But she averred — and truthfully averred — her entire ignorance of the fact that Mobbs had subsequently shared the same fate, until she had heard of the discovery of the two dead bodies when calling an hour back at the milliner's establishment in Pall Mall. She also gave an account of the incident which had occurred one morning in the milliner's bedroom, when she had found Frederick Dray with his mistress, and when the former was so severely bitten by the dog which had secreted itself in the chamber. In conclusion, she stated that she had not now come forward to give herevidence through any jealous or vindictive feeling toward Mrs. Brace, but because the part which she had taken in the concealment of Grumley's body weighed heavily upon her mind, and she felt that her conscience would be eased by a full confession of all she knew and all she had done relative to that matter.

Having listened to everything that the unhappy young woman had to say, the magistrate inquired whether she had written an anonymous letter containing intelligence of such a nature as had led to the measures adopted by the constables to test the accuracy of that information. But Harriet positively declared that she had not written any letter of the kind. The anonymous billet was then read by the clerk; and the writer of it was duly called upon to come forward. No one responded to the summons, and the magistrate thereupon instructed Crawley to take such steps as he might consider expedient with a view to ascertain whence the mysterious missive had emanated.

His worship, with much gentleness of tone and commiseration of manner, proceeded to inform the unhappy Harriet that he should be forced to regard her, on her own confession,

as an accessory after the fact in respect to the murder of Grumley; but he took it upon himself to assure her that the contrition which she now manifested and her desire to aid the purposes of justice would not be lost sight of on the day of trial. To these observations Harriet replied that she was not ignorant of the peril to which she exposed herself when resolving to come forward and confess everything she knew, and her mind was evidently much relieved by the course which she had thus adopted.

But the murderess, Mrs. Brace, the once fashionable milliner, — she who had been the paramour of the Prince of Wales and of the handsomest and gayest nobles of the West End, — this wretched woman was completely overwhelmed by the presence of Harriet and the testimony she had given. Every ray of hope — even the last and faintest — had now disappeared. The crime was brought fully home to her, and with an awful shuddering that shook her frame to the innermost confines of her whole being, did she perceive that her fate was sealed.

The magistrate ordered the milliner and the lady's-maid to be both committed for trial, — the former on the charge of a double murder, and the latter as an accessory after the fact in respect to one of those crimes.

The prisoners were now removed to separate cells preparatory to the arrival of vehicles to convey them to Newgate. But ere the bolt of the massive door was drawn upon Mrs. Brace, she requested to speak to Mr. Crawley. This functionary was accordingly fetched from the court, and the milliner said to him, "Have you any objection to allow me to see the anonymous letter which was spoken of just now?"

"None at all," answered Crawley. "You would be entitled to a copy of it in the depositions. Here it is."

"That is the handwriting of Caroline Walters," exclaimed the milliner, the moment she glanced over the billet; and a fiendish expression of vindictive malignity settled for a few moments upon her countenance, already so ghastly and changed.

"Caroline Walters?" echoed the constable. "I should know that name."

"The young woman who murdered Mrs. Lindley, the midwife of Fore Street," said Mrs. Brace.

"Ah! and who escaped from the custody of Peter Grum-

ley," ejaculated the officer. "Then she is lurking somewhere about in London."

"She was at my house last night, first disguised as a black page," continued the milliner, "and then apparelled as a bride. But doubtless she has adopted some other garb of concealment by this time."

"Very good. If she's in London, I will have her in custody before twelve hours elapse," exclaimed Crawley. "I suppose she was an accomplice in the affairs which have got you into trouble, ma'am?"

"Nothing of the kind," responded Mrs. Brace; "and I am utterly at a loss to imagine how she became aware — But of that no matter," cried the milliner, suddenly interrupting herself with feverish impatience. "Lose no time in searching for her, trace her out, arrest her, hang her, for it is she who will have sent me to the scaffold."

And falling back upon her seat in the cell, the miserable woman, whose courage and presence of mind appeared to have returned during the former portion of her colloquy with the officer, gave free vent to all the mental agony that was now breaking up as it were the foundations of her soul.

An hour afterward, the milliner and the lady's-maid were the occupants of separate cells in the prison of Newgate.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PATRICIAN LADY AND THE PLEBEIAN GIRL

WE must now return to Caroline Walters, whom we left at the conclusion of her interview with Mr. Rigden.

On issuing forth from that gentleman's office, she retraced her way to the coffee-house where she had passed the night; and, seating herself in a corner of one of the boxes, she opened a book in the contents of which she soon affected to be deeply absorbed. But her thoughts were elsewhere, and her ears were open to catch every piece of intelligence which any newcomer might happen to impart to the other persons frequenting the place. Nor was Caroline compelled to remain very long in suspense, ere she acquired the certainty that her letter to the Bow Street magistrate had produced the wished-for result.

"I say," exclaimed an individual who bounced into the coffee-room at about half-past one o'clock in the afternoon, and who thus familiarly addressed himself to three or four of his acquaintances who were seated there, "I say, my fine fellows, have you heard what an awful discovery and precious smash there's been up at the West End just now?"

"No. What is it?" was the query put with all the impatience of suddenly awakened curiosity.

"You remember that two Bow Street officers, one Grumley and one Mobbs, disappeared very suddenly some little time ago, don't you? Well," continued the informant, "their fate has come to light this morning, and it seems they were murdered —"

"Murdered!" cried the listeners, with shuddering voices.

"Yes, murdered, and in a most mysterious manner, too," continued the informant. "At all events their bodies have

been dug up from under a stone in the kitchen or back yard, I don't exactly know which — ”

“ But where? where? ” Who murdered them? ” demanded the listeners, their curiosity now rising to a degree of fever-heat.

“ You'll be astounded when I tell you. In fact, every body is astonished, no one can scarcely believe it — ”

“ But who is the murderer? ” was the anxiously repeated query.

“ Mrs. Brace, the fashionable milliner of Pall Mall; and she is at this moment in the dock at Bow Street. ”

“ Mrs. Brace! Good Heaven! Who would have thought it? ” were the ejaculations which now burst forth from the lips of the listeners. “ But is it certain that she did it? And under what circumstances? ”

“ Ah! that is not known at present. I was passing by the police office just now, and seeing a tremendous crowd around the door, I naturally inquired what was the matter. Then I heard all that I've just told you. I tried to get into the court, but it was thronged to suffocation, and the usher wouldn't allow me even to make the attempt. There's no doubt of Mrs. Brace's guilt, from all I could learn. ”

“ And how was the thing discovered? ” demanded a listener.

“ I didn't learn, ” responded the informant. “ We shall know all about it in the course of the afternoon, and tomorrow morning's papers will be full of the proceedings. ”

Caroline Walters lost not a syllable of this conversation. A hyena-like joy — the blending of ferocity and triumph — sprang up in her bosom as she thus learned the success of her scheme; and the blood coursed hot and fevered through her tingling veins as she gloated over the immeasurable vengeance which she had wreaked upon the milliner.

“ Ah! it was an evil day for thee, vile woman, ” thought Caroline within herself, “ when thou didst sell me — me, the orphan confided to thy charge — to the treacherous, graceless, unprincipled Florimel. Mine is a nature to love fervidly — devotedly; but it is also a nature to avenge terribly. Ah! well do I remember, when first consigned to the dread solitude of my chamber at the infamous abode of Mrs. Lindley, well do I remember saying to myself that if I could not live on for love, I might for vengeance. And so

soon as this vengeance of mine shall have been gratified, — when the milliner has swung upon the scaffold and my seducer has been despoiled alike of rank and fortune, — then shall I care not how soon I quit this world of woe. Yes, vengeance first, and then suicide!”

And as she thus gave way to her reflections, the young woman leaned with her elbow upon the table, her hands supporting her head, and her eyes fixed upon the book. She saw nothing outwardly; all her senses, all her faculties, all her thoughts were absorbed in that reverie the mental vision of which looked only inward.

At length, slowly awakening as it were from this morbid dream, she collected her ideas; and remembering that she had a particular character to enact and a special part to play — or in other words, that she must not yield to abstractions in which the most trivial incident might betray her sex — she cast a rapid look around the room to ascertain whether she had become the object of any marked attention. But the other persons present were too busily engaged in discussing the arrest of Mrs. Brace to notice anything peculiar that there might have been in the attitude or appearance of the disguised midshipman, and she was therefore reassured on this head.

It was now nearly three o'clock. She accordingly desired some refreshment to be served up to her, and having partaken thereof, she sallied forth from the coffee-house. Her present object was to engage a suitable lodging, where she might dwell in privacy and security while watching the progress of her schemes and the gradual operation of her vengeance. Without being particular as to what direction she took or in which neighbourhood she should choose an apartment, Caroline sped toward Oxford Street, and her steps chanced to lead her into Cavendish Square.

She was traversing this fashionable district in order to reach some of the streets which lay beyond, when her attention was all of a sudden caught by the features of a young lady elegantly dressed and leaning on the arm of an elderly gentleman of aristocratic appearance. This couple were about to enter a house in the square at the moment that Caroline Walters was struck by the countenance of the lady; and, hastening forward, she said, “ Pardon me, madam, but I am delighted to meet you once more.”

"I do not recollect you, sir," was the haughty reply. Then, as some sudden reminiscence flashed vaguely and dimly to the lady's mind, she fixed her eyes more intently upon the countenance of the disguised midshipman, observing, "And yet your features are not altogether unfamiliar to me."

"We once vowed friendship to each other," responded Caroline; "and beneath the roof of Mrs. Lindley."

"Ah! I recollect, you are Miss Walters!" exclaimed Fernanda, for Lady Holderness it was, in company with her husband; and she did not appear to be overwell pleased at this encounter.

"What, Caroline Walters!" ejaculated Lord Holderness, starting nervously, and surveying the disguised female in a peculiar manner. "The young woman who was arrested —"

"And falsely accused of the murder of that same Mrs. Lindley whose name I mentioned ere now," added Caroline, in a firm tone and with a dauntless demeanour. "Madam," she continued, once more turning toward Fernanda, "I know not who you are, — your name and rank you scrupulously kept concealed from me when we were dwelling beneath the same roof —"

"For God's sake detain us not, young woman," interrupted Lord Holderness, in a hasty and imperious whisper, as the liveried footman opened the front door; and pushing Fernanda gently forward, the nobleman followed her into the hall.

Another moment, and the door was banged in Caroline's face.

But the instant that Lord and Lady Holderness were alone together in the parlour, they exchanged uneasy and troubled looks. Then, as Fernanda tossed off her bonnet and threw aside her shawl, she said, "I do not like this meeting with that girl."

"Nor I," returned the nobleman, in a voice of nervous excitement. "Something akin to prescience of evil has struck me —"

"And yet I do not see of what we have to be afraid," interrupted Fernanda, whose natural courage speedily came back to her aid. "It is impossible that this girl can have obtained any clue —"

"Who knows? who knows?" cried Lord Holderness, with

increased trepidation alike of voice and manner. "Ah! Fernanda, conscience renders us the most despicable of cowards —"

"Say rather that conscience renders you a coward," exclaimed Fernanda, her scarlet lips wreathing with a contemptuous expression, and her violet eyes flashing a look of ineffable scorn upon her husband. "For my part," she continued, in that haughty tone of proud defiance which she was so frequently wont to adopt, "I acknowledge not the power of conscience."

"How often, Fernanda, oh, how often," cried Lord Holderness, trembling visibly, "must I implore you not to add blasphemy and impiety to the other crimes —"

"Which we have both committed, eh?" observed that young patrician female who was strong-minded in her wickedness. "But do not give way to idle terrors, Walter," she added, in a milder tone. "At first I must confess that I was not particularly well pleased with an encounter that might lead to mischief and could not possibly do any good; but I have no doubt that Caroline Walters has gone her ways and will not let us hear of her any more. Besides, what after all could she say against me? That I was an inmate of Mrs. Lindley's establishment under particular circumstances. But to scandalize me behind my back would be to draw down suspicious looks upon herself; and those suspicious looks would speedily penetrate the disguise in which she has clothed herself. No, no; trust me, Walter, that we have nothing to fear from that young woman."

Scarcely were these words uttered, when a loud double knock at the front door resounded through the house; and in a few moments the footman appeared, ushering Caroline Walters (whom the domestic of course took for a young naval officer) into the presence of Lord and Lady Holderness.

"What means this intrusion?" demanded Fernanda, haughtily and fiercely, the moment the footman had withdrawn, and her eyes shot forth lightnings at Caroline.

"Did we not pledge an eternal friendship at Mrs. Lindley's?" was the exclamation of her to whom the peremptory query was addressed.

"But do you imagine me to be ignorant of the fact that you are charged with the murder of that woman?" cried

Lady Holderness, now endeavouring to frighten and subdue Miss Walters by the assumption of a look of stern menace.

"It may be so," said Caroline, with a calmness that almost staggered Fernanda; "but I am innocent, nevertheless. Lady Holderness, I now know who you are, I know also that this is your husband; and if I have made any unpleasant allusion before him, it is your ladyship who has provoked it. Had you treated me with only ordinary kindness when I met your ladyship ere now at the door of your mansion, I should have been gratified, and not for a single instant should I have thought of obtruding myself farther upon your notice. A kind word, in recognition of former friendship, would have warmed my heart toward you; but your ladyship treated me with contumely, with insult; and my wounded pride prompted me to resent this ungracious demeanour on your part."

"And would you have me apologize for what I have done?" demanded the patrician lady, in a tone of haughty defiance, though in her breast a certain misgiving, almost amounting to a positive uneasiness, had risen up while Caroline was speaking.

"Apology!" ejaculated Miss Walters, with a contempt as bitter as any irony that Fernanda was capable of using. "No apology from your aristocratic lips to my plebeian self would be sincere, and therefore I should reject it with scorn. But listen to me for a few moments. Not a quarter of an hour has elapsed since the door of your mansion was closed in my face. All the blood boiled in my veins; my soul was fired with resentment. Away I sped to the nearest shop; and there, while purchasing some trifle, I asked who lived at such and such a number in Cavendish Square. The shopkeeper was garrulous, and I learned in a few minutes twenty times more than I could have possibly expected to glean in so short a space concerning you."

"And what have you thus learned?" demanded Lady Holderness, still maintaining a tone and manner of cool defiance, while her husband walked toward the window and back again to the farther extremity of the room, with an agitation and a nervousness that he could not conceal. "What have you learned, I ask?" repeated Fernanda, with the affected indifference of a conscious security, but really for the purpose of ascertaining how much Caroline knew, and whether she

suspected anything more than what she had gleaned in the neighbourhood.

"I will answer your ladyship's question," returned Miss Walters. "From the communicative shopkeeper I learned that Lord and Lady Holderness dwelt in this house, that Lord Holderness has two daughters, the Honourable Misses Clarendon, who do not live with him, and that Lady Holderness was the Honourable Miss Fernanda Aylmer, niece of the Earl and Countess of Desborough."

"Is that all?" inquired the patrician lady, fixing her eyes intently upon the countenance of the disguised female.

"Not quite," responded the latter. "Some time ago it was whispered that the Honourable Arthur Eaton, Lord Marchmont's son, and Miss Fernanda Aylmer were engaged to be married, but the match was broken off, Mr. Eaton became a prey to what was deemed an incurable malady, and Miss Aylmer was reported to have gone upon the Continent. But Miss Aylmer did not visit a foreign clime," proceeded Caroline, with emphasis; "on the contrary, she retired to an establishment of mingled mystery and horror in Fore Street, Lambeth, where I formed her acquaintance. Ah! and she told me many, many things which were incomprehensible then, many, many things relative to her vengeance, which was progressing with a certainty as terrible as its nature and its origin were alike unsuspected by its victim. But now, lady, now," exclaimed Caroline Walters, "I am enabled to understand all that was incomprehensible then. Having learned who you are, and recalling to memory everything you told me at the midwife's house, I cannot possibly experience any difficulty in reading your history. It is clear to my mind as the noonday sun is bright to the eye. Arthur Eaton seduced you, and he therefore was the victim of your vengeance. He was perishing by a slow and mysterious malady that defied all the wisdom of the physician, all the skill of the surgeon. That was the dark and deadly nature of your revenge. But he suddenly gets better, the spell is lifted from his existence, and in a short time he recovers altogether. Ah, lady, that was because you failed, for some reason or another, to carry out your vengeance to a full consummation! But, behold! the invisible hand of an unrelenting and remorseless persecution still follows him. He recovers from that malady which appeared to be

hurrying him to the grave, and he is plunged into Newgate for a crime which he was incapable of committing."

"Who says that? Who dares to prejudge —"

And Fernanda stopped short in the exclamation which mingled anger and excitement was wringing from her lips.

"Who says so?" cried Miss Walters, with a stern and implacable expression of countenance. "I say it! Oh, I am quick — marvellously quick — in penetrating into the deepest mysteries, the moment that I obtain a key to the deciphering of them! And what is more, proud lady," added Caroline with a withering bitterness of accent, "I know that you are capable of anything and everything."

"What mean you?" asked Fernanda, her presence of mind rapidly failing her, and yielding to agitation of emotions and confusion of manner.

"I mean, lady," continued Caroline Walters, in a tone that was solemn and sombre to a degree, so that Fernanda remained with the upheaved bosom of breathless suspense, and Lord Holderness stood still, motionless as a statue, and with every lineament of his pale countenance indicating a profound terror mingled with a poignant curiosity, "I mean," repeated the young woman whose ominous looks and voice had thus powerfully enthralled the attention of her patrician listeners, — "I mean that some months ago, on a night of storm and of tempest, ay, a fearful night, and just fitted for the foul deed which rendered it more truly horrible than the profound darkness and the warring elements themselves could make it, — on that night, I say, a window was opened at the back of the house overlooking the Thames, and a new-born child was flung forth from the chamber where its mother lay, — yes, flung forth by the murderous hand of the midwife, to be engulfed in the rapid, dark, and turbid waters that rolled below."

"Hush, speak not so loud!" murmured Lord Holderness, horrified at this tale which he now heard for the first time, but which he had no difficulty in associating with his wife.

"Caroline, wherefore all these particulars?" demanded Fernanda, repressing, as well as she was able, the cold shudder that she felt creeping over her form at this re-awakening of all the terrible memories connected with that night of horror. "Besides, it is all mere assertion on your part," she exclaimed, in a bolder and haughtier tone.

"Assertion!" echoed Miss Walters, bitterly. "What! when the plaintive shriek of that murdered babe—your babe, lady—still rings in my ears, ay, and vibrates unceasingly in my brain! Oh, my God, it appeared to me then, it appears to me now, as if I were an accomplice in the tremendous tragedy of that foul night. Because I heard the faint scream of the innocent as it fell from the casement into the swollen river; because I knew that it was the child of the patrician young lady who tenanted the next room to mine; because I had no doubt that Mrs. Lindley herself was the murderess, and because I subsequently gleaned from your lips enough to convince me that you were in the full possession of consciousness when you gave birth to that child, and therefore that you were cognizant of the doom to which the accursed old harridan devoted it,—it was on account of all these circumstances, I say, that I felt as if I myself became an accessory and a co-partner in the appalling crime, inasmuch as I held my peace and gave no warning to justice of its perpetration."

"Fernanda, Fernanda," whispered Lord Holderness, in a hollow voice, as he drew his wife forcibly aside for a moment; "what are we to do with this young woman? What does she require? Let us get rid of her, for Heaven's sake!"

"Yes, yes," responded Lady Holderness, speaking hurriedly and apart to her husband; "but we must not appear to be afraid of her." Then, turning toward the disguised female, she said in a more conciliatory tone than any she had yet adopted, "Caroline, you are heaping together a number of accusations, inferences, and suppositions, in order to vent your spite upon me, simply because I did not receive you with open arms the instant that you accosted me ere now. But let us abandon that style of discourse. Accusation can be met by recrimination; and, even if all we may bring forward on either side be strictly true no beneficial result will arise to either of us. For you dare not proclaim to the world anything you know or fancy you know concerning me; and for my part, I have not the least inclination to call in a constable, and tell him that Caroline Walters is in my house, disguised in a naval uniform and an exquisite pair of whiskers."

"Ah! you adopt a bantering tone with me!" exclaimed Caroline, her wrath being piqued anew by the slight yet perceptible accent of irony which marked the concluding

words of Fernanda's speech, and also curled her lip gently as she uttered them.

"You are determined to quarrel with me, Caroline," said Lady Holderness, now condescending to smile with a partial degree of affability. "But this is too absurd. What possible benefit will accrue to either of us by charges and counter-charges of a disagreeable nature? Tell me how I can serve you. Do you require money, advice —"

"Neither," interrupted Caroline, in a peremptory manner. "But I am glad that we have met, because my ideas have all on a sudden been turned into a thoroughly new channel, respecting certain events that until within this hour have seemed buried in the most profound and impenetrable mystery."

"And those events?" said Fernanda, inquiringly; but despite of all her efforts to maintain a dignified composure, the strong woman was shaken from head to foot by cruel alarm and apprehension, ay, and not only from head to foot, but to the innermost recesses of her haughty and impious soul.

"Those events!" echoed Caroline, in a voice of cruel triumph. "Oh, it is not necessary to particularize them, lady, unless it be to observe that as surely and certainly as I am innocent of the death of Mrs. Lindley the midwife, so is Arthur Eaton guiltless of the murder of William Dudley!"

And having thus spoken, Caroline Walters was hastening from the room, when Fernanda sprang forward and caught her violently by the arm, saying in a deep and strangely altered voice, "We must not part yet, young woman, nor in this manner."

But Caroline would have broken forcibly away from the patrician lady, had not a sudden moaning and sobbing met her ears and caused her to turn her head. Then she beheld Lord Holderness convulsed with overpowering emotions, rocking to and fro on the sofa where he had flung himself, and covering his face with his hands.

"What does your ladyship require of me? And why do you detain me?" demanded Caroline.

"Let us be friends, dear friends once again, as we were at the midwife's," said Fernanda, still in that altered and agitated voice, and with a manner so troubled that she no longer attempted the vain task of concealing it.

"Lady, your proposal has come too late," responded Caroline, with a sinister and gloomy solemnity. "Your patrician arrogance sought to trample me underfoot, your aristocratic presumption endeavoured to crush me beneath its heel. But the worm — ay, the humble worm — has turned, and has already frightened you. Beware lest it change into a serpent and sting you to the quick."

Fernanda fell back in dismay at the terrible threat which was thus proclaimed, and at the flashing looks of scorn and ferocious triumph which accompanied the menace; and Caroline Walters, availing herself of that opportunity, rushed from the room and quitted the house.

Well and truly indeed had she declared that the occurrences of the last hour had turned her thoughts into an entirely new channel, or rather, had opened to them an avenue along which they might travel with some degree of certainty and clearness relative to the course which they were thus taking. She had suddenly been led to contemplate many things in a new light. It appeared to her as if she had all in an instant and most unexpectedly emerged from a dense fog in which she had hitherto been walking, and the result was that she had become inspired with a hope that changed the entire aspect of her destiny.

She longed to be alone in some room where she could sit down and ponder upon all these matters; and so impatient was she to carry her new thoughts into some solitude where she might open this suddenly found budget of ideas and weigh them one by one without hindrance and free from observation that she could not wait to search for a lodging. She accordingly retraced her steps to the coffee-house already mentioned, and on entering the public room, she found it well-nigh filled with customers who were engaged in discussing the particulars of Mrs. Brace's examination at Bow Street.

Caroline paused for a few minutes to listen to the details which the topic thus evolved; and she thence learned that Harriet the lady's-maid had appeared as a witness and was included in the committal to Newgate. Something was also said about the anonymous letter; but the information which those present in the coffee-room had obtained on this head was too vague and slight to furnish any accurate notion of what had really taken place at Bow Street in connection therewith.

Ignorant, therefore, that her missive to the magistrate had given rise to any proceedings calculated to menace her own personal safety, — but, on the contrary, gloating over the evident success of the means which she had adopted to ruin Mrs. Brace and send her to the scaffold, — Caroline Walters quitted the coffee-room and repaired to the chamber which she had occupied on the previous night.

“That’s a smart young fellow,” observed one of the customers of the house, addressing the remark to the knot of persons with whom he was discoursing.

“Who do you mean — the boy in the middy’s uniform?” exclaimed another of the group. “Well, for my part, I’ll be hanged if I don’t think it’s a girl in disguise. There’s something peculiar in the gait and walk —”

“Girl in disguise!” ejaculated Crawley, the Bow Street officer, who happened to enter the coffee-house at this moment. “Who was speaking of a girl in disguise?”

“Do you want such a person, old fellow?” asked the previous speaker, to whom the constable was well known.

“I want a certain young woman, and she’s very likely to be in disguise,” was the response. “The fact is, I’ve just got Mrs. Brace’s affair over, — she’s off to Newgate, — and now I’m on the lookout for another female —”

“Ah! this is quite a girl, I should say, unless it’s really a boy after all,” said the previous speaker, and every one present laughed at the coarse jest.

“Come, describe your hero, or heroine, as the case may be,” observed Mr. Crawley, as he drew forth a paper from his pocket. “Here’s the description of the girl that I want.”

“Well,” continued the previous speaker, “I should say that the young person of whom I’m talking must be about one or two and twenty, if of the male sex and having real whiskers; but not more than seventeen or so, if of the female sex and having false whiskers.”

“Age sixteen and a half,” observed Mr. Crawley, referring to the paper which he held in his hand. “Short in stature, well made, rather slight, brunette complexion, very fine dark eyes, splendid teeth, rich red lips —”

“By jingo! it is the very same,” cried several voices. “But who is she? What has she done? Poor thing! who’d have thought it?”

The constable waited not, however, to respond to these

questions or pay any regard to the ejaculations of wonder and curiosity that arose from the assembled frequenters of the coffee-house; but proceeding straight up to the bar, he inquired which was the chamber of the young person alluded to in the preceding conversation. The barmaid had overheard everything that had been said, and therefore had no difficulty in answering the query thus put; and in less than a minute the constable entered the room to which Caroline Walters had so recently repaired.

She instantaneously saw that she was discovered. The appearance of the man denoted his calling, and the unfortunate girl could not do otherwise than divine the object of this visit. For a few moments she trembled, turned very pale, and looked confused; but recovering her presence of mind, she boldly demanded his business. This was at once explained, precisely as she had foreseen; and Caroline affected to laugh at the idea that she was other than what she seemed, namely, a veritable midshipman. But Mr. Crawley was confident that he had made no mistake in the matter; and he insisted that she should proceed with him to Bow Street. Caroline was forced to comply; and as she passed through the coffee-room in the custody of the officer, the ardent curiosity of which she found herself the object brought a burning blush to her cheeks. That crimson glow and the downcast look which accompanied it confirmed the suspicion already entertained with regard to her real sex; and on arriving at the police office she was fain to confess the truth in order to avoid the ignominy of being stripped by the searchers.

She was then placed at the bar, identified as Caroline Walters, and, after a brief examination, committed to Newgate to take her trial for the murder of Mrs. Lindley, the midwife.

CHAPTER XX

ALFRED

WE must now return to Mr. Rigden's offices in Featherstone Buildings.

After Caroline Walters had taken her departure, the youth Alfred seized an opportunity to write the following words upon a slip of paper: "At last I have succeeded. You may expect me to-night." Then, still unobserved by the head clerk who sat facing him at the huge double desk in the front office, the boy folded up the paper in the form of a note, wafered, and addressed it. A few minutes afterward he found a pretext for slipping out; and, hastening to the nearest two-penny post, he dropped his letter into the box. He then returned to the office, resumed his place at the desk, and continued the work upon which he was engaged.

Meantime Mr. Rigden, ensconced in the armchair at his own desk in the inner office, was once more deeply engrossed in the study of the various deeds which lay spread out before him; until he was presently aroused by the entrance of his noble client, the Earl of Montgomery.

"Ah! I am glad your lordship has come," exclaimed the solicitor, taking a pinch of snuff with his usual precaution, so as not to permit the slightest grain to fall upon his shirt-frill. "I was most anxious to see your lordship —"

"Has anything further transpired?" demanded the earl, with an accent and a manner that appeared to indicate a feverish impatience.

"Nothing particular, my lord," returned Mr. Rigden, with his usual sententious coldness. "But your lordship is aware how awkwardly I am situated in respect to your brother, the Lord Raymond Montgomery; and, as matters are now coming to a crisis, I wish to know whether your

lordship or I shall undertake a journey into Warwickshire to represent to Lord Raymond the absolute necessity of his paying some little attention to the important suit so soon to be decided. I presume your lordship has received no communication from him?"

"None whatever," replied the earl, gloomily.

"It is now nearly two months, my lord," continued Rigden, "since the Master in Chancery was prepared to deliver his reports in the several matters of 'Montgomery *versus* Bellenden,' 'Raymond Montgomery *versus* Bellenden,' and 'Aylmer *versus* Bellenden.' But inasmuch as we did not then succeed in persuading Lord Raymond to come up to London and attend to the business, — indeed, as the letters which we addressed to him remained altogether unanswered, — I was compelled to put in certain affidavits, as your lordship is aware, in order to effect the postponement of the case."

"And the postponement was granted for two months, was it not?" said the Earl of Montgomery, inquiringly.

"Yes, my lord, until the end of May," was the response.

"And that will be in five more days," observed the earl, in a musing tone. "Well, you had better send off your head clerk into Warwickshire without delay; and if he don't find my brother at Malden Farm, I am sure I do not know where he is to search after him."

"And yet it is of the utmost consequence to him, my lord," said Rigden, "that he should be found. You must remember that singular clause in your ancestor's will, under which Lord Raymond claims the Warwickshire estates? If he do not comply with the conditions of that clause on or before the day on which he shall attain his twenty-second year, then does he forfeit all his right and title to those estates. Now, according to his baptismal certificate, he will be twenty-two on the 30th of May, and on the 31st the Master in Chancery will deliver his report. Should that report be unfavourable to Lord Raymond's claims altogether, it will of course matter little or nothing whether he has complied with the testamentary conditions, or not; but if the report should be favourable, — and I do not possibly see how it can be otherwise, — then will it only remain for me to show the Lord Chancellor that the testamentary conditions aforesaid have been complied with."

"And if they have not?" said Lord Montgomery, with a subdued nervousness.

"Why, your lordship knows as well as I do," exclaimed Mr. Rigden, "that in the case you have mentioned, two-thirds of the Warwickshire estates would go to Miss Aylmer — or rather Lady Holderness — and one-third to you, — that is to say, always supposing that we gain our suit against the Marchioness of Bellenden."

"And of that you have little doubt?" said Lord Montgomery, inquiringly.

"The additional evidence which you procured about three months ago, when your lordship went into Warwickshire, for the purpose, you know," said the lawyer.

"Yes, yes," exclaimed the earl, with something like petulance in his tone and manner. "I remember what you mean."

"Well, my lord," continued Rigden, surprised at the nobleman's irritable impetuosity, "the light which you were enabled to throw upon the case, on your return to London, and the subsequent investigations which we caused to be made down in the country, have all produced a visible effect upon the Master's mind and seem to have given a new complexion to the whole matter. Frankly speaking, then, I am sure we shall beat Lady Bellenden as completely and thoroughly as ever a suitor in Chancery was vanquished yet."

"What! beat her on every point?" cried the earl, joyfully.

"Yes, my lord," answered Rigden; "and now I am proclaiming a positive opinion for the first time. Indeed, it is not my habit to commit myself to my clients by means of pledges and promises. But if I do not beat the marchioness in respect to your claims, — in respect also to Lord Raymond's claims, and lastly, in respect to the claims of Lady Holderness, — then will I consent to be denounced as a fool and branded as a liar."

"I am charmed to hear you speak thus confidently, my dear Rigden," said the earl; and now his features brightened up, and a gloomy cloud which hung over them when he first entered the lawyer's office disappeared altogether. "But you will not fail to send off for my brother Raymond?"

"I will despatch my head clerk this very afternoon, my lord," returned the man of business. "He shall start in an hour, and travel post-haste to Malden Farm. If he does not

find Lord Raymond there, he will doubtless obtain some tidings concerning him. At all events, we will do our best; and if the young nobleman is so indifferent to his own interests as to have gone away and left no clue to his whereabouts at a time when such an important case is pending, why, he deserves to lose everything, that's all I can say about it. But still, as the solicitor in this suit, it is my duty to leave no stone unturned in the endeavour to find him out, and that duty shall be performed."

"To be sure, certainly," exclaimed Lord Montgomery. "I will write a letter to my brother, and your clerk can take it with him."

The earl accordingly sat down and penned a long epistle to Lord Raymond, whom he urged to come up to London without delay. He likewise besought him to forbear in future from treating his relatives with such cruel indifference as he had lately exhibited toward them, reminding him that more than three months had now elapsed since any tidings had been received from him. The earl stated that their mother, the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery, was especially hurt at the long and obstinate silence which Raymond had thus preserved; and he concluded by imploring his brother to exert his moral courage and rise superior to the disappointment which he had experienced in respect to their cousin Fernanda.

"There! will that do?" exclaimed the earl, throwing the letter across the desk to Mr. Rigden.

"Excellently well, my lord," replied the attorney, who hastily cast his eyes over the contents. "I really had begun to think that your lordship was secretly desirous for your brother to remain absent and leave the testamentary conditions unfulfilled, in order that his heritage might lapse to Lady Holderness and yourself. But now I perceive that I wronged your lordship by the suspicion —"

"You could scarcely deem me guilty of such unkindness, Rigden," interrupted the earl, starting from his seat and turning red as a peony. Then, with as rapid a transition becoming ghastly pale, he added, in a voice which he vainly essayed to render steady and composed, "Besides, would it not be a palpable folly on my part to prefer my cousin to my brother, even if I had any power to influence the results at all?"

"Well, I should think so, truly," observed Rigden. "It would be a palpable folly indeed. But if I gave your lordship offence by hinting at the suspicions which had been gathering in my mind, I humbly beseech your lordship's pardon."

"Oh! it is granted, Rigden, it is granted," cried the earl, now recovering his equanimity. "You will let your clerk become the bearer of this letter, then?" he observed, so soon as he had folded, sealed, and addressed the missive.

The attorney responded in the affirmative, and Lord Montgomery took his departure.

"There is something strange, something unaccountable, about my noble client," muttered Mr. Rigden to himself; "and despite of his indignant denial — despite also of the letter which he has written — I still believe my suspicions to be well grounded. He has always been very intimate with his cousin Fernanda, — too intimate I have sometimes thought. But be all that as it may, I care not. His lordship is one of the best of my clients, and that is the principal point I have to regard."

With this comfortable conclusion, Mr. Rigden rang the bell. The head clerk was summoned into his presence and ordered to make immediate preparations for a journey into the midland counties. The attorney gave him the requisite instructions, letters, and money, and the official departed in a post-chaise for Warwickshire.

Throughout the remainder of the day did Mr. Rigden continue to pore over the documents lying upon his desk; and, as the business was now becoming urgent, he stayed at the office long after five o'clock. The head clerk, as we have just described, was absent, and all the others, save Alfred, left the place at the usual hour. The youth however remained to shut up the office.

It was nearly nine o'clock when Mr. Rigden took his departure, thoroughly fagged with his fatiguing day's work. No sooner was his back turned, when Alfred rubbed his hands gleefully and appeared scarcely able to restrain his joy within moderate bounds. But having given vent to his exultation, he sat down again and waited a full half-hour ere he took any step in the execution of the project which he had in hand. Then, feeling assured Mr. Rigden was gone for good, and that

there was no chance of his return that night, the youth rose from his chair, muttering, "Now is the time."

The lawyer invariably locked the door of his own private office ere he left, and as regularly took away the key with him. This Alfred of course well knew, and he was prepared to meet the difficulty. Taking a small skeleton key from his pocket he speedily opened the door; and, on entering the private office, he found that all the parchments and papers of any consequence had been removed from the desk. For a moment he was staggered with the fear that Rigden might have carried away the very identical documents which he (Alfred) now required; but a second thought reminded him that such a proceeding was altogether contrary to the lawyer's habit. He accordingly resolved to pick the locks of all the japanned cases in the office, until he should either find the deeds he wanted, or else ascertain that they were not there; and to work he went, aided by a few little implements which he took from his pocket.

There were altogether about twenty tin boxes in the room, some of them bearing the names of clients, others having no names upon them at all. That of Montgomery did not appear upon any one, and therefore the youth commenced with the cases which had nothing in the form of nomenclature or initials painted on them. His search was speedily crowned with success, and the coveted documents fell into his hands!

Yes, they were those which he required, those which he had been instructed to procure, those, indeed, to which he had heard Caroline Walters so especially allude in the morning.

And now, securing them about his person, the youth hastily quitted the offices, fastening only the outer door, and leaving the key in the lock. He then made the best of his way to Horslydown, and at about half-past ten o'clock he reached that noted pandemonium, the Beggar's Staff.

The welcome which Alfred received at the hands of Carrotty Poll and the Gallows' Widow was of the most cordial description. They literally hugged and kissed him in the exuberance of their joy; and Elizabeth Marks assuredly evinced a degree of excitement which was altogether unusual with her.

"Well, this is the finest and most admirable stroke of policy that ever was executed!" she cried, as she glanced at

the deeds which Alfred deposited upon the table. "Florimel will reward us munificently."

"To be sure," observed Carrotty Poll, as she produced a bottle of wine upon the strength of the hoped-for recompense. "Now, take a glass, Alfred, and then tell us how you managed it."

"I suppose you received my note, old gal?" said the youth, whose meekness of manner and humility of tone had apparently been left behind him at the lawyer's office, for the atmosphere of which they had been so successfully assumed.

"Yes, we got the letter, Alf," replied Poll; "and overjoyed we were. Only we had our misgivings, lest you should fail at the very last, or be detected —"

"What a cursed spoony you must take me for," exclaimed the youth, flinging one arm around Carrotty Poll's neck, and the other around the Gallows' Widow's. "No, no; I played my cards better than that, I can tell you. Old Rigden is as cunning as a fox, and I fancied that he looked queer at me once or twice during the day. But never before had he entertained the least suspicion that I wasn't all right, even if he did up to the very last moment."

"And how came you to discover the deeds to-day?" demanded Poll.

"Oh, a young fellow came — a midshipman-looking chap — to see the gov'ner," replied Alfred; "and I happened to go into the inner office with a message, just at the moment that the visitor said, 'I see that you have got the Florimel documents all before you.' So then I ascertained for the first time that the papers were there; and I do believe that the young middy noticed the satisfaction which I felt burning as it were upon my face. Having once made sure of the grand point which I had been endeavouring to arrive at from the very first moment I entered Rigden's service, I knew that the rest was plain sailing. So I seized an opportunity to write you off a note, and, in a word, I have fulfilled my mission."

"Ah! see what it is to have nice-mannered and well-educated young gents like you enlisted in our service," said Carrotty Poll. "If you'd never run away from school and fallen in with the Kinchin-Grand, you wouldn't have performed this glorious feat, you see, and you certainly

wouldn't have earned the twenty guineas I promised you."

"And which you may now pay me, Poll," exclaimed the youth; "for I mean to have a regular lark along with the Kinchin-Grand until it is all gone, and then you must find me something else to do."

"To be sure," returned the Big Beggarman's daughter. "But you must remain very quiet for a few days, Alf, for fear Rigden should raise the hue and cry and advertise the job. You shall however have your money at once, because fair play is fair play."

"Ah! that's true enough," observed the young spark, as he consigned to his pocket the twenty guineas which Carrotty Poll forthwith counted down upon the table.

"And now let us lock up these deeds for to-night," said the Gallows' Widow; "and to-morrow morning early we'll call at Lord Florimel's and see if he has come back to town. If not, we'll post down to Dover and see him there."

CHAPTER XXI

THE RECONCILIATION

ONCE more do we find the sisters Octavia and Pauline reunited. In pursuance of the hint which she had received from the Kinchin-Grand, relative to the mode of effecting Octavia's liberation from the madhouse, Pauline had proceeded thither and demanded an interview with Doctor Burton, the proprietor of the asylum. To this individual the courageous and intrepid young lady had declared her resolution of at once applying to a magistrate unless her sister was released without a moment's delay; and the doctor, trembling at the prospect of exposure, and perceiving that Pauline was aware of the foul conspiracy of which Octavia was the victim, not only hastened to submit to her demand, but besought her in the most grovelling terms to pardon him for the share he had taken in the matter. Pauline was too much delighted at the restoration of her sister to freedom not to deal mercifully with the suppliant doctor; and, moreover, it was altogether foreign to her wishes to adopt any measure that was calculated to give publicity to Octavia's disgrace.

The sisters, then, were reunited after a cruel separation of a month and upwards; and the tranquillity of a few days' enjoyment of home, together with the affectionate ministrations and tender endearments lavished upon her by Pauline, again worked a striking and manifest improvement in the mental condition of Octavia. Still, however, did her countenance wear an expression of settled melancholy; and still was there an occasional vacancy in her looks, as if her memory failed her at intervals or grew cloudy and bewildered as she sought to fix her ideas upon some special point.

It was about noon, on the day following the occurrences related in the four preceding chapters, and the sisters were

seated in their handsomely furnished parlour. Octavia was half-reclining upon the sofa, Pauline occupied a chair near the window, and was working. The former was gazing intently upon a sprig of lilac which she held in her fair hand, and was weaving with her somewhat confused thoughts the associations which the flower conjured up relative to the blooming of fond hopes to-day and their withering to-morrow; while the younger sister was thinking of Lord Florimel and marvelling uneasily why he had not answered the letter which she had written to him a few days previously to Dover.

Suddenly the gate of the little garden in front of the house creaked upon its hinges; and the look which Pauline flung forth encountered the glance of Lord Florimel. Rapture, hope, and suspense were depicted upon his features; but the colour instantaneously fled from the cheeks of Pauline and a sensation of dizziness came over her, for now that the moment so anxiously expected had arrived and they were about to meet again, she knew not how to receive him. The whole details of the masquerade scene came back, vivid in colouring and poignant in effect, to her memory. She still believed in his perfidy, and yet she felt that she must yield him her forgiveness.

The double knock at the door resounded through the house, and Octavia started nervously.

"Oh, if that were the prince come to implore my pardon!" she exclaimed, trembling all over with the fever of excitement.

"No, my dearest sister, that will never happen, and you are wrong to indulge the hope, poor girl!" said Pauline. "But if it were —"

"Then I would forgive him," ejaculated Octavia, with impassioned accent.

It appeared as if an angel's voice had suddenly answered, by means of Octavia's lips, the question which Pauline was mooting in the recesses of her own heart with regard to Florimel; and the thought flashed to her mind in a moment, that if her sister who was so deeply injured would forgive the author of her wrongs, it was assuredly incumbent upon herself to pardon the comparatively venial offences of which Florimel had been guilty toward her.

With the speed of lightning did this reflection traverse her imagination; and the next moment the handsome and

graceful Gabriel burst into the room. The impulse which urged Pauline at the instant was entirely in his favour; the frank and ingenuous remark of Octavia had dispelled all hesitation on the side of the young maiden, and the lovers precipitated themselves into each other's arms.

"Dearest, dearest Pauline," exclaimed Florimel; "at length we meet again!"

"And the past is forgotten, Gabriel," murmured the young lady, as she gave back the joyous and enraptured kisses which the nobleman imprinted upon her lips, her cheeks, and her brow.

Octavia clasped her hands together fervently, and the tears ran down her cheeks; but it was through joy, through emotions of gladness at the spectacle of her sister's happiness, and this was the first real gleam of sunshine that had dawned upon the soul of the unfortunate young lady since the dreadful day on which the full measure of the prince's perfidy became known to her.

When the first ebullition of feeling on the part of Florimel and Pauline was over, the nobleman paid his respects to Octavia, whom he treated with the affectionate interest and kind sympathy which a brother would devote to a cherished but afflicted sister. Then, seating himself by the side of Pauline, he took her hand, pressed it to his lips, and gazed long and tenderly upon her charming countenance.

"Oh, my beloved," he whispered at length in her ear, "there have been sad and dreadful misunderstandings between us; but let them be all cleared up now, and then forgotten for ever. They told me that you were married, that the account of your wedding was in the newspapers —"

"Who could possibly have deceived you thus, Gabriel?" inquired Pauline, amazed at the announcement thus made her.

"A person who was interested in deluding and persecuting me, my angel," answered the young nobleman; and as he still gazed on the lovely features of Pauline, he wondered how he could ever have been mad, base, and besotted enough to have dreamed of sacrificing the amiable virgin for the unknown woman of gallantry and pleasure. "But tell me, my charmer, tell me, my adored one, wherefore you so suddenly broke off everything between us?"

"Does not your own conscience answer the question,

Gabriel?" said Pauline, in a low tone of upbraiding, while her countenance suddenly became serious and mournful. "Ah! I have consented to forgive you this once, for the last time; but do not affect ignorance, instead of manifesting contrition."

"Pauline," replied the young nobleman, with the impassioned accents and fervid manner of unmistakable sincerity, "your words are but a continuation of that dreadful enigma which has so much perplexed me and almost driven me to despair. If I have erred since that day on which you wrote to tell me that everything was at an end between us, my offence must be looked upon with a compassionate consideration, because your own inexplicable conduct was but too well calculated to plunge me into any excesses that might divert my mind from pondering on its blasted hopes and its stricken affections. But until that letter came, I take God to witness that I was true and faithful in word and deed unto you —"

"Oh, Gabriel! add not this perjury to your other offences," exclaimed Pauline, emphatically; "or I shall withdraw my promise of pardon — I shall refuse all reconciliation."

"Then, in the name of God! explain yourself," cried Florimel, with a vehemence equally impassioned, "in order that I may enter upon my justification! You cannot, at least, refuse me that demand?"

"One word will suffice, Gabriel," said Pauline, in a tone profoundly mournful; then, in a scarcely audible whisper, she added, "I fancied that you could not have been at a loss to conjecture who the Flower Girl was at the masquerade."

"By Heaven! this enigma is intolerable, this mystery is more than I can endure," exclaimed the young nobleman, completely bewildered. "Ah! I recollect," he cried, as a sudden reminiscence struck him; "I was invited to a masquerade at Covent Garden Theatre, but I take God to witness that I did not go."

"Then has there been some foul treachery played upon me," said Pauline, staggered and confounded by the air of sincerity and the tone of confidence with which her lover's denial was given. "And, to speak candidly," she continued, in a musing tone, "I was struck then — at the time — by the circumstance that the masque in the blue domino with the braiding and the star was taller than you —"

“ A blue domino, braiding, and star! ” ejaculated Florimel, now more bewildered and mystified than ever. “ Yes, I know of such a domino, it was sent to me, but I commanded my page to destroy it. Oh, I begin to see through all this hideous misunderstanding,” he cried, suddenly struck by the conviction that some dark scheme of treachery, unsuspected by him until this very moment, had been perpetrated by Rao — alias Caroline Walters — through the agency of the blue domino. “ Perhaps it was not destroyed after all, and another person may have used it — ”

“ Oh, if such were indeed the case, Florimel,” interrupted Pauline, now dreadfully agitated, “ then have I done you a cruel injustice, wronged you by the vilest suspicions, and behaved toward you with a precipitation and an inconsiderateness which you can never overlook.”

“ Never overlook! ” repeated Gabriel, in an impassioned tone. “ There is nothing you can do toward me, beloved Pauline, that I am not prepared to pardon, because I have so much for which to ask forgiveness of you.”

And the young nobleman sank upon his knees at her feet.

“ Rise, oh, rise, my well-beloved Gabriel,” exclaimed the beautiful virgin, starting from her seat, a prey to the wildest agitation. Then, as she abandoned her hand to the nobleman who still knelt before her, she said with exceeding bitterness of tone, “ Ah! I was too hasty, yes, too precipitate; and I was sealing my own unhappiness at the same time that I was causing yours. But you will forgive me, Gabriel, you will forgive me — ”

“ Oh, let us grant mutual pardon, my angel, my beauty, my adored! ” cried Florimel, springing from his suppliant position and snatching the heavenly being to his breast.

“ Yes, pardon each other, whatever ills you may have done,” said Octavia, rising from the sofa, and approaching the tender pair. Then, suddenly bursting into tears, she cried, “ Oh, that the false prince would come and demand pardon of me! ”

Pauline and Gabriel now devoted themselves to the task of soothing Octavia’s abruptly awakened grief; and, leading her back to the sofa, they said all they could to afford her solace and sympathy. In a few minutes they succeeded in calming the afflicted young lady; and when they saw that the violence of the storm had thus passed, they returned to the

seat which they had previously occupied at the other end of the room.

"And now, my Pauline," said Lord Florimel, "will you explain to me all that is still bewildering and mysterious to me, relative to the blue domino?"

"Read this letter," observed the younger Miss Clarendon, producing the document from a desk which stood upon a table close by, "and you will then judge what my feelings must have been."

"Ah! it is as I thought," ejaculated the nobleman, instantaneously recognizing the handwriting of Caroline Walters.

He then ran his eyes hastily over the contents of the letter, which has already been given in our narrative, but which we shall reproduce in this place, as the precise terms in which it was worded may have escaped the memory of the reader:

"Lord Florimel is unfaithful to you. While affecting a complete reformation in his conduct, his private life is as profligate as ever; but his intrigues are carried on with a greater circumspection. To-morrow night he will be present at a masquerade at Covent Garden Theatre, disguised in a blue domino edged with a peculiar braiding and having a star of the same material on the top or crown of the hood. The object of his visit to that scene is a new love intrigue; and you may convince yourself with your own eyes that such is the fact. The writer of this note is animated by no other desire than a sincere wish to prevent so much virtue, generous confidence, amiability, and candour being sacrificed to such profound hypocrisy, such foul deceit, and such unpardonable treachery; for by all those virtues are you characterized, and by all these faults is Lord Florimel distinguished.

"Well aware that you are so utterly unacquainted with all the arts of London dissipation as to be ignorant even how to proceed in order to procure at so short a notice a suitable disguise for the purpose which this letter naturally suggests, the writer has made the necessary arrangements at a respectable fancy dress warehouse in London (the card of which is enclosed). The mistress of the establishment will have a chamber prepared for you to perform your toilet in the strictest privacy, and you can proceed thence in a hackney-coach to the theatre, which is at no great distance from the warehouse.

“One word more. The writer positively and earnestly enjoins you not to address a syllable of reproach to Lord Florimel within the walls of the theatre. You are even forbidden to accost him in a manner that may enable him to guess who you are. On the contrary, you must restrain your feelings and take time to deliberate upon the proper course to be subsequently pursued.”

“That last paragraph, Pauline,” exclaimed Lord Florimel, indignantly, when he had terminated the perusal of the letter, “must serve to convince you that I was not the wearer of the blue domino at the masquerade. Read it, examine it thoroughly; see how carefully it is worded, and how energetic is the caution that it conveys. Why were you not to address the wearer of the blue domino in a manner that would provoke reply? Because any conversation that might have occurred between you would have led to the discovery that a scandalous trick had been practised upon you and that I was not the masque whom you accosted.”

“Yes, the truth is apparent now, Gabriel,” said Pauline, fixing her eyes tenderly upon her lover; “and again do I implore your pardon for the readiness with which I yielded to the suspicions so wickedly excited and so artfully maintained. And now that I bethink me, there was a female masque, disguised as a Gipsy, who accosted me on that memorable evening and avowed the authorship of the anonymous letter. I questioned her concerning the motive which had induced her to warn me against holding any discourse with the Blue Domino, and I remember that her tone was ferocious, vindictive, and malignant in the extreme, as she replied that those were her secrets. Moreover, it was she herself who deliberately suggested the very terms in which I ought to convey to you the intimation that everything was at an end between us.”

“The wretch!” murmured Florimel, between his set teeth. “But did you catch a glimpse of her countenance?” he inquired.

“I noticed that she had fine dark eyes, which flashed through the holes of her mask,” said Pauline, “brilliant teeth and black hair. Her stature was short; but she was gracefully formed, and she was evidently quite young.”

“Enough,” exclaimed Florimel; “’tis she, the unfortunate girl, and I merited all her vindictiveness! But once more

do I fall upon my knees in your presence, Pauline," he cried, in an impassioned tone, "and never shall I rise until I have confessed my errors, my misdeeds, and received your full pardon."

"No, Gabriel, you shall make no confession to me," exclaimed the generous-hearted Pauline. "Rise, I will not listen to one word of self-crimination from your lips. I have been harsh, precipitate, unkind toward you in one respect, and you have forgiven me. Shall I be less considerate on your behalf? Besides, I can already divine the truth in reference to the vindictive young woman who achieved so much mischief and who personated the Gipsy at the masquerade. She was doubtless one who had good cause to deplore a broken pledge on your part, and it will now be our duty to seek her, console and propitiate her, and ensure her a competency, if she be poor, for the remainder of her days."

"Ah! you know not of whom you are speaking, Pauline," exclaimed Florimel. "Do you remember the dreadful murder that was committed in Lambeth some two or three months back? Well, that same Caroline Walters — the murderess — is the young woman whom you would console and propitiate, and she was arrested last evening."

"Oh, the unhappy girl!" cried Pauline, clasping her hands and shuddering visibly. "And that infamous woman — the milliner of Pall Mall — was also taken into custody, I have heard, charged with crimes that are almost incredible —"

"But which appear, notwithstanding, to be conclusively brought home to her," added Florimel. "Let us not, however, devote a word or a thought to any one or anything, unless connected with our own affairs, for these must now be the all-engrossing topic. Yes, Pauline," continued the young nobleman, still remaining upon his knees before her, and speaking in a voice of the deepest contrition, "I betrayed that young girl — that Caroline Walters — and hence the fearful revenge which she has sought to wreak upon me, by alienating your affections from me for ever. It is true that she became my victim before I was even acquainted with you; but can you — will you — bestow your hand on one who has erred so deeply as I?"

"The candour of the confession, Gabriel, permits me not

to hesitate a moment how to answer you," said Pauline. "Oh, surely, surely you are repentant for the past —"

"God knows how penitent I am!" ejaculated the young nobleman, fervidly. "But it is for you, Pauline, to become my guardian angel, my saving genius; and I will reward you with a love as unbounded and a fidelity as true as your virtues merit."

"Rise, rise, my Gabriel, and be happy!" exclaimed Pauline, forcing the young nobleman to abandon his suppliant posture. "There, seat yourself by my side, and let me hear you converse without an excitement that is painful to us both. The past cannot be recalled, but it may be atoned for, perhaps; and contrition is the first step toward expiation."

"You are an angel, Pauline," cried Florimel, straining the lovely girl to his breast. "But you little know what remarkable vicissitudes I have experienced since last we met. Disguised as a black page did Caroline Walters enter my service, with a view to achieve my ruin by any means that should present themselves or under any circumstances that might arise to favour her designs. Thus was it that she was enabled to purloin from me certain documents, the loss of which menaced my peerage and my fortune. But the papers were restored to me this morning, Pauline, and I can still place a coronet upon thy brow and make thee the sharer of my wealth. And this reminds me that the persons through whose agency I regained possession of my deeds are the same who delivered you the other day from the power of that vilest of miscreants, — the Prince of Wales. Yes, I have this morning heard all that happened beneath the roof of your treacherous neighbours, the Pages; and you may readily imagine how great was my surprise, how infinite my joy, when I learned that you were residing once more in the very dwelling where we first became acquainted. I lost no time in coming hither, Pauline; and the hopes which animated me have not been disappointed, for, Heaven be praised! we are reconciled once more."

"And it shall be your fault, my Gabriel, if any further misunderstanding takes place between us," said Pauline, bending her beautiful eyes affectionately upon her lover's handsome countenance; "for, on my part, I can securely promise that never again will I yield to unconfirmed suspicions or presumptive evidence —"

“ Oh, the noblest feelings are of a jealous nature, my Pauline,” exclaimed Florimel; “ and unless you had loved me tenderly you would not have resented my supposed infidelity severely.”

“ I am grateful to thee, Gabriel,” whispered Pauline, “ for thus finding an extenuation for my injurious, rash, and precipitate conduct toward thee. But tell me, who could that individual have been who wore the blue domino and personated yourself at the masquerade? ”

“ Doubtless some accomplice in Caroline Walters’s scheme of revenge,” replied Florimel. “ And now let us avert our eyes as much as possible from the past, and think only of the present, — yes, and of the future also,” he added, pressing the maiden’s hand to his lips. “ It is for you, Pauline,” he continued, in a low and tender tone, “ to settle the day which will render us both happy, unite us, never more to separate, and, while bestowing upon me a husband’s right to protect and cherish you, afford me also a brother’s privilege to watch over and console your afflicted and deeply wronged sister.”

Then, with melting looks and blushing cheeks, the charming maiden murmured a few words in her lover’s ear; and doubtless the response which they conveyed to his solicitation was agreeable to his hopes and wishes, for he once more caught her in his arms, strained her to his breast, and covered her cheeks with kisses.

CHAPTER XXII

AN EXPLOSION AMONGST THE NEW LIGHTS

WHILE the preceding scene was taking place at the corner house in the genteel little row known as Paradise Villas, the occupants of the dwelling a couple of doors off were playing their part in a somewhat less agreeable drama at the police court in Bow Street, Covent Garden.

The reader has probably borne in mind the circumstance that when Mr. Page introduced himself on the first occasion to Carlton Palace, he informed the Prince of Wales that, on taking a house in Paradise Villas, he found out that the Honourable Misses Clarendon dwelt on one side, and the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby on the other side of his new abode.

Such was indeed the fact; for the esteemed and estimable pastor of the New Lights, accompanied by his admired and admirable friend Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, had transferred their quarters from the establishment of Mrs. Piggleberry in Jermyn Street to the beautiful suburban villa aforesaid. The worthy dame was of course well aware that these chosen vessels had thus removed to the Edgware Road, inasmuch as she had given them a highly satisfactory character when referred to by the landlord of their new tenement; but she was not equally well informed in respect to the fact that they had enticed her niece, the pretty Ann Jones, to follow them secretly and undertake the duties of housekeeper. In plain terms, the niece was found to be missing a few days after the removal of the pious gentlemen; and her parents, from whose home she had fled, together with her aunt, at whose house she had been a constant visitress, were overwhelmed with sorrow and cruelly perplexed at her sudden disappearance.

Indeed, there was some cause for suspecting that the young woman had experienced foul play; inasmuch as, at the period of her flight, she was passing a few days with her aunt, by whom she was sent out to liquidate some little accounts that were owing in the neighbourhood, and for which purpose a ten-pound note was given to her. But she never returned; and, on subsequent inquiry, it proved that she had not paid the debts at all, nor even visited the shops where the accounts were owing. She had been home to her parents' abode for a few minutes, to put on her best clothes and procure her father's umbrella; but from the moment she started forth again, all trace was lost of her. Her father, mother, and aunt had therefore naturally experienced much alarm and uneasiness on her account, and all the researches and inquiries which they set afoot proved unavailing. The neighbours shook their heads and observed significantly that "Miss Ann was a pretty girl, and she knew it;" some added that "she was a thorough coquette and given to fine dressing lately;" and others ventured to prophesy that "she would come back again when she wanted the midwife's assistance." But her parents and aunt turned a deaf ear to these remarks. They could not possibly think that Ann had gone astray after becoming a member of the New Lights; nor did it for a moment strike these worthy people that she had been allured away by the odour of sanctity which attended like a halo upon the persons of the Reverend Nathaniel Sneaksby and Brother Paxwax.

Thus several weeks had passed, during which Ann Jones was pleasantly and comfortably employed in discharging the duties of housekeeper at the new dwelling where the chosen vessels had established themselves in Paradise Villas. But it happened at last — indeed, early in the very morning of the day on which Florimel and Pauline were reunited — that Mr. Jones, Ann's respected father and consequently Mrs. Pigglesberry's beloved brother, was passing along the Edgeware Road, when, to his infinite surprise, he beheld his daughter taking in the hot rolls at Mr. Sneaksby's front door. The ejaculation of wonder which burst from his lips at this discovery met the ears of Miss Ann Jones; and instantaneously recognizing her sire, she dropped the rolls as if they were scorpions, stepped back into the house, and slammed the door in the face of the astonished baker, who naturally

thought that the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby's confidential domestic had suddenly gone mad.

But Mr. Jones, to whose comprehension all the perfidy of the pious gentlemen suddenly became clear and apparent as daylight, was resolved to recover his daughter; and, rushing up the steps, he began to knock furiously at the front door. For some time no regard was paid to his noisy summons; and therefore he continued to knock, and knock, as if inspired with a determination to break in the door on the one hand and arouse the whole neighbourhood on the other. Doubtless both these catastrophes were at last apprehended by the inmates of the house, and they therefore thought it prudent to capitulate. Accordingly, Mr. Ichabod Paxwax opened the door and besought Mr. Jones to step in and "settle the matter amicably;" but Mr. Jones being a very passionate individual was not to be soothed or coaxed by the bland appeal of the chosen vessel. He therefore preferred taking his stand on the threshold, and bawling out to his daughter to come forth from "that den of hypocrisy." Awfully scandalized at this proceeding, Brother Paxwax used every endeavour to pacify the irate Mr. Jones; but Mr. Jones was not to be pacified at any price short of the surrender of his daughter, and as this consummation did not appear to be nigh at hand, he continued to bawl and vociferate more lustily than ever.

The Reverend Mr. Sneaksby accordingly came forth to see what effect his eloquence would have in the matter; and he began by denying in the most positive terms that Ann Jones was in his house at all, alleging that he certainly possessed a maid servant very much like her, but whose name was Mary Smith. For a few moments Mr. Jones was staggered, and really began to think it just possible that he had made a mistake; but all on a sudden he caught sight of an umbrella — his own umbrella — which he instantaneously recognized as the one that his daughter had taken away with her on the day of her disappearance. Bounding into the passage like an infuriate bull-dog, Mr. Jones seized upon the umbrella, and therewith set to work to belabour the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby so unmercifully that the pious vessel was covered all over with bruises before he had even time to raise an arm in self-defence. Mr. Paxwax roared out, "Murder!" and Mr. Sneaksby vociferated, "Fire!" or anything

else that came to the tip of his tongue. Then, in the midst of the fracas, Ann Jones — the fair, but frail Ann Jones herself — emerged, shrieking and screaming, from the back parlour. The whole neighbourhood was alarmed, the constables were sent for, and the upshot was that Mr. Jones, his daughter, and the two influential leaders of the New Lights, together with the umbrella, were all ignominiously bundled into a hackney-coach which was passing at the time, and in this manner duly conveyed to Bow Street.

Immediately upon their arrival at the police office, Mr. Jones despatched a messenger to Jermyn Street, to inform Mrs. Pigglesberry of what had occurred and obtain her attendance at the forthcoming examination; and the case was accordingly kept back until the worthy woman's arrival. The parties were then introduced to the notice of the magistrate; and a very singular appearance they made.

In the first place the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby put on his longest, demurest, and most puritanically miserable look, screwing up his mouth, and yet drawing down his chin at the same time, an operation which only gentlemen of his class can ever hope to succeed in accomplishing. Secondly, that excellent creature Brother Paxwax assumed a demeanour so resigned and so expressive of injured innocence, that had it not seemed most sublimely ridiculous in connection with his rubicund countenance and brandy-loving looks, it doubtless would have produced the desired effect. Thirdly, there was Mr. Jones, with a fierce aspect and a stern demeanour, ready to pitch into anybody or everybody at the slightest provocation, and bestowing irate glances upon the pious vessels and his frail daughter by turns. Fourthly, there was the young female herself, — abashed, trembling, and looking as if she entertained a vague apprehension of speedily becoming better acquainted with Bridewell than she as yet was. Lastly, we must observe that poor Mrs. Pigglesberry, standing apart from the rest, appeared the very picture of woe and seemed intent on the process of inflaming her right eye with the corner of her apron.

The two leaders of the New Lights, Mr. Jones, and his daughter, were all placed at the bar, charged with fighting, creating a disturbance, and alarming the neighbourhood in which the occurrence took place; but the magistrate had not entered very far into an investigation of the affair before

he obtained sufficient insight into its origin and nature to determine him to dismiss the charge and place the whole groundwork of the proceedings upon another footing.

"Now, Mr. Jones," he said, "you complain that Nathaniel Sneaksby and Ichabod Paxwax have enticed your daughter away from home, is it not so?"

"Yes, your worship," replied the individual thus addressed; "and if that isn't a reason why I should punch their heads —"

"Hush! hush!" ejaculated the magistrate. "We know nothing of punching heads here, or rather, we know too much of it in the cases that come before us. But what age is your daughter, Mr. Jones?"

"Turned of twenty, your worship," was the answer; "and if that isn't an age when she ought to know better, I'm cursed if I —"

"Hush! hush!" interposed the functionary on the bench. "You must not make use of such language, or I shall fine you five shillings. I want to do you justice, for I see that you have been ill-treated; but you should curb your temper."

"The man of Belial!" moaned Mr. Sneaksby, first bending his eyes with an expression of sorrowful reproach upon Mr. Jones, and then turning up the said eyes like a duck in a thunder-storm.

"The man of wrath!" groaned Mr. Paxwax, imitating his reverend leader as much as possible, alike in tone and looks.

"Silence!" exclaimed the usher of the court, sharply.

"What saith that Philistine, Brother Paxwax?" asked Mr. Sneaksby, assuming the martyred air of a saint.

"That we must bridle our tongues, Brother Sneaksby," was the lugubrious response.

"Silence!" once more ejaculated the usher.

"Please your washup," observed Mrs. Pigglesberry, imagining that this was the very best time for her to state what she knew of the matter, "them two unsavoury wessels has debauched and ruined the poor gal which I loved as well as if she was my own mother, — leastways, my darter, I should say —"

"Oh, aunt," exclaimed Miss Ann Jones, under the impression that she could do nothing better than get up a little scene, and perhaps go into hysterics by way of a finale, "I

know that I've been very ungrateful, very undu-u-tiful to both fa-a-ther and yourself-elf," she continued, in a whimpering tone, "but it was all along of that tall hypocrite there —"

"Sister Ann, sister Ann!" exclaimed Mr. Sneaksby, in a tone of mild rebuke, as the girl pointed her left hand toward him while she held her apron up to her eyes with her right. "Have I not been even as a brother unto thee —"

"Yea, verily, and as a husband too," added Mr. Paxwax, thinking to aid his leader's cause by the remark.

"I've not the slightest doubt about it," observed the magistrate, drily. "But this young woman is twenty years of age, and therefore able to take care of herself. The charge of abduction will not stand; and unless you can show me, Mr. Jones, that when your daughter was enticed away, she took some of your property with her, and that such property is now beneath the roof of these persons —"

"To be sure!" ejaculated Jones. "My umbrella —"

"And my ten-pound note!" exclaimed Mrs. Pigglesberry.

"Oh, the filthy lucre!" moaned Mr. Sneaksby, raising his eyes and hands, as if in appeal to Heaven.

"Oh, the base cotton umbrella!" groaned Mr. Paxwax, in the deep trouble of his spirit.

"Yes, but we must hear a little more of these things," said the magistrate, who was evidently bent upon punishing the New Light leaders if he possibly could manage it. "And first about the ten-pound note, as that is the most serious?"

"Well, sir, I'll confess everything, please, sir, that I will, if you won't hurt me," exclaimed Ann Jones, now crying in bitter reality, for she saw that the affair was every instant becoming more and more serious.

"That's right, tell the truth, gal," said Mrs. Pigglesberry; "and his washup won't do you no harm."

"Oh, aunt," cried the young woman, reproachfully, "it was all your fault that ever I went among them New Lights, and you've brought me to this," she added, sobbing grievously.

"Cuss the New Lights!" ejaculated Mrs. Pigglesberry, darting furious glances at Mr. Sneaksby and Mr. Paxwax, who stood gazing upon the magistrate with the meek and sanctimonious air of outraged innocence resigned to all its wrongs.

"Now if all this isn't a reason," exclaimed Mr. Jones, who

was very fond of introducing his remarks in those terms, "to make one ready to knock these fellows' heads together —"

"Hush! we can have no knocking of heads here," cried the magistrate. "Now, madam," he continued, turning toward Mrs. Pigglesberry, "tell me about that ten-pound note."

"I will, sir, and I won't deceive you," said the good woman, with a curtsy. "Please your worship, I'm a respectable widder which rents a house in Jermyn Street, and pays rent and taxes as reglar as quarter-days and collectors comes around. I gets my living by lodgings, — leastways, by taking in gentlemen and doing for them, — which is the way I come to have them sneaking waggabones a-living in my house and okkipying rooms that I might have let to their betters. But I've found 'em out now, the canting hum-bugs!"

"The poor benighted creature is in wrath," moaned Mr. Sneaksby.

"And, verily, she revileth us," groaned Mr. Paxwax.

"We are in the hands of the ungodly, brother," sighed his Reverence.

"Yea, in the power of the men of Belial," gasped Ichabod.

"Forty stripes save one shalt thou have on thine hide, friend Paxwax," whispered the former.

"And a night and a day shalt thou sit in the stocks, friend Sneaksby," murmured the latter.

"Come, cease that talking," cried the magistrate. "And now about this ten-pound note?"

"Please your washup," resumed Mrs. Pigglesberry, with another curtsy, "I'll tell the truth. It was a new note, — brand-new, as one maysay, — not a bit soiled in any one place, and crisplike to the touch. Well, your washup, I gives it to my niece there, and, 'Ann,' I says, says I, 'you'll just step around to the tradesmen and pay the veek's bills,' says I. 'Yes, aunt,' she says, says she, 'I vill.' 'Do, Ann,' says I; and I gives her the ten-pound note. Away she trots, and I goes down into the kitchen to cook some liver and bacon for my dinner, for I'm exceedin' fond of liver and bacon, your washup, besides its being cheap —"

"The fleshpots of Egypt," groaned Mr. Sneaksby, smacking his lips.

"A savoury mess, such as Ichabod loveth," moaned Mr. Paxwax.

"But I always puts an ing'un into the gravy, please your washup," continued Mrs. Pigglesberry, "and if your washup will only tell your cook the next time —"

"The ten-pound note," exclaimed the magistrate, impatiently. "This is not a case of liver and bacon, my good woman."

"No more it isn't," said Mrs. Pigglesberry, seriously; though with a dubious look and mystic shake of her head, as if she were not quite sure that the dish in question had not something to do with the matter. "Well, your washup, I gave the girl the ten-pound note —"

"And I gave it to Mr. Snea-eks-by," said Ann Jones, whimpering. "It was agreed that I should leave home and go and live at his new house after a little while; but I wasn't to follow him directly, for fear that mother and father and aunt should suspect where I'd gone. But when I got the ten pounds, I thought it was the best time to go to him, as I could keep the money to buy clothes with. But I didn't buy clothes, for Mr. Sneaksby was very short at the time, and when he knew that I had the note he asked me to give it to him. He said the Lord had need of it."

"Oh, Ann, thou canst not say that I took thy shekels of gold!" observed the reverend gentleman, with a solemn shake of the head, and an awful elongation of the countenance.

"Nor the shekels of silver," added Paxwax, in a sombre tone.

"Yes, you did, though," cried Ann, tartly; "and you both got so tipsy the same night that I was ashamed of you. But these two fellows, your worship, were always drinking; and they sometimes used me very badly. I should have run away from them, only I'd no place to go to, for I didn't dare return home. And now that everything has come out at last, I don't mind telling all I know of them. They're a scandalous pair of impostors, and that's what they are," added Miss Jones, working herself up into a fury.

"Sister Ann, sister Ann," exclaimed Mr. Sneaksby, shaking his forefinger at the young woman, "thou wilt repent of this ingratitude to one who hath been a kind master and a loving brother unto thee!"

"Oh! do send him to prison, your worship," cried the

girl, whimpering once more; "for he seduced me, he did; he made me go astray; and if father will take me home again, I'll be good and steady in future."

"Well, young woman," remarked the magistrate, "we shall see what your father says presently. And now answer me one or two questions. Did Sneaksby know how you came by the ten pounds that you gave him?"

"To be sure he did, your worship," was the reply. "I told him that aunt gave it to me, and he said the Lord had need of it. So I handed it over to him. He'd such power over me then, he had."

"And has he ever paid you any portion of it back again?" inquired the magistrate.

"Not a farthing, your worship, although he's had plenty of money since, from Salem and other places. And, what's more, the New Lights are building him and Brother Paxwax both beautiful houses —"

"If this isn't a reason to make your worship send these rascals to prison, I'll be hanged if I know what would," exclaimed Mr. Jones. "As for my daughter, I'll take her home again and forgive her this time —"

"And I won't do it no more, father," cried Ann, turning in an appealing manner toward her parent. "But will mother forgive me?"

"Yes, yes, it shall be all right," answered her father.

"Come, don't cry, my love," whispered Mrs. Piggleberry, in a soothing tone. "I know it was all my fault for taking you to Salem and throwing you in the way of them New Lights. A precious state of grease they've brought you to after all."

"Now, one more question, young woman," said the magistrate. "Was the prisoner Paxwax cognizant of the affair of the ten-pound note?"

"He knew all about it, your worship," replied Ann Jones; "in fact it was him that went and changed it the moment I gave it to them."

"That will do," observed the magistrate; "we need not go into the case of the umbrella. Now, prisoners, what have you to say in your defence?"

"Verily, the young woman hath spoken falsely," said the Reverend Nathaniel Sneaksby, in his habitual canting drone; "and thou, O righteous judge! wilt not be swayed by Satan

to do evil unto me. Never received I aught from the young woman; neither shekels of gold, nor shekels of silver; and as toucheth her chastity, if she be not a virgin, of a surety it is not I that have defiled her. I took her as mine hand-maiden to serve and minister unto me, at a wage of three pounds for each fourth part of a year. And forasmuch as she hath not yet tarried with me so long a period as three months, verily is her wage not due till the term cometh. She is wroth against me, because I have rebuked her for her too great forwardness touching a certain ungodly vessel whom men do call the pot-boy at the public-house which is nearest unto my abode. But I yield her my forgiveness; nay, more, I will even pay her her wage, albeit though not yet due, and I will send for Brother Unthank Snag and Brother Crick, and bid them come with money in their hands that they may present unto this widow the ten shekels which her niece did take from her. This will I do, thou interpreter of the law," added Mr. Sneaksby, apostrophizing the magistrate, "so that there may be peace between us, and I may gird up my loins and depart!"

"Amen!" said Ichabod Paxwax, in a deep solemn tone.

"Have you anything to urge in your own behalf?" demanded the magistrate of this latter individual.

"I have said it," was the response.

"Then shall I proceed to adjudicate summarily in this matter," continued the magistrate. "It is through the vile hypocrisy, the wretched cant, and the foul immoralities of such men as yourselves, that the cause of true religion is injured. I care not whether an individual be a member of the Established Church, a Dissenter, or a Catholic; so long as he is sincere, honest, and true in his professions and his practice, he is worthy of esteem and respect. Indeed, I am well aware that taking the whole body of Dissenters generally, they are in every way deserving of admiration and praise. But there are hypocrites, maw-worms, false prophets, and canting impostors in all sects and all creeds; and under the respectable cloak of Dissent, do cheats and counterfeits like you, prisoners at the bar, succeed in preying upon the credulous and unwary, the weak-minded and the ignorant. Your offence against society is all the greater, because you are the real wolves in sheep's clothing of whom the Holy Scriptures speak. You assume the most sacred

characters, in order to conceal the most depraved courses and the most dissolute lives. Society must be protected against such men, true religion shall not be outraged with impunity. I therefore sentence you each to three months' imprisonment as rogues and vagabonds. Clear the court!"

The Reverend Mr. Sneaksby threw up his arms in dismay, while Brother Paxwax fell on his knees and began to blubber like a schoolboy. But the magistrate was inexorable; and the two influential leaders of the New Lights were lugged out of the office and locked up in a cell until all the cases of the day were disposed of. They were then conveyed in a hackney-coach to the House of Correction, where we shall leave them to deplore their unhappy fate and curse the day on which they undertook to bring Ann Jones to a state of grace.

But ere we conclude this chapter we must avail ourselves of the opportunity to declare that, in depicting such characters as Sneaksby and Paxwax, we aim only at exposing the maw-worms and the hypocritical reprobates who make a trade of religion; and that we have never harboured the slightest intention of ridiculing or maligning the honest, sincere, and conscientious pastors who do their duty to their flock. We are well aware that in the Dissenting ministry there are thousands of excellent, amiable, and truly pious men; and we therefore delineate Mr. Sneaksby as a type of the exceptions to the rule, and not of the class itself. We will even declare our positive conviction that for morality, useful learning, and disinterested zeal, the Dissenting ministers are incomparably superior to the bigoted, narrow-minded, selfish, and dissipated clergy of the Established Church.

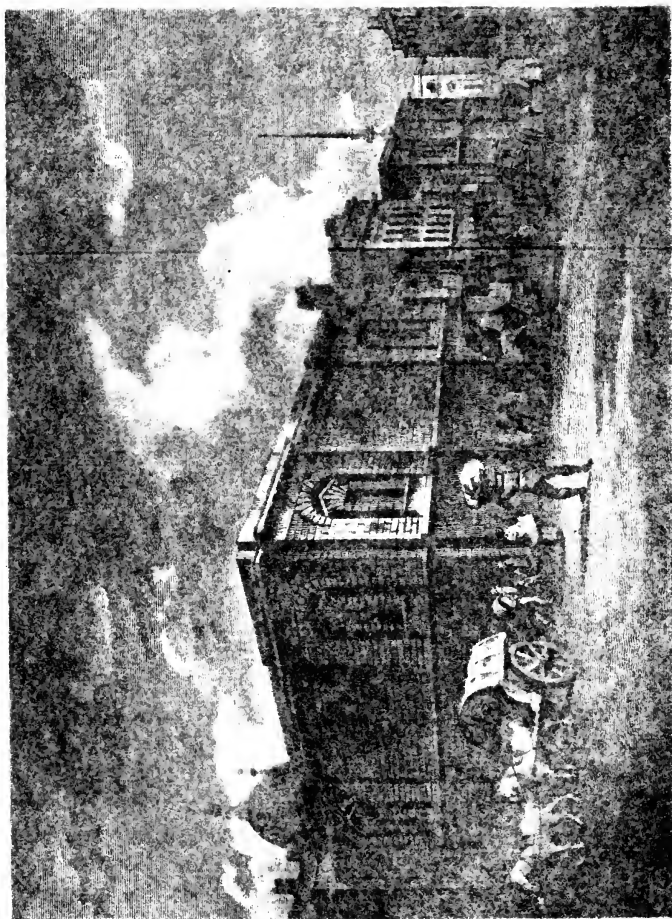
CHAPTER XXIII

AN INTERVIEW IN NEWGATE

NEARLY two months and a half had now elapsed since the Honourable Arthur Eaton was committed to Newgate, to await his trial on the charge of murdering his valet William Dudley.

We must remind our readers that when the investigation of that dark and mysterious tragedy took place at Bow Street, Mr. Eaton addressed the magistrate in the following manner: "I can only say that I am innocent of this foul deed which is imputed to me. That a tremendous mass of circumstantial evidence has accumulated against me, I readily admit; but there is a key to the reading of this terrible mystery, a clue to the unravelling of this skein of incidents, at present so tangled and so complicated. That is, however, my secret for the present; useless and unavailing were it to enter upon any explanations at this moment or in this place. No, for a more solemn occasion and a higher tribunal shall be reserved a narrative the details of which will cause every heart to thrill with horror throughout the land, and turn into sympathy and commiseration the loathing and abhorrence which in the meantime may attach themselves unto me." It will be readily understood that Arthur Eaton alluded, in this address, to the bitter persecution which he had experienced at the hands of Fernanda, and every detail of which he purposed to reveal in self-defence at the proper time.

But in those days of which we are writing, the newspapers were of diminutive size, and their reports of cases were necessarily limited and brief. It therefore happened that the whole of Arthur Eaton's address to the magistrate was omitted; and not the slightest reference was made to his



NEWGATE
Photograph after painting by Miller.

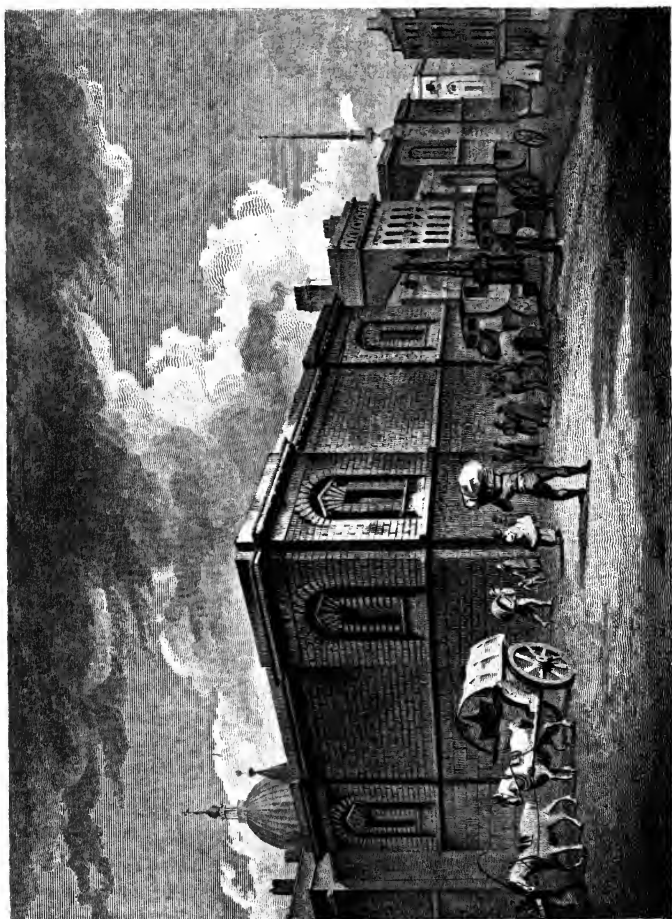
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But in those days of which we are writing, the newspapers were a different size, and their reports of cases were necessarily laconic and brief. It therefore happened that the whole of Arthur Eaton's address to the magistrate was omitted; and a *Photogravure after painting by Miller* made to his





declaration that he possessed a key to the reading of the mystery and would give startling explanations when put upon his trial. But the reporters did insert the concluding incident of the proceedings at the police court; namely, that as Arthur Eaton was being led away, the assembled spectators testified their compassion by sundry remarks, proving that they looked upon him as a monomaniac swayed by an irresistible instinct for blood.

If such, then, was the impression made upon the minds of the persons who had attended the proceedings and heard the prisoner's address to the magistrate, it cannot be wondered at if the same opinion should be adopted by those who knew nothing more of the matter than what they gleaned from the imperfect reports in the newspapers. In fact, these reports were precisely of a nature to encourage the belief that Arthur Eaton was a monomaniac, and that he had no explanation in reserve nor any defence to offer when the day of trial should come. Such was the general impression upon the public mind; but there were of course a few individuals who thought differently and more profoundly upon the subject. Lord Marchmont, the prisoner's father, for instance, could not possibly imagine that his son was guilty of the crime imputed to him; although the shock occasioned by such a tremendous calamity had thrown the old nobleman on a sick bed and brought him to the very verge of the grave. Then again, there was Pauline Clarendon, who entertained too sublime a confidence not only in the rectitude of her cousin, but likewise in the strength of his mind, to believe for a single moment that he had perpetrated the deed either wilfully or under the influence of a dominant mania. Lord and Lady Holderness had likewise, no doubt, strong opinions upon the same subject; but up to the hour when they encountered Caroline Walters disguised as a midshipman, they had felt convinced that Arthur Eaton must inevitably succumb, on the day of trial, beneath the circumstantial evidence that weighed so tremendously against him.

Nearly two months and a half, we said, had elapsed since the committal of the young gentleman to Newgate. During that period there was one sitting of the criminal tribunal at the Old Bailey; but it followed so closely upon Arthur's consignment to gaol, that his trial was postponed until the ensuing session. In the meantime he recovered somewhat

from the dreadful shock which he had experienced on finding that he was regarded as a monomaniac; and during the last two or three weeks of his incarceration, he had long and frequent interviews with his professional adviser. Still, however, was he weighed down by a deep sense of misfortune, degradation, and grief; his cheeks had become as pale as they were when he appeared to be perishing beneath the influence of the secret poison, and he felt as if all his vital powers were sapped and undermined beyond all earthly means of restoration.

In such a condition was he, — physically attenuated and morally depressed, — when he was one morning informed by a turnkey that a prisoner who had been committed to Newgate on the previous evening anxiously and earnestly desired an interview with him. To the questions which Arthur put, the functionary responded that the prisoner alluded to was a certain Caroline Walters, — the young woman charged with the murder of Mrs. Lindley, the midwife. With the vividness and celerity of an inspiration did it strike Mr. Eaton that the object of the interview now solicited more or less concerned his own special case; and, yielding at once to the influence of this presentiment, he desired the turnkey to bring the young woman to his cell.

The regulations of the prison were far from being strict or severe in the times of which we are writing; and the liberal fee that Caroline had placed in the turnkey's hands was the incentive to those good offices which he was thus exercising in her behalf. Accordingly, having obtained Arthur Eaton's assent to the demand for an interview, the turnkey hastened to conduct Caroline into the young gentleman's presence.

She was once more habited in the attire which became her sex; and the moment she entered Eaton's cell, he was struck with the conviction that the mere girl who now stood before him was not likely to be the murderess of the old midwife. But a second and more scrutinizing look which he fixed upon her countenance enabled him to discover an expression of stern resolution in her lineaments; and the thought then arose within him that the strong mind of an experienced woman haply tenanted that form of youthful grace and of winning charms scarcely as yet matured.

The turnkey intimated that he should return again in an

hour; and, on leaving the cell, he locked and bolted the door. Arthur rose from his seat, placed a chair for Caroline, and then, resuming his place, anxiously waited for her to explain the purport of her visit.

"Mr. Eaton," she said in a low, but firm and impressive, tone, "we have an identity of interests at this moment; and the discovery which I have made that such is the fact is the only apology I need offer for obtruding myself upon your notice. In a word, you are innocent, and I am innocent; and we must aid and succour each other in proving our guiltlessness, ay, and in bringing the real criminal to justice."

"The real criminal in which case?" asked the young gentleman, naturally placing himself upon his guard with a stranger.

"In both cases," was the significant reply.

"Ah! is it possible?" exclaimed Eaton, with a start.

"Do you doubt it?" demanded Caroline, earnestly.

"You mistake the feeling which wrung from me that ejaculation of astonishment," returned Arthur. "The truth is, I had myself entertained a certain suspicion, but only vaguely and distantly, it is true; and now my wonder is excited at observing that you speak confidently of what I had scarcely dared to suspect faintly."

"I understand," said Caroline. "There have been moments when you have fancied it to be just possible that the same hand which inflicted the death-blow upon William Dudley likewise carried the work of assassination into the home of the midwife? But you have not been able as yet to bring your mind to the settled conviction that such was indeed the fact?"

"You have interpreted my thoughts accurately, Miss Walters," observed the Honourable Mr. Eaton. "But how have you obtained the certainty —"

"That Fernanda is the murderess in both cases?" said Caroline, in ominous tone and with significant manner. "Ah! sir, the evidence against her speaks with a thousand tongues. I know everything connected with yourself and that perfidious creature, Lady Holderness; for I was an inmate of the midwife's house when she became a mother there, yes, and when the offspring of her shame was foully murdered on a night of tempest and of storm."

"Murdered!" ejaculated Arthur Eaton, every lineament

of his pale but handsome countenance suddenly expressing the most acute horror.

"Yes, murdered, foully murdered!" repeated Caroline. "I heard the poor infant's scream penetrating through the furious noises of the night —"

"Enough! enough!" cried Eaton, starting from his chair. "'Twas my child, the offspring of our love, ay, and of our guilt, but I could have cherished it as fondly as if it were not born in shame. Oh, the foul, foul murderess. Just Heaven! I will show her no mercy now. There have been moments when compassion and pity have well-nigh prompted me to put a seal upon my lips concerning all that I have to tell, and mount the scaffold, or be consigned as a maniac to Bethlem, so that she might be saved. For I have remembered that I seduced her, that I wronged her, and that it was a woman's most righteous and most natural vengeance which she sought to wreak upon me. But now, now, that you assure me she is the murderess of her own child — my child —"

"As there is a God above us, sir, I am telling you the truth!" exclaimed Caroline. "Mine was the next room to that which Fernanda occupied at the midwife's; and I heard enough to afford me a dread insight into the whole appalling tragedy. For the babe, at the very instant of its birth, was flung forth from the window, into the deep and rapid waters of the Thames —"

"Just Heaven! did thy thunders sleep that night?" said Eaton, in a tone of mingled solemnity and despair, as he sank back upon the seat whence he had risen a few minutes previously. "That Fernanda was cruel, implacable, merciless, I was, alas! too well aware; but that she was a veritable fiend in human shape, I had yet to learn."

"And now, sir, can you not believe that the woman who assented to the murder of her own child," asked Caroline, "is fully capable of putting to death all those who obstruct her path or menace her safety? In a word, is it not probable — is it not certain — that the same hand which assassinated William Dudley inflicted death upon the midwife? Look, listen, and attend carefully! The two crimes were perpetrated on the same night, both enveloped in a deep mystery, and both flinging their ominous shadows upon innocent persons. Of those innocent persons you are one and I am the other."

“Proceed — proceed,” said Arthur in an excited tone; for the murder of the babe was now goading even his generous soul to a savage vindictiveness.

“I have already informed you, sir,” continued the young woman, “that I was an inmate of Mrs. Lindley’s establishment at the same time as Lady Holderness, — then Fernanda Aylmer. But I knew not who she was; nor, indeed, did I become enlightened on that head until yesterday. However, at the midwife’s abode of infamy, I formed the acquaintance of Fernanda; and she spoke darkly and mysteriously to me of the terrible progress of her vengeance, — a vengeance that was unsuspected by its object, unknown by its victim. And I also longed for vengeance, for, like her, had I been betrayed by the seducer. She promised to impart her secret to me, — the secret of that vengeance which she was inflicting, even from the retreat of shame, upon the author of her dishonour. But she left the house suddenly and abruptly, and I saw her no more until yesterday, when I encountered her, leaning upon the arm of a gentleman, in Cavendish Square. I accosted her, and she spurned me from her, yes, spurned me with her looks, — those looks that she can render so fierce and menacing when she chooses. The door of the palatial mansion which she entered was shut in my face, and at the bottom of my soul did a feeling of bitter rancour spring up at the instant against that arrogant patrician female and her haughty-looking companion. I went into the neighbourhood and instituted certain inquiries. Heavens! what a light suddenly burst upon my mind. That lady, as I heard, was the late Honourable Miss Fernanda Aylmer, now the wife of Lord Holderness. She had formerly been engaged to you, sir, the match was broken off, — no one knew wherefore, — and you had for many months pined with a malady that was deemed incurable. But you had suddenly revived, your health came back, and then occurred the mysterious and unaccountable murder of your valet, followed by your consignment to this gaol. These particulars — some gleaned in the course of my inquiries, and others already familiar to my knowledge — turned all my thoughts into a new channel. I had suddenly found a clue to the unravelment of some mysteries; while strange suspicions and glimmerings of light were taking birth in my mind relative to others. I at once comprehended that you, Mr. Eaton, were the object

of that remorseless vengeance of which Fernanda had spoken to me in Fore Street; and it struck me that you had been the victim of a slow poison. But who had administered it? Did not the death of William Dudley afford the key to the solution of that mystery? Yes, 'twas your own valet whom the she-wolf had employed to carry out her revenge; and the murder of the man, whom she had made the agent of her iniquity, was calculated to serve a double purpose. It removed from the world an individual who could tell disagreeable truths concerning herself, and it fastened upon you a crime which, the demoness hoped, would send you to the scaffold. All these ideas sprang up in my brain, and assumed the regular order of a continuous chain of events. I saw and comprehended it all, — motive and deed, cause and effect, action and aim. But my thoughts, when once pursuing such a channel, were not likely to stop half-way; and then was it that other suspicions sprang up in my bosom. Mrs. Lindley was murdered on the same night as William Dudley. Why not, then, by the same hand? Yes; for the motive that would prompt the expediency of clearing the she-wolf's pathway of the valet would suggest the prudence of doing the same by the midwife. Both were the depositories of secrets which they might reveal in the hour of remorse, or let slip in the moment of inadvertency; and the lady's ruin was constantly hanging as it were at the tip of two tongues. Away with them both! silence them for ever! and Fernanda is safe! Such was, no doubt, the reasoning of the demoness,— that unnatural mother who had assented to the death of her new-born child. You appear impatient, Mr. Eaton; but I shall not detain you much longer with my explanations and commentaries."

"No, I am not impatient at what you are saying, Miss Walters," returned Arthur; "but I am excited, irritated, indignant when I reflect upon the weakness and folly which ever prompted me, even for a moment, to think of saving that woman and sacrificing myself."

"Ah! well you may repent such intervals of unjustifiable leniency," exclaimed Caroline. "But I was explaining to you, sir, how the inquiries which I made yesterday afternoon in the vicinage of Cavendish Square turned all my thoughts into those channels which led me in a few minutes to fix upon Fernanda as the heroine of the two stupendous

crimes with which yourself and I are severally charged. A change took place within me. I saw the possibility of rescuing my character from the hideous suspicion that was attached to it, and I felt a sudden yearning to throw off the loathsome reputation of a murderess. The hope of accomplishing this end became all in an instant blended with the previously existing desire to humble that arrogant patrician lady and that haughty aristocrat who had closed their door in my face. I went back to their mansion, I demanded admission, I was shown into their presence. The conversation which ensued was pregnant with evidence that all my suspicions had flowed into the proper channels and were taking the right direction. The assertions I boldly made, the reminiscences I conjured up, the charges of guilt and turpitude at which I more than hinted, all touched the most excruciating chords in the hearts of that nobleman and his wife. But I need say no more: Fernanda is the murderess of William Dudley and Mrs. Lindley."

"Yes, it must be so," murmured Arthur Eaton; "and she will expiate her crimes upon the scaffold. Her husband, too, along with her, — the father of those beauteous girls, Octavia and Pauline, — he also will be doubtless implicated."

"And our innocence will be made manifest," observed Caroline. "Now, Mr. Eaton, shall we not coöperate in bringing about a result that will lift the weight of infamy from our heads and rescue our names from execration?"

"Assuredly, Miss Walters," was the response, delivered in a firm tone; "for, as you remarked ere now, our interests are at present identical. And to prove to you that I accept your coöperation as frankly and sincerely as it is offered, I will confide to your ears the narrative of the persecution which I have experienced at the hands of Lady Holderness."

The Honourable Arthur Eaton then detailed those particulars which are already known to the reader, — how he had discovered the receipts for the Heir's Friend and the Antidote at Mrs. Lindley's house, how Bradford, the celebrated chemist of Bond Street, had tested the nature and effects of these prescriptions, how the antidote had checked the wasting malady and brought back health, how Fernanda and Dudley had entered his room at night to consummate the crowning turpitude, how he had suffered the lady to

depart, and how the valet, after confessing everything, had become truly repentant.

Caroline Walters listened with the deepest curiosity; and, as the reader may suppose, every word that fell from Arthur's lips confirmed the opinion which she had already formed with regard to Lady Holderness.

The turnkey soon reappeared to conduct the young woman back to the department of the gaol in which she was lodged; but the promise of another fee elicited from the official a pledge that she should be allowed to revisit Arthur's cell on the morrow.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FAMILY VAULT

IN one of the most beautiful parts of Warwickshire stands the ancient village of Bellenden. Nothing can be more charmingly picturesque than this little group of habitations, situated on the gentle slope of a hill, and embowered as it were by stately oaks and chestnut-trees which had flourished for ages. The tower of the old church was covered with ivy, and the sacred fane itself was larger than such edifices usually are in country places. The cemetery was crowded with tombstones, some of them so old that the inscriptions were entirely effaced by the hand of Time; indeed, it was universally believed in the village and surrounding district that Bellenden church was one of the most ancient in the whole kingdom.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, when a travelling-carriage drove up to the door of the Bellenden Arms, which was the name of the village tavern. There were no heraldic blazonries upon the panels of the vehicle; but the plain equipage was instantaneously recognized notwithstanding by the landlord and his wife. Out they came, followed by the hostler and the chambermaid, the men cap in hand and the females all smiles and curtsies, for some years had elapsed since the Marchioness of Bellenden had honoured the village with her presence, and her arrival now was as welcome as it was unexpected.

Yes, it was the marchioness herself who had just halted at the Bellenden Arms. She was travelling with post-horses and was attended only by a footman and a female domestic, both of whom had been for some years in her service and were of long-tried fidelity.

To the greetings of the landlord and landlady of the Bellenden Arms her ladyship responded in the kindest

manner; and alighting from the carriage, she entered the homely parlour to which they escorted her. Having ordered some refreshment, she desired that a message should be sent to the village rector, requesting him to favour her with a call; and as the reverend gentleman lived within a couple of hundred yards of the tavern, he speedily waited upon the marchioness.

“Mr. Roberts,” said her ladyship, when the usual compliments and greetings had been exchanged, “I am desirous to visit the church for a particular purpose. Indeed, I purpose to descend into the vault of the Bellenden family; and I therefore request you to procure the necessary assistance to raise the stone and light me into the receptacle of the dead. You will perhaps also be good enough to accompany me, as I may need a witness with regard to the investigation that I am about to make.”

“Your ladyship’s commands shall be promptly attended to,” said the Reverend Mr. Roberts, by no means startled at the nature of the instructions he had received, inasmuch as he at once comprehended that the object of the marchioness bore reference to the lawsuit in which she was engaged with the Montgomery family. “Of course your ladyship is aware that the vaults have already been visited and the registers examined by agents sent down from London on the part of Earl Montgomery and Lady Holderness?”

“I am no stranger to the fact which you mention,” said the marchioness. “Indeed, I have seen the affidavits which have been put in by my opponents, and which embody all the evidence obtained by Lord Montgomery’s agents when they visited Bellenden church. But I believe that his lordship himself came down in the first instance, did he not?”

“He did, my lady,” answered Mr. Roberts. “It was about three months ago, as nearly as I can guess; but his lordship only remained in the village for a few hours, during which he was making all kinds of inquiries amongst the very oldest inhabitants of the place.”

“And those inquiries were relative to the traditions of the Bellenden family?” said the marchioness, interrogatively.

“Precisely so,” returned the clergyman. “Just before his lordship took his departure he called upon me and said—”

“Tell me everything that fell from the earl’s lips on that occasion,” exclaimed the marchioness. “Consult your

memory well, and omit not a single word that he uttered. You know not how important it is to my interests that I should sift to the very bottom all the particulars of Lord Montgomery's visit to this place."

"I am indebted to your ladyship for too much kindness not to be anxious to seek every opportunity of showing my gratitude," observed Mr. Roberts; "but even if it were not so, as a matter of justice I should give your ladyship all the information in my power, inasmuch as I consider your ladyship to be the victim of a gross conspiracy to deprive you of your estates. Such is the prevalent feeling in this part of Warwickshire —"

"The prevalent feeling, but not the universal one, I suppose?" said the marchioness, inquiringly.

"Well, my lady," responded the clergyman, "I must confess that there are a few individuals in the village and the surrounding parts who espouse the interests of the Montgomerys; but I suppose they have been well paid for their allegiance in this respect, otherwise they would not be so staunch and so bold in asserting their conviction that your ladyship must lose the lawsuit."

"Who are the persons you are referring to?" inquired Lady Bellenden; "and what kind of characters do they bear?"

"Characters, indeed!" exclaimed the parson. Then, in a more serious tone, he added, "It ill becomes a Christian minister to speak harshly of people behind their backs, or under any circumstances whatsoever; but I cannot conscientiously declare that the individuals to whom I allude are trustworthy, honest, or respectable. In fact, the landlord and the landlady of the Bellenden Arms will corroborate my assertions —"

"But who are those individuals?" demanded the marchioness, impatiently; and as she spoke she drew forth a set of ivory tablets from her reticule.

"In the first place, my lady," responded Mr. Roberts, "there is Chapman the stone-mason —"

"And he doubtless was employed by Earl Montgomery's agents to open the vault of the Bellenden family?" said the marchioness, inquiringly, as she wrote down the man's name in her tablets.

"Precisely so," returned the clergyman. "The sexton

Mr. Northwitch, who is likewise a stone-mason, was much surprised and vexed that Chapman, who is altogether unconnected with the church, should have had the job. However, such were the earl's instructions to his agents; and as the vault was opened and examined under an order of the Court of Chancery, upon an affidavit put in by the earl, there was no use in Northwitch's making any objection. Chapman accordingly did it for the earl's agents."

"And now continue your list of the suspicious characters who speak against me and are wedded to the interests of the Montgomerys," said the marchioness.

"I have mentioned Chapman," resumed Mr. Roberts, "and the next in the catalogue are the Austins, — an old couple who live in a cottage about two miles off, on the road to Malden Farm. They are nasty people, I can assure your ladyship; and although they apparently live very retired and seem to keep themselves quiet, yet they are known to be anything but saints. The man Austin has a sister — a widow — who lives in a cottage near Congleton, and of whom report likewise speaks disparagingly. Her name is Bushman. She is a very old woman, but of astonishing activity and bustling habits —"

"But Congleton is fifty miles away," interrupted the marchioness. "How, then, can this Widow Bushman's character and attributes be so well known in the village of Bellenden?"

"Because she was a resident here, my lady, until within the last year or eighteen months," answered Mr. Roberts; "and she was one of the most staunch of Earl Montgomery's partisans."

"Any other names to particularize?" asked the noble lady.

"None," was the reply. "Chapman, the Austins, and Widow Bushman are the principal. But, by the way, I recollect that I have not informed your ladyship of what Lord Montgomery said to me upon the occasion of his visit to this place three months ago."

"Speak slowly, Mr. Roberts," observed the marchioness, "as I shall write it all down. Now, proceed."

"His lordship called upon me at the rectory just before he left the village," continued the clergyman, "and, after the usual interchange of compliments, he said, 'Mr. Roberts,

I have gleaned some very curious particulars concerning the deceased members of the Bellenden family, and which particulars are most important to my interests in the suit that I am carrying on against the marchioness.' I thereupon begged his lordship not to make me his confidant, as I was bound by gratitude to support the cause and defend the interests of the noble lady who gave me the presentation of the Bellenden rectory. 'I am aware of your devotion in that quarter, Mr. Roberts,' said Earl Montgomery, 'and so far from being angry with you, I honour you for it. Indeed, I have called upon you from motives of respect and courtesy, and to inform you that in consequence of the curious particulars I have this day gleaned from some of the patriarchs of the village, I shall cause the vault of the Bellenden family to be examined and the register of deaths to be searched.' Upon hearing these announcements, I respectfully but firmly explained to his lordship that he was welcome to consult the registers, but that he could not be permitted to break open the family vault of the house of Bellenden, without a proper authority or permission. 'Well, you are quite right to act cautiously, Mr. Roberts,' exclaimed the earl, with an offhand manner and indifferent tone. 'I will apply to the Lord Chancellor for an order to open the vault; and I will send down agents duly authorized to carry this aim into effect. The examination of the registers can stand over until the same opportunity. Indeed, it will be better that the same persons should conduct both investigations, because there will then be only one set of witnesses, and consequently a saving of expense. I presume, Mr. Roberts, that when I do thus send my agents down, you will throw no obstacle in their way.' I answered that I should obey any official mandate or proper authority in respect to the opening of the vault; and that as for the registers, any one was at liberty to inspect them on certain terms. 'The truth is,' continued the earl, who seemed resolved to be communicative, although I can assure your ladyship there was nothing encouraging in my manner toward him, 'a great deal — indeed, almost everything on the Marchioness of Bellenden's side — depends upon a particular conveyance deed which she has put into court. This deed is alleged to have been signed by the late Marquis of Bellenden's father fifty years ago, — that is to say, in the year 1745. But according to what I have been able to

glean from one old man of eighty-four, another of seventy-three, and a third of sixty-nine, the particular Marquis of Bellenden alluded to died and was buried at least two years before 1745; and my informants are enabled to speak thus positively as to dates, because that of 1745 was the year of the Great Rebellion. If, therefore, it should transpire that the late marquis's father did really die in 1743, and not in 1745, then the conveyance deed which Lady Bellenden has filed in court must be a forgery, because it purports to have been dated and signed in 1745.' "

"Lord Montgomery was very kind and condescending to narrate all these particulars," observed the Marchioness of Bellenden, who had committed to her tablets every sentence and syllable uttered by the clergyman. "Did he tell you anything more, Mr. Roberts?"

"His lordship merely said that if he had appeared strangely communicative, it was only because he was conducting the lawsuit in an open, frank, and candid manner, and he did not care if all the world knew each successive step that was taken in it, so far as he was concerned. And now," added the Reverend Mr. Roberts, "that I have told your ladyship all that passed between the earl and myself on the occasion referred to, I will hasten to make the necessary preparations for your visit to the church."

With these words the reverend gentleman took a temporary leave of the marchioness, who now remained alone in the parlour at the inn. For a few minutes she reflected profoundly upon all that she had just heard; then, as a smile of triumph appeared slowly upon her beautiful countenance, she murmured to herself, "The victory shall be mine, and Eugene Montgomery shall sink humbled, terror-stricken, and a miserable suppliant at my feet."

Having thus expressed the feeling that was uppermost in her mind, — a feeling which certainly savoured more of vindictiveness than was quite consistent with her character for Christian benevolence and pious resignation, — the Marchioness of Bellenden rang the bell for her confidential domestics.

Of these two individuals we must say a few words. The female attendant was a woman of about fifty years of age, still retaining the traces of great beauty, and wearing a matronly appearance of the highest respectability. In fact,

her looks, her style of dress, her manner, and her speech all seemed to denote a sedateness without hypocrisy, and a deep sense of religious feeling without fanaticism.

The footman was a tall, handsome man, with a dark complexion and a serious look. He was about forty years of age; his figure was finely modelled, the stalwart proportions being blended with masculine grace; and his demeanour was altogether superior to his situation. He seemed older than he really was on account of the air of extreme steadiness which characterized him, and which was the dominant impression that his appearance made upon the mind of any one who saw him for the first time, so that it was necessary to look as it were beneath that aspect of sedateness to discover that he was in reality a very handsome man.

In a word, judging from their external appearances, the female attendant and the footman were two domestics of the most respectable class, and precisely such as a widow lady of excellent reputation might be expected to have in her suite.

We said that the Marchioness of Bellenden, soon after Mr. Roberts had quitted her, summoned those two dependents to her presence; and perhaps the reader will expect to be informed that on entering the room they still retained all the cold reserve of manner and ceremonial rigidity of countenance which invested them with so decorous an air of sedateness. No such thing. The instant the door closed behind them, their appearance changed as if by magic; the matronly demeanour which was so imposing on the part of the female, and the serious look which gave such an air of respectability to the man, were thrown off all in a moment, and with an evident feeling of relief at passing from a condition of studied restraint to the relaxation and abandonment of temporary freedom.

“What news, my dear?” demanded the female, with a mingled curiosity and friendly interest in her voice and manner; and she took a chair without waiting for either invitation or permission to be seated.

“Yes, what news, Laura?” inquired the footman, flinging himself upon the sofa, stretching out his legs, and passing his fingers through his wavy and perfumed hair. “Has Parson Roberts been able to give you any particulars in addition to what you already knew?”

“ Many, and all most important, my dear Richard,” replied the marchioness, who was evidently accustomed to this familiarity with her two confidential domestics. “ In a word, I have found out the places where Montgomery and his hired ruffians halted on two occasions, and you must start off presently and take the necessary steps to make these discoveries available and useful in case of need. One place is a cottage two miles from hence, on the road to Malden Farm; it is kept by an old couple named Austin. The other place is also a cottage, but about fifty miles distant, — in fact, close by Congleton. The woman who keeps it is called Widow Bushman, and she is related to the Austins.”

“ And what about the man who opened the vault for Montgomery’s agents? ” said the footman, inquiringly.

“ Ah! what about him? ” echoed the female dependent.

“ Now, do not be impatient, Richard, nor you either, Margaret,” said Lady Bellenden, in a tone of good-humoured chiding, “ and you shall both know everything in time. The stone-mason’s name is Chapman, and he lives in the village. I shall get you, Margaret, to see him while I visit the church; and you must not be sparing of gold in order to win him over to my interests. The evidence he can give would no doubt be important.”

“ Depend upon it, my love,” said Margaret, in a tone of earnest assurance, “ nothing shall be wanting on my part to forward your interests.”

“ And I know you will believe me, Laura, when I say the same thing,” observed Richard. “ But when do you wish me to visit these Austins who dwell in the neighbourhood, and that Widow Bushman who resides near Congleton? ”

“ I wish you to start off at once, Richard,” replied the marchioness. “ You can doubtless procure a vehicle of some sort — ”

“ Give yourself no concern on that head, my dear Laura,” said the footman; “ I shall find some means of conveyance. Tell me where and when I am to rejoin you, and I shall be off.”

“ You will either find me or hear of me at Malden Farm,” returned the lady. “ If I quit that place before you reach it, I will leave a letter for you. Have you plenty of money in your purse? ”

"Plenty," answered Richard. "And now good-bye for the present."

Thus speaking, the footman rose from the sofa and embraced the Marchioness of Bellenden. In a moment her eyes, usually of so soft and melting an expression, became illumined with a burning lustre, as if through those windows of the soul shone forth the sudden kindling of all the fires of her impassioned nature. Throwing her arms around the neck of that man who thus freely bestowed his caresses upon her, the titled lady glued her lips to his swarthy but handsome countenance; and by the lighting up of her fine blue eyes, the deep flushing of her plump cheeks, and the quick heaving and falling of her luxuriant bosom, it was evident that the slightest contact with her good-looking dependent served as a spark to the train of her desires and made them flame up as it were into a frenzy.

"Hush! a footstep approaches," exclaimed Margaret; and, rising from her chair, she suddenly resumed her artificial demeanour of matronly sedateness as easily as if it were a cloak that she was putting on without an effort.

At the same instant, too, the handsome footman, starting from the embrace of his noble mistress, drew himself up to his full height and stood in her presence with a look and an attitude that denoted the profoundest respect. The marchioness rapidly smoothed her hair, arranged her cap, and composed her looks in such a manner that the keenest observer could not have noticed the slightest indication to lead him to suspect that her features had so recently been ruffled by sensuous desires. Every trace of that voluptuous expression had passed away from her countenance, which all in a moment became as placid and as calmly beautiful as if the burning kiss of lust had never been imprinted on its damask surface.

Thus, when the Reverend Mr. Roberts reëntered the room, on his return from the church, he found the two dependents standing before their mistress with the proper air of respectful attention, while the lady herself was issuing her orders in a tone where mildness and conscious authority were so nicely blended as to denote alike the kind mistress and the well-bred woman.

"You will therefore start off at once, Richard," said the marchioness; "and you must be particularly careful in

executing the commissions which I have entrusted to you."

"Your ladyship may rest assured on that head," returned the footman; then, with a low bow, — while not a muscle of his countenance relaxed from the serious expression which it had assumed, — he took his departure.

"And you, Margaret," resumed Lady Bellenden, "will have the goodness to step out into the village and make these inquiries which I have been dictating to you."

"Your ladyship's commands shall be faithfully attended to," was the response, and Margaret likewise quitted the room.

"Everything is now ready at the church for your ladyship's reception," said the Reverend Mr. Roberts.

"I thank you," observed the marchioness. Then hastily putting on her bonnet and throwing her scarf over her shoulders, she accepted the arm of the clergyman who proposed to escort her to the sacred edifice.

As she passed through the village, all the inhabitants appeared at their doors to greet her with bows and curtsies, and these salutations were acknowledged with the sweetest affability on her part. In a few minutes the churchyard was reached, and beneath the porch of the ancient building the sexton and his assistant were waiting her ladyship's arrival. In accordance with the instructions they received through Mr. Roberts, they were provided with implements to raise the stones and lanterns to light the vaults.

The sun was shining through the windows, the countless diamond panes of which gave a prismatic effect to the warm lustre; and it seemed as if slanting lines, or rather oblique columns, of impalpable dust stretched from those windows half-across the nave of the church. Leaning upon the clergyman's arm, and followed by Northwitch and his assistant, the Marchioness of Bellenden threaded the aisle, until the party came to a cloistral recess which was screened off by a partition of stonework elaborately sculptured. Within the enclosure the walls were covered with monumental tablets, all sacred to the memories of the departed scions of the noble house of Bellenden; and the huge flagstones of the pavement were likewise covered with inscriptions.

"There is one particular stone which must be raised, I believe," said the marchioness, as her eyes wandered slowly

over the pavement, "inasmuch as it covers the steps leading down into the vault."

"This is the stone, my lady," returned Northwitch, pointing with a crowbar to a particular flag.

"Then raise it," said the marchioness. "Will the task be a long one? Because, if so, I may as well search in the meantime for a particular entry in the register of deaths."

"We shall not be long moving the stone, my lady," replied Northwitch; "because it was lifted a short time back, and is therefore comparatively loose in its setting. I mean that the cement is not properly dry yet, and I dare say that Chapman who raised the stone for the earl's agents did not trouble himself to put it down again with overmuch care. However, here goes!"

To work accordingly went the sexton and his assistant; and Lady Bellenden decided upon remaining to visit the place of tombs first, before she repaired to the vestry to examine the register.

In about twenty minutes the enormous stone was raised and rolled back from the mouth of the subterranean vault which it covered. The sexton and his man then lighted their lanterns, and, having allowed a few minutes for the escape of the foul air from the place, they descended the narrow flight of stone steps which led down into the family vault of the ancient race of Bellenden. The marchioness followed, and the clergyman closed the rear.

The subterranean vault has already been described, in a former chapter, as spacious; and around the walls were arranged numerous coffins, in three rows, — the lowest standing upon the paved floor, and the other two resting on stout iron supporters projecting from the solid masonry. By these means no coffin actually stood upon another, and between the rows there was space sufficient to enable the plates upon the lids to be examined without moving the coffins themselves.

The party reached the bottom of the steps and were advancing farther into the vault, when a sudden ejaculation of horror burst from the lips of the sexton who was leading the way.

"What is the matter?" demanded Lady Bellenden, for the moment stricken by a superstitious terror.

"There — yonder — that coffin!" cried Northwitch,

pointing in a particular direction with one hand and holding the lantern high up with the other.

"Ah! I see," ejaculated his assistant, drawing back a pace or two with a visible shuddering of his entire form.

At the same instant the marchioness and Mr. Roberts caught sight of the object which had produced such a sensation upon the sexton and his man; and exclamations of mingled horror and disgust broke from the noble lady and the reverend gentleman. For, behold! on the uppermost row, at the farthest extremity of the vault, a coffin had burst open, and a putrid corpse was exposed to view.

"How shocking!" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellen-den, a raw, damp, and mouldy smell now offending her nostrils, and a thick clammy taste clinging to her palate. "But whose corpse can it be, that it is comparatively so well preserved?"

"Why, my lady," cried Northwitch, "that body may have been here twenty, thirty, or even forty years, and yet be no more than half-decomposed as it is now. It is the embalming and the leaden coffins that preserve them. This particular coffin has, however, burst, as your ladyship perceives; shell and all, it is laid completely open. But I'll soon see whose corpse it is."

With these words, the sexton approached the coffin and held the lantern in such a manner that its rays might fall upon the piece of the broken lid where the plate still remained. As a matter of course the light streamed upon the dead body, from which a considerable portion of the winding-sheet had fallen away; and not only was its countenance exposed, but the neck, chest, and right side were all laid bare.

"I should think that this body must have been placed here at least twenty years ago," observed the sexton, as he thus took a near view of the loathsome spectacle. "It is even more swollen and discoloured than it is decomposed, now that I examine it close. In fact, it must have been splendidly embalmed, for the features are well-nigh perfect, and the hands are entire. Ah, here's actually the mark of a ring upon one of the fingers! Why, the ring that made the mark must have been on the hand until lately. It has evidently been plucked off within a recent period. There's the scraping, as one may call it, which the ring made along the rotting finger as it was drawn away. But, Heavens! how curiously

the corpse is discoloured! I've seen a vast many bodies in my time, and some few that have been embalmed; but I never saw one that, not being more decomposed than this, was so shockingly discoloured. Besides, not only unnaturally discoloured, but also swollen, dreadfully swollen. Ah! it looks uncommonly as if the deceased, whoever he was, had died by poison!"

"Well, whose corpse is it?" demanded the assistant, somewhat impatiently. "Can't you make the plate out? Or is the inscription rusted away?"

"No, it is tolerably plain," returned the sexton. "Let me see? The date is 1775, — why, it's the last Marquis of Bellenden, to be sure, — her ladyship's husband," exclaimed Northwitch.

"Cover up the remains with something," cried the Reverend Mr. Roberts. "Here, stay, I will run and fetch a piece of the church mourning from the vestry —"

"No, do not trouble yourself," said the marchioness, as she clung to his arm; and the voice in which she spoke was low and hollow.

"Ah! your ladyship is unwell?" exclaimed Mr. Roberts; and, turning his eyes upon the marchioness, he was startled and shocked at the ghastly expression which her countenance wore. "Shall I conduct you hence? Let me lead you away. The sickly odour, the dreadful spectacle, and the sexton's words, — all are enough to overpower your ladyship."

"No, no, I will remain, I feel better now," murmured the marchioness. Then, with an almost superhuman effort to crush the feelings that were struggling in her bosom, she turned toward the sexton, saying, "Mr. Northwitch, I should recommend you to be more cautious and guarded for the future in the free and offhand way in which you toss as it were from the tip of your tongue the first words that come uppermost. You should weigh your thoughts before you so glibly give utterance to them. For by proclaiming in so random a manner the very first and of course most inconsiderate impressions which any particular occurrence or spectacle may make upon your mind, you may be unintentionally the cause of exciting the most disagreeable suspicions."

"I humbly beg your ladyship's pardon," said the man, who did not immediately perceive the drift of the noble

lady's observations, and therefore was for a few moments at a loss to comprehend how he had done wrong; "but I am sure I did not mean to give offence when I talked of the discoloured state of his lordship's body. And as for my saying that it seemed as if his lordship the late marquis had been poisoned, the notion is absurd. But I made the remark before I knew whose coffin it was —"

"Enough upon the subject, Mr. Northwitch," said the marchioness, in a voice which she now rendered mournful though firm. "You have wounded my feelings deeply; but I pardon you, yes, cheerfully pardon you. I know you spoke inconsiderately —"

"I did, upon my soul, my lady," exclaimed the sexton, quite concerned to think how much mischief his unguarded words had occasioned. "We all know that you are a kind-hearted and excellent lady, and I would sooner cut my tongue out than allow it to hurt your ladyship's feelings."

"I believe you, Northwitch," said the marchioness, in a tone of compassion and forgiveness. "But you must learn, my good friend, that the remains of the dead often present the most remarkable appearances, do they not, Mr. Roberts?"

"Assuredly, my lady," responded the clergyman, who, although a well-meaning and harmless kind of an individual, nevertheless carried his obsequiousness to the extreme of a fulsome sycophancy, and was therefore ready to corroborate everything that his aristocratic patroness might say.

"The swollen and discoloured appearance of the corpse of my long dead husband," continued the marchioness, in a tone profoundly mournful, "is only one of the sad phases of decomposition, is it not so, Mr. Roberts?"

"Beyond all matter of doubt, my lady," was the reply.

"And most sad and distressing is it for me to have been doomed this day to gaze upon the remains of one whom I respected so profoundly on earth," continued the marchioness, "but who for long years past has been a saint in heaven. Ah! Mr. Roberts, I am no hypocrite, I am incapable of affecting a feeling that is not intrinsically real. I therefore admit, with frankness and with candour, that I did not love the old and venerable nobleman who made me his wife, gave me his name, and bequeathed to me that fortune which dishonest pretenders would now wrest from my grasp; no, I did not love him in the true sense of the term, but I re-

spected him, I revered him, I esteemed him as a man who sought to ensure my happiness to the utmost of his power."

"I am glad your ladyship has said this much," exclaimed Northwitch, with an honest exultation, although the interruption was somewhat of the rudest; "for that scandalous fellow Chapman declares that your ladyship hated and detested the late marquis, and that your ladyship loved another, saving your ladyship's presence —"

"Northwitch, have done, be quiet, silence!" exclaimed the Reverend Mr. Roberts, perfectly horrified at the sexton's indiscretion, although it plainly arose from the man's zealous devotion to the cause of the marchioness in opposition to that of the Montgomerys.

"The venom of scandalous tongues produces no disagreeable effects upon me," observed the marchioness, in a tone of bland resignation; "and whatever rumours my worthy friend Mr. Northwitch has heard need not distress him on my account. But assuredly this is not the most pleasant place in the world to choose for our conversation," cried her ladyship, in a different voice; "and I feel the damp of the vault striking chill and cold to my very bones. Let us, then, proceed to search for the object which has brought me hither. Mr. Northwitch, you will oblige me by finding the coffin of the late marquis's father. The plate should bear the obituary date of 1745, but if you happen to find one of 1743 —"

"Here is the coffin, my lady, of which you speak," exclaimed the sexton, pausing in the midst of the scrutiny which he had commenced with regard to the tenements of the dead. "But the date is 1743 —"

"That will do," said the marchioness. "Now, wrench off the plate, or rather remove it gently if you can, and be careful to keep the four screws." Then, turning toward the clergyman, she observed, "Mr. Roberts, as my witness in this proceeding, you will maintain your eyes fixed upon that plate and those screws, in order to be enabled to identify them on any future occasion."

"I will do so, my lady," answered the minister.

The plate was wrenched off, and, together with the screws, was given into the keeping of the reverend gentleman. The Marchioness of Bellenden then quitted the vault, having liberally remunerated the sexton and his assistant, and having

charged them to get the coffin of her deceased husband properly repaired before they finally sealed the mouth of the family vault again.

Accompanied by Mr. Roberts, the marchioness now proceeded to the vestry of the church, and, on reaching that room, she said, "In the first place, reverend sir, you must envelop that coffin-plate and the screws in a sheet of paper and affix your seal to the packet, so that you may be enabled at the proper time to prove the identity of those objects."

The noble lady's instructions were immediately obeyed; and she then desired the clergyman to produce the parochial register of burials. Opening a small closet, or cabinet, which joined the vestry-room, Mr. Roberts took the bulky volume from the iron safe where it was kept; and the marchioness proceeded to examine it with the most careful scrutiny. At length she discovered the particular entry which she sought and of which she bade Mr. Roberts take special notice.

A few minutes afterward Lady Bellenden quitted the church, and, returning to the inn, she entered her carriage and took her departure from the village, accompanied by the faithful Margaret.

CHAPTER XXV

MALDEN FARM

It was now about five o'clock in the evening, and the breeze, laden with the perfumes of May, came with a delightful freshness after the sultry heat which had previously prevailed.

Having ascended a hill, the sides and summit of which were embowered with the richest emerald foliage, the travelling-carriage proceeded at a more rapid rate along the narrow by-road which it was pursuing; and at a distance of about two miles from the village, a small but neat-looking cottage, standing in a lonely spot, was passed by.

"That is the abode of the Austins," said the Marchioness of Bellenden to Margaret, who was seated inside the carriage along with her noble mistress. "I wonder how Richard has succeeded with them."

"Better, I hope, than I did with old Chapman," responded Margaret. "But perhaps Richard is still there," she added, looking forth from the window of the vehicle. "And yet I do not see the chaise which he hired from the landlord of the Bellenden Arms, and there is no stable or out-house where it could be put up."

"We may therefore conclude that he has seen the Austins and gone on post-haste toward Congleton," said the marchioness. "But, alluding to Chapman, you need not feel vexed, my dear Margaret, that you were unable to succeed in that quarter. We have plenty of evidence, Heaven knows, without him. And yet," she added, in a mournful voice, "I shall derive but comparatively little pleasure from the fact of securing to myself the safe and undisputed possession of these estates, since he whom I love so madly, so passionately, so fervidly, can never be mine. No, it were useless to

make another attempt to bring him within the circle of my influence — ”

“ Let us not despair on that head, my dear Laura,” interrupted Margaret.

Lady Bellenden made no response; but, heaving a low and long sigh, she fell into a profound reverie.

In about an hour from the moment of quitting the village, the travelling-carriage emerged from the by-lane which it had been pursuing, and entered a broader road.

“ There!” suddenly ejaculated the marchioness, as she pointed from the window toward a bridge which was in the course of being erected over a clear stream about ninety or a hundred feet wide.

“ Yes, that is the spot,” cried Margaret, a visible shudder agitating her whole frame. “ Ten or a dozen years have elapsed since I was last in this neighbourhood, and great improvements have been made. This wide road, that bridge — ”

“ Ah! that bridge,” added the noble lady; and she exchanged significant looks with her faithful dependent.

The carriage was now leaving the bridge behind and advancing along the road toward a small farmhouse about a quarter of a mile distant, and the white walls of which gleamed forth from the midst of the foliage that enhanced the picturesque beauty of the landscape.

“ Behold Malden Farm,” said the marchioness. “ There are the same heavy overhanging gables, the same small and deep-set windows, with their diamond-fashioned panes, the same portico with the creeping clematis, which I remember years and years ago when first I visited the Bellenden estates.”

“ And there, too,” added Margaret, looking toward a splendid mansion which stood upon an eminence about a couple of miles beyond the farm, “ there, too, is Bellenden Hall, the finest country-seat in Warwickshire. The whole domain which the view can now embrace belongs to thee, dear Laura; and, thank Heaven! the hated Montgomerys shall not wrest it from thy grasp. But are you decided upon stopping at Malden Farm instead of going on to the hall? ”

“ Yes, such is my intention, Margaret,” responded the noble lady. “ You know that I have not long to remain in Warwickshire, that this lawsuit compels my immediate

return to London, and that it therefore becomes a matter of consequence to save every mile of road and minute of time. The farm is two miles nearer than the hall to the new bridge, at which point, you know," she added, significantly, "we have such important business to transact; and, moreover, by staying at the farm, we at once obtain the opportunity of making inquiries concerning Lord Raymond Montgomery — "

"For what earthly purpose, Laura?" demanded Margaret. "Since you are confident that you have not been misled respecting that young nobleman's fate, wherefore ask any questions regarding him?"

"To prevent others from suspecting that we are already so well informed on that head," returned the marchioness.

"Then you mean that the discovery which is to be made either to-night or to-morrow morning shall have the appearance of hazard or accident?" continued the dependent, interrogatively.

"Precisely so," answered the noble lady. "Indeed, I do not purpose to proclaim to the world all I know or all I may yet glean relative to my opponents, unless they force me to extremes."

"I understand, and I approve of the course which you intend to adopt," said Margaret.

At this moment the carriage entered an avenue of evergreens, the great gate leading into which was held open by a stout, sun-burnt, middle-aged man whose countenance was the picture of good-humour and vigorous health. This was Farmer Brooks, the occupant of Malden, and therefore one of the numerous tenantry of the marchioness, inasmuch as she held possession of the estates during the progress of the Chancery suit. He had observed the carriage approaching, and having ordered his wife, who was a comely woman of four and forty, "to see that all was comfortable and tidy indoors," he had run down to the end of the avenue to open the gate.

Mrs. Brooks was one of those simple-minded and well-meaning bodies, one of those ingenuous and honest creatures, that are rarely (at least at her age) to be met amidst the contamination of cities and great towns, but which are often found in the small farmhouses or secluded cottages of agricultural districts. The receipt of a letter in the morning to

the effect that the Marchioness of Bellenden would visit Malden Farm in the evening, and perhaps pass the night there, had put the worthy woman quite upon the *qui vive*; and during the whole day she had been making preparations to receive the illustrious guest. In this task she had been duly assisted by her son and daughter, — the former a young man of two or three and twenty, and the latter a girl of eighteen or nineteen. The comely matron and her two good-looking, sun-burnt, healthy auxiliaries presented a picture of domestic cordiality and perfect love such as the eye does not often contemplate beneath the roof of rich men's dwellings.

Sincere and honest was the welcome which the marchioness therefore experienced at Malden Farm; and, finding that so much pains had been bestowed upon the repast which was just ready to be served up, she did not choose to give any offence or wound sensitive feelings by not partaking of it at once. She accordingly resolved to postpone until the morning her walk to the bridge which was being constructed; and having laid aside her bonnet and scarf, she sat down to table in company with the farmer's family and Margaret, all of whom she insisted on making her companions for the time, and not her servitors.

"I am sure, my lady," said Farmer Brooks, during a pause in the progress of the festivities, "I am more honoured and much happier than I can well express in words, on account of this visit which your ladyship has condescended to pay my humble abode. I know that your ladyship's steward and housekeeper up at the hall will be much annoyed that your ladyship did not proceed direct to your own seat instead of tarrying at Malden Farm, which certainly is your own likewise, though tenanted by me. And I can add with truth and sincerity that although young Lord Raymond did lodge at our house for a considerable time, and not only behave munificently but also in a most friendly manner toward us, yet I unfeignedly hope that your ladyship will beat the Montgomerys and the Aylmers in the long run, and continue our mistress and our landlady."

"I am sure we should never get a better," exclaimed Mrs. Brooks, in a tone of unaffected fervour. "But I hope your ladyship was not offended with us for letting Lord Raymond come to lodge at the farm —"

“ If I had been offended, my good woman,” interrupted the marchioness, “ should I have visited you this evening, thereby preferring for the time your dwelling to my own country-seat which is so near at hand? Besides, when Lord Raymond first applied to you for permission to establish himself as a lodger in the peaceful seclusion of Malden Farm, you wrote to me frankly and ingenuously upon the subject.”

“ And your ladyship replied that you had no personal animosity against your cousin Lord Raymond Montgomery,” observed Farmer Brooks, “ and that you therefore entertained not the slightest objection to his becoming a lodger beneath this roof.”

“ I think that I said even something more than this,” remarked Lady Bellenden, “ for if my memory serves me truly I stated in my reply to your letter, Mr. Brooks, that I entertained the deepest sympathy and compassion for my cousin Raymond, to whom however I have not spoken for so many years. But I had heard of his hopeless passion for the beautiful Fernanda Aylmer, now Lady Holderness, I had heard of the enthusiastic devotion with which he worshipped that splendid creature, I had heard of the heartless coquetry which she practised toward him, giving him encouragement at one time, and then jilting him for the Honourable Mr. Eaton, whom she did not marry after all, I had heard these various particulars, I say, and I was touched with pity for the young noble. Indeed, I expressed myself in those terms when writing the reply to your letter.”

“ I remember it well, my lady,” said Brooks; “ and the kind, the handsome, the friendly tone of your letter decided me and my wife in receiving Lord Raymond into our house agreeably to his request.”

“ I suppose that being well-nigh heart-broken by his disappointed love,” observed the marchioness, “ he courted solitude as the only condition of existence which could possibly accord with a mind so wounded and a spirit so bruised as his own. Poor youth! I had heard much of his amiability, his goodness of heart, his generosity toward the poor; and I pitied him, sincerely pitied him. And to tell you the truth, it was partially with the desire of meeting my unfortunate cousin, whom I have not seen since his childhood, that I resolved to tarry at your abode, good people, during my few hours’ visit to this neighbourhood. Is Raymond

at home?" she inquired, lowering her voice as if she fancied that the young nobleman himself might possibly overhear the question which she had just put to the farmer.

"At home? here! my lady?" cried Farmer Brooks, astonished at the question. "But I recollect," he added, in a calmer tone as he recovered from his amazement; "you may not have heard of what has happened —"

"Has anything disagreeable occurred?" demanded Lady Bellenden, with all the appearance of intense surprise and painful curiosity.

"Three months have elapsed, my lady," responded the farmer, in a solemn tone, "since Lord Raymond fled from Malden, yes, left us with a cruel abruptness that savoured even of ingratitude after all the attention we showed him and the endeavours we made to comfort and cheer him."

"Lord Raymond left you thus!" cried the marchioness. "How astonishing that he should have acted in such an extraordinary manner!"

"Perhaps, my lady," suggested Margaret, in a deferential tone, "the poor young nobleman is scarcely responsible for his actions, and he may have obeyed some sudden, irresistible impulse —"

"That is what I and my wife have said to each other a thousand times since his lordship's disappearance," exclaimed Farmer Brooks. "Besides, he was often subjected to wild freaks of fancy and strange humours, which were wont to yield to fits of the deepest despondency. More than once has he said to me, 'My good friend, if I should suddenly take it into my head to leave your abode and set out on a pedestrian tour through the North of England do not be surprised. I sometimes feel as if nothing but violent exercise and a continuous change of scene will save me from going mad.' And yet, although we were thus warned by Lord Raymond, we were alarmed and vexed when he disappeared so suddenly; but finding that letters soon afterward arrived here addressed to him as usual, we felt reassured by the belief that his friends and relatives knew that he was safe —"

"Besides, what could possibly have happened to him?" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden. "If he had been foully dealt with traces of the crime would have remained; and if he had committed suicide in a moment of intolerable

anguish or blank despair, his corpse would have been discovered. Depend upon it, good people, the poor young gentleman is wandering like a troubled spirit about the country — ”

“ And what inclines us to that belief, my lady, is that he took away with him all his money and all his private papers on the morning when he left us,” said Farmer Brooks. “ His bed had been slept in during the previous night, and the inference is that he had risen early, — that is to say, early for the time of year; for it was in the winter season, just at the end of February — ”

“ It was the 26th, father,” observed young Brooks.

“ You are particular as to the date, my boy,” said his parent.

“ I remember it so well, father,” returned the lad, “ because it was on the same Monday morning that the great crowning stone fell upon the buttress of the new bridge.”

“ Ah! what, an accident?” inquired the marchioness.

“ No, my lady, that is to say, not an accident by which anybody was hurt,” responded young Brooks. “ But when I and my mates went down to begin work soon after day-break — ”

“ My son, your ladyship should know, is a stone-mason,” interrupted the elder Brooks, by way of explanation; “ and he has been engaged from the first upon the new bridge which your ladyship ordered to be built across the river. When one of the buttresses was completed about three months ago, it was determined that your ladyship’s steward should be invited by all the tenants in this district to superintend the deposit of an earthen jar full of coins in the great hollow of the buttress. The crowning stone was suspended over the mouth with such precision and in such a manner that on loosening the winch-rope which sustained it, the massive granite could not fail to settle exactly on the head of the buttress.”

“ Such was the condition in which we had left the stone on the Saturday night,” observed young Brooks; “ and when we went to work on the Monday morning, lo and behold! the winch-rope had given way, and the crowning stone had fallen upon the buttress. But as it had settled to a hair’s breadth in the position which it was intended to occupy, your

ladyship's steward decided upon not having it disturbed for the mere sake of placing the coins inside the buttress."

"And therefore the ceremony did not take place?" exclaimed the marchioness, inquiringly.

"No, my lady," responded young Brooks. "Your ladyship's steward gave orders that the ceremony should be postponed until the next buttress is built —"

"But this is absurd," cried the marchioness, in a tone of apparent annoyance and dissatisfaction; "my orders were explicit upon the subject, and they have not been obeyed. I wrote to my steward, commanding him to have the usual ceremony performed at the proper time, and I sent him a quantity of old coins which he was to use, in addition to the various specimens of the existing currency, for the purpose. Now there is a sort of superstition in the minds of many honest but simple country folks, relative to the baptizing of the foundation-stones of a new bridge with a bottle of wine, and the deposit of the coins in the first buttress, and I would not for the world have such a prejudice shocked —"

"I am glad your ladyship has mentioned the matter," observed Mrs. Brooks; "for I can assure your ladyship that many of your ladyship's tenants declare they will never cross that bridge, for, let it be built ever so strong, they think it won't be safe on account of omitting the usual ceremonies when the first buttress was raised."

"Then we will have the affair righted to-morrow, my good woman," said the marchioness, in a tone of firm decision. "Let your son step up to the hall and tell my steward that I have arrived at Malden Farm, where I propose to pass the night, and that early in the morning I will myself superintend the ceremonials relative to the bridge. Immediate preparations must therefore be made for the purpose, especially as the huge stone over the first buttress must be raised again."

"I will go at once, my lady," said young Brooks, rising from his seat, "and deliver your message at the hall. I will then go and inform the overseer of the works that the masons must be at the bridge by daylight. Shall I tell the steward that he is to wait upon your ladyship this evening?"

"No, I will see him in the morning upon matters of business," returned the marchioness; "for it is now past eight

o'clock, and I propose to retire to rest soon, in order to rise early in the morning. The time has passed so agreeably in your society, my worthy friends, and our conversation has been so varied — ”

“ But there is one thing I quite forgot to mention to your ladyship,” exclaimed Farmer Brooks, as an idea struck him, “ and that is, a lawyer’s clerk was here yesterday inquiring for Lord Raymond Montgomery — ”

“ Ah! Mr. Rigden’s clerk, I presume? ” said the noble lady.

“ Yes, that’s the name of the lawyer who sent him,” continued the farmer. “ He came in a post-chaise, — quite a bustle — ”

“ And so important withal,” added Miss Brooks, who now joined in the conversation for the first time.

“ Oh, he quite put my daughter out,” exclaimed Brooks, laughing, “ by asking her such a host of questions. And when he found that we could give him no clue to search after Lord Raymond, he actually became saucy, said it was very queer, very suspicious — ”

“ And so I told him he had better go about his business,” remarked Miss Brooks; “ whereupon he grew more civil and even apologized for what he had been saying of an offensive character.”

“ And did he set off again on his return to London? ” inquired the Marchioness of Bellenden.

“ No, my lady, I believe not,” responded Miss Brooks. “ He said that he should make inquiries all over the neighbourhood, that he should proceed to the village of Bellenden, and that he should leave no stone unturned to discover some clue to his missing lordship. But it does not appear that he has much time for making his search, because he says that unless he can find him before midnight on the 30th of May — ”

“ He loses every possible pretension — even if he possessed any valid claim at all — to these estates,” added the marchioness. “ Well, this is the 29th, to-morrow will be the 30th — ”

“ And the clerk swore with a terrible oath,” said Brooks, “ before the time was up, he would discover the young nobleman, either dead or alive.”

“ He is very positive, at all events,” observed Lady Bel-

lenden, with a smile. "So far as I am concerned, I should be truly pleased to hear of my unfortunate cousin's safety, and likewise of his happiness. It is his mother the dowager-countess and his brother Eugene the earl, who have carried on the suit with a merciless perseverance against me; and I believe that poor Raymond has been more their tool than their auxiliary."

"He always spoke of your ladyship in the most respectful terms," said Brooks; "and I have frequently heard him deplore the feuds which subsisted between yourself and his family, — the more so that your ladyship's self was a Montgomery previous to your marriage with the late Marquis of Bellenden."

"Poor Lord Raymond!" observed the marchioness, rising from her seat as a signal of her wish to retire for the night. "I most sincerely hope that we shall soon receive satisfactory tidings concerning him."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RAISING OF THE STONE

IT was about seven o'clock on the following morning that the Marchioness of Bellenden came forth from the homestead of Malden Farm, where she had passed the night, and proceeded on foot toward the spot where the bridge was being built. She was attended by the faithful Margaret, her steward and housekeeper from the adjacent hall, together with Mr. and Mrs. Brooks and their daughter.

The noble lady, clad in the mourning garments which so much became her, walked a little in advance of the rest, but every now and then turned and spoke to them with that courteous manner and truly gracious affability which seemed to constitute a part and parcel of her very nature.

On nearing the works, it was perceived that the massive poles had been raised over the buttress and the stout winch-rope already rigged for the purpose of lifting up the crowning stone; and in fact every preparation was completed by the masons who had risen at a very early hour in order to accomplish them. The steward was provided with a large earthen vase filled with old and new specimens of coins, and the housekeeper carried a bottle of wine which her noble mistress was to break over the head of the buttress. But there were no spectators present in addition to the persons already mentioned, inasmuch as it was not known beyond this circle that the marchioness had even arrived at Malden Farm, — much less that she contemplated any ceremonial of the nature which was about to take place.

But just as Lady Bellenden and her followers were within a few yards of the river's bank, the sounds of an approaching vehicle met their ears; and in a few instants a post-chaise emerged from the by-lane which has before been alluded to

as communicating with the road. And here we should perhaps observe that this by-lane branched off amidst the woodlands into two routes, — one affecting a junction with the high road to Birmingham and London, and the other leading to the beautiful village of Bellenden. It was therefore impossible to decide whether the post-chaise which now emerged from the lane had come from the direction of Birmingham, or from that of the peaceful hamlet in whose church vaults reposed the ashes of one of the proudest and mightiest families of the British aristocracy.

But the post-chaise stopped, the door was opened by a hand thrust forth from the window, and out jumped a thin, short, middle-aged man, who looked precisely what he indeed was.

“Mr. Rigden’s clerk,” exclaimed Farmer Brooks, instantaneously recognizing the bustling functionary, as he approached the party with a quick step and an important self-complacency of manner.

“There is something afoot betimes this morning,” he said, casting a rapid glance from one to another. Then, as his looks settled upon the marchioness, he gave a sort of start as if he were suddenly struck by the conviction who she was, and, raising his hat, he observed in a respectful tone, “I presume that I have the honour to find myself in the presence of her ladyship of Bellenden?”

The marchioness bowed coldly and reservedly, for she was not prepossessed by the man’s appearance, and she had no particular reason to like or esteem any one connected with Mr. Rigden.

“I have been hunting everywhere for your ladyship’s cousin, the Lord Raymond Montgomery,” said the clerk, unabashed by the freezing demeanour of the marchioness; “and I cannot obtain the least clue to his whereabouts. I was at Bellenden village last night —”

“And I was there yesterday afternoon,” said the noble lady, for the purpose of ascertaining whether the clerk had heard any particulars connected with her visit to the peaceful hamlet.

“So I was told,” he observed, laconically. “I slept there last night, and now I am on my way back to London —”

“Indeed, sir, you have come out of your way, I can tell

you," exclaimed Farmer Brooks. "On leaving the village you should not have taken to the by-lanes at all —"

"I know that, my good man," interrupted the clerk; "but I chose to come around by Malden Farm this morning — indeed, I got up at five o'clock on purpose — just to make a last inquiry concerning Lord Raymond and see whether anything had transpired with regard to him since I was here the day before yesterday. Because this is the 30th; and he must know that unless he fulfils a certain duty by twelve o'clock to-night, he loses any claim which he may now possess to the objects of litigation. I therefore fancied it just possible that he might have returned at the eleventh hour, as one might say —"

"I have heard nothing of his lordship, I can assure you," interrupted Farmer Brooks. "But I thought that you were resolved to find him out, dead or alive —"

"Upon my honour, my good fellow — and saving her ladyship's presence for talking thus familiarly," exclaimed Mr. Rigden's head clerk, — "I do really begin to feel assured that if Lord Raymond Montgomery should ever again turn up at all, it will be only as a corpse, and not as a being full of youthful vigour, and animation, and life."

"Good Heaven! what makes you think that?" cried Farmer Brooks, while ejaculations of horror burst from the lips of the worthy man's wife and daughter.

"Oh, simply because people don't disappear in this kind of fashion without having met foul play," said the clerk. "But may I take the liberty of inquiring wherefore you are all abroad so early, and what is going on at the new bridge here?"

"Her ladyship is about to deposit a vase of coins in the hollow of that buttress," replied Farmer Brooks; "and the masons are at this moment on the point of lifting that huge crowning stone."

"With her ladyship's permission I will remain a few minutes and witness the ceremony," said the clerk.

"I have not the slightest objection," returned the marchioness; and with these words, she advanced close up to the spot where the masons had already begun to work the apparatus erected for the raising of the stone.

The steward, the housekeeper, Margaret, Brooks, his wife, and his daughter, all took their station at a short distance

behind the marchioness; but the attorney's clerk stood forward to contemplate the process of lifting the huge mass of granite. Having dwelt all his life in London, and having spent the greater portion of that life behind a desk, he now felt just like a bird escaped from its cage; and while the emerald scenery of the country was most grateful to his eye, every trifling incident which he encountered in his travels became a matter of interest with him. Thus was it that like a prying and curious schoolboy, he now stood gazing on the operation that was in progress; and when the stone was raised a few inches from the mouth of the buttress, he bent down to carry his scrutiny to every feature and detail of the masonry and the mason's proceedings.

"How high shall we raise it, sir?" asked young Brooks of the steward.

"About a couple of feet, or perhaps a little more," was the response. "The jar containing the coins is a high one."

Silence then ensued once more, broken only by the creaking of the winch-rope and the grinding sound of the roller around which it was slowly, slowly winding. In about ten minutes the stone was raised more than two feet from the mouth of the buttress, and the steward desired the masons to desist from winding any more.

"What a putrid odour there is," said the lawyer's clerk, retreating a few paces from the buttress and sniffing with the disagreeable sensation.

"So there is," observed one of the masons.

"Depend upon it there's stagnant water inside the buttress," said the steward; "and if so, the foundation of the bridge can't be right. You must look to it before her ladyship commences the ceremony."

"Here! I will soon see what's the matter," exclaimed young Brooks; and, dropping down upon his hands and knees he protruded his head beneath the overhanging stone so as to look down into the hollow of the buttress.

"Well, what is it?" demanded the overseer of the masons.

"The smell is bad enough, but I cannot see anything shining like water. And yet — there is something, but it is dark, and all huddled up — My God! yes — it is — it is — the corpse of a man!"

And as these ejaculations, vented in horror, struck thrill-

ingly through every brain and to every heart, kindred echoes burst from the lips of those present.

"A corpse!" exclaimed the steward, springing forward.

"And it smells like one," said the lawyer's clerk.

"Good Heaven! is it possible!" cried the Marchioness of Bellenden, exchanging a rapid look of deep meaning with Margaret.

"Come, now, don't stand idling there," vociferated the overseer to his men; "but lift the stone a little higher, and let some one get ready a hook and a cord."

The windlass began to groan and the winch-rope to creak again; while young Brooks, having fastened an iron hook to a piece of cord, dropped it into the buttress. The spectators stood gazing on the operations, with outstretched necks, fixed looks, lips apart, and attitudes of painful suspense; but ejaculations of horror again burst from their tongues when they perceived by the motions of young Brooks that he was dragging up some heavy object.

And, sure enough! it was a corpse that the hook and the cord were now bringing to the mouth of the buttress; but how appalling was the consternation which appeared to seize upon all present when the farmer's son exclaimed in a tone of mingled horror and amazement, "Good God! 'tis Lord Raymond!"

The marchioness, having exchanged another rapid and meaning glance with Margaret, rushed forward as if to assure herself that such was indeed the fact. Mrs. Brooks and her daughter both became so dreadfully agitated that it was found necessary to remove them from the spot; and the lawyer's clerk exclaimed, "Well, I declared that I would see the young lord, either alive or dead, before I quitted these parts!"

The corpse was now completely dragged forth from the interior of the buttress and stretched upon the ground. It was much decomposed, but there was no difficulty in identifying it as that of Lord Raymond Montgomery. The long fair hair, matted and damp with the clammy dews of death though it were, still remained; the apparel, soiled and even rotting in many parts as it was, was also recognized; and, in fine, though the countenance was livid and disfigured, there could be no doubt that in the decomposing carcass which lay at their feet, the horror-stricken spectators

beheld the remains of the once handsome, elegant, but unfortunate Raymond.

But in order that no evidence calculated to establish this identity should remain disregarded, the pockets of the deceased were searched. A purse full of money was found upon him, his watch was safe in his fob, and on his finger was a diamond ring of immense value. It therefore became evident that, if he had been foully dealt with, plunder was not the object of his assassins. But his papers — his letters? Ah! these were indeed found in his pocketbook; but the damp had committed such ravages upon them that all the writing was utterly obliterated, and the documents themselves fell to pieces when touched.

And now arose the questions, "Was it really murder, or might it not have been suicide?" and "If it were murder, who could have done it?"

"Murder — and nothing less," exclaimed Mr. Rigden's head clerk, who had all his wits about him despite the shocking scene whereof he had so unexpectedly become a witness. "Look here, the mouth is held open by a gag, something between the teeth, — it seems like a bit of sponge —"

"And so it is," said the overseer. "Poor young gentleman, he has been foully murdered."

"And it was on the very day of his disappearance that the stone was found to have fallen," observed young Brooks.

"True, lad," said the overseer. "And what's more, one of the men declared at the time that as he was coming down yon hill to his work, he saw a carriage driving away post-haste up the lane; but we didn't think much about it then —"

"And now that incident becomes of value and importance," the Marchioness of Bellenden hastened to observe. "For my part, I take the earliest opportunity of declaring that no one in this district must be suspected of the deed, — no one dwelling in this vicinage must be pointed to as the supposed author of the tremendous crime. No, that carriage which was seen departing so hurriedly on the morning of the catastrophe affords the clue — the only feasible clue — to the reading of the mystery; and the justice of Heaven will sooner or later overtake the murderer."

"Provided the chain of evidence is duly followed up, my lady," said the lawyer's clerk; "and I admit with your ladyship that the circumstance of the carriage is the first

link in that chain. As for suspecting any of these honest people about here, it is out of the question," added the man of business, in whose mind a suspicion was already rising up, a suspicion which, though as yet faint and vague in its inception, was still strong enough to prompt the declaration he had just made.

"I am glad, sir, that you echo my own belief," said the marchioness, now speaking in a conciliatory tone to the attorney's clerk and abandoning the reserve she had hitherto maintained toward him. "Your legal experience is an important auxiliary in this difficult and delicate business; and you deserve the best thanks of all present for the manly and honest way in which you expressed your opinion. It would be cruel indeed if unjust suspicion fell upon any individual who could have had no earthly motive for the perpetration of this dreadful crime."

"There will be an inquest, of course, my lady," said the steward; "and then the whole matter will be duly and properly investigated. Meantime, all opinions should be suspended."

"Precisely so," observed the marchioness. "Let the corpse be conveyed to the hall and the usual notice sent to the coroner. I am compelled to depart forthwith on my return to London; but should my presence be needed for any purpose, my steward will communicate with me, and in a few days I shall be enabled to revisit this neighbourhood, if required."

"And I must also depart at once," said Mr. Rigden's clerk. Then, having made a low obeisance to the marchioness, he hurried back to his post-chaise, which immediately drove away.

The corpse of Lord Raymond Montgomery was covered with a sheet brought from Malden Farm, and borne upon a stretcher to Bellenden Hall. The ceremony respecting the bridge was of course abandoned under the mournful circumstances which had transpired, and the marchioness returned to the homestead where she had passed the night.

"Oh, my lady," said Brooks, now approaching her with anguish and dismay pictured upon his countenance, "I hope your ladyship is well assured —"

"That you are innocent of this crime?" exclaimed the marchioness, in a tone of firm decision. "I am certain that

you are, my good friend, morally certain," she added, with a stronger emphasis still. "Do not alarm yourself, do not let your wife and children give way to despondency. I will protect you, because I know you to be innocent."

"God be thanked, and Heaven bless your ladyship," said Brooks, dropping upon one knee, seizing the fair hand of the marchioness, and pressing it to his lips. Then, springing to his feet again, he hurried into the adjacent room to convey to his family the solacing assurance which he had just received.

"Now, Margaret," said Lady Bellenden, as soon as the noble lady and her faithful dependent were alone together in the parlour of Malden Farm, "give me writing materials and I will leave a note for Richard, who will doubtless be here in the course of the day. He must travel post-haste after us, for to-morrow will be a busy and an eventful day for us in London."

"And these poor people here, Laura?" said Margaret, in a tone of anxious inquiry.

"No harm shall be permitted to overtake them," responded the marchioness, emphatically. "Were suspicion to involve them in any embarrassment or dilemma, the whole truth should be at once proclaimed relative to the tragedy of Malden Bridge. Yes, everything should be revealed, happen what would!"

"I am glad to hear that such is your determination, my dear Laura," observed Margaret; "and now for the letter, as I perceive that the travelling-carriage is in readiness."

The note was accordingly penned and given to Brooks to be delivered to Richard the moment he should arrive at the farm. The marchioness then expressed her thanks to the yeoman and his family for their hospitality, and, having once more assured them they had nothing to fear in respect to the discovery of Lord Raymond's corpse, she took her departure in company with the faithful Margaret.

CHAPTER XXVII

A MEETING OF OLD ACQUAINTANCES

WE must now transport our readers back to London, in order to relate an incident which occurred on the same day as that which has been marked by the events just chronicled.

It was about noon, and Tim Meagles was riding on horseback along the Edgeware Road, when his attention was suddenly riveted upon the slight and graceful form of a young lady clad in mourning. She was proceeding rapidly along, with her veil drawn over her countenance; but the beauty of her figure, the musical charm of her walk, and the sable apparel which she wore, all convinced him that she was indeed the fair young girl whom he had longed to meet once again, if no more than once.

Pressing his horse toward the footway, Meagles said in a low earnest tone, "Miss Foster."

The maiden turned, gave utterance to a cry of mingled amazement and joy, and then, bounding toward Tim, took his hand and pressed it warmly.

"God be praised that you are safe and at liberty," exclaimed the warm-hearted girl in all the enthusiasm of her fervid, ingenuous, noble gratitude.

"And you, Miss Foster, are you happy?" inquired Meagles, putting the question with an impatience and awaiting the reply with a visible anxiety which showed how deeply interested he felt in the condition of the orphan maiden.

"I have every reason to be so," she responded, throwing up her veil at the same time, so as not to have the air of treating as a stranger an individual to whom she lay under so many obligations, and whom she knew to have suffered for her sake. "But I am residing in this neighbourhood, Mr.

Meagles," she added, "and although my kind benefactress is from home at present, yet she will not chide me for inviting so kind and disinterested a friend as you have proved yourself to be to enter her mansion and rest awhile."

"I accept the invitation cheerfully, Miss Foster," said Meagles; "the more so, inasmuch as I am anxious to hear an account of any favourable change which has taken place in your fortunes."

"This is the mansion where I dwell," said Rose, stepping up to the gate of Bellenden Priory; then, ringing the bell, she desired the porter who made his appearance to take charge of Mr. Meagles's horse.

Tim accordingly dismounted and tossed the reins of his steed to the domestic, for he had ridden out alone on this particular morning, Wasp having been despatched with a message on some important business. Rose Foster led the way across the beautiful gardens, and introduced Meagles into an elegant parlour, where she ordered refreshments to be served up. Then, having quitted him for a few minutes in order to lay aside her bonnet and shawl in her own chamber, she returned with a countenance expressing the most unfeigned satisfaction at being enabled to testify, however slightly, the sense of gratitude which she experienced toward him. But when Meagles saw that charming girl come and seat herself by his side with all the ingenuous, artless confidence which a sister shows toward a brother, he could not help sighing at the thought that the feeling which animated her was nothing more tender than a grateful friendship.

"And now, Mr. Meagles," she said, "you must permit me to declare how deep and lasting has been the sense which I have entertained of all the obligations I owe you. You have doubtless read or heard of the fearful accusation which for a moment threatened to overwhelm me —"

"Yes, I have read all that in a file of newspapers since my return home," said Meagles. "And did you find a friend in Lady Bellenden, for I am aware that this is her ladyship's residence —"

"I found a friend in the marchioness on the very day of my most bitter need," returned the maiden. "When discharged by the magistrate from the fearful accusation to which I have alluded, I was conducted straight hither and introduced to her ladyship. She received me with open

arms, and here have I since dwelt in security and happiness. No, not in perfect happiness," added Rose, hastily; "for I have entertained sore misgivings relative to yourself and the good-hearted working man, James Melmoth. The very day after I had found an asylum beneath this roof, I explained to the Marchioness of Bellenden all the obligations I owed alike to yourself and Melmoth; and I besought her to send and make inquiries concerning you, as well as communicate to you both the fact that I had taken up my residence at her mansion. For I had heard nothing of either you or Mr. Melmoth since that day when you burst into Mrs. Brace's house to rescue me from my royal persecutor, and when the constables assailed you both with their bludgeons.

"The marchioness accordingly despatched her confidential domestic Richard to execute my commissions; but on his return I was destined to hear accounts that filled me with the cruellest alarms. In Jermyn Street Richard was informed that you had been expatriated to America for seditious designs against the king; and that you had been sent off on a particular day which was mentioned by your landlady. In Westminster, Richard learned that Mr. Melmoth had likewise been transported on a certain day by the government authorities, and that his family had quitted their humble lodgings only four and twenty hours previously to my thus sending to inquire after them. Richard could not ascertain whither the poor mother and her children had gone; but he feared from the way in which the cross landlady of the lodging-house answered him, that she had behaved harshly toward them. Oh, how it grieved me to remain in that condition of uncertainty relative to those poor people!

"But while I was pondering upon the apparently extraordinary coincidence that yourself and Melmoth should have been expatriated on the same day and for the same alleged offence, it struck me that it was the identical day on which you had so generously flown to my assistance at Mrs. Brace's house. Oh, all the treachery of the prince became apparent to me then in a moment, and I saw that yourself and the generous-hearted Melmoth had become involved in ruin on my account! I addressed a letter full of remonstrance, full of upbraiding, full of supplication to his Royal Highness, appealing to him on your behalf, and reminding him that his suppliant was the daughter of the man whom his crime

had made a suicide! But I did not state in that letter where I was residing; you can full well divine, Mr. Meagles, that I dared not incur the risk of becoming the object of his base persecution any more. My letter, then, as a matter of course remained unanswered, and I continued in ignorance of the effect which it had produced, or rather, whether it produced any at all. But every now and then I have sent to Jermyn Street to inquire whether any tidings had been received concerning you, and at the same time I have not forgotten to send to the lodging-house in Westminster, in the hope of hearing intelligence with regard to that poor family. But to all the inquiries which I thus caused to be instituted, a negative was invariably returned. It must now be upwards of a fortnight since I last sent to Jermyn Street, and I should have despatched a domestic thither to-morrow or next day, had I not so fortunately and so happily encountered you this morning."

"And it is within the last fortnight that I have returned to London, Miss Foster," said Meagles. "My landlady informed me that numerous inquiries had been made concerning me while I was absent; but she did not tell me that any servant of Lady Bellenden's had called."

"Because I had charged my messengers, on every occasion, to deliver into your hands a note which I had written to you, and which was not to be left unless you were there in person to receive it. Ah! Mr. Meagles," exclaimed the young lady, "you can well understand how cautious I am compelled to be in order to avoid every chance or risk of being discovered by my royal persecutor. I had heard, through Richard, that your lodgings had been searched and your papers taken away, and I feared that if a note were left there for you, containing my address, it might perchance fall into the hands of persons devoted to the interests of the prince."

"And you acted prudently, Miss Foster," said Meagles. "Ah! I have indeed been treated with foul ingratitude by that prince, and with a diabolical tyranny by the government; but in monarchical countries, all princes are tyrants and all governments tyrannical. Condemned without trial, sentenced to deportation upon a fictitious charge, and hurried down to Woolwich immediately after our judgment was pronounced by a secret conclave of government hirelings and tools, Melmoth and myself were ordered to be placed on

board the *Diana* frigate, which was waiting to sail for North America. I was securely lodged in the ship; but Melmoth sprang into the deep waters, and under cover of night was borne either to death or safety, I know not which. The *Diana* sailed, some weeks passed, and already were we nearing the American coast, when we were overtaken by a fast sailing vessel which had been despatched after us, and which was the bearer of my pardon. This pardon had been procured for me by the intervention of a magnanimous friend; and now that I have returned to England, I am devoting myself to the task of persecuting this royal family which knows so well how to persecute others."

"And you are not aware what has become of poor Melmoth's family?" said Rose Foster, with a deep sigh as she thought of the probability of the unfortunate creatures being foodless, houseless, and friendless.

"I have not succeeded in finding the faintest clue to their whereabouts," responded Meagles. Then, as he gazed intently upon the beauteous and indeed angelic countenance of the maiden, he said in a lower and deeper tone than was his wont, "I thank you, Miss Foster, for the kind interest which you have displayed on my behalf; and I can assure you that while I was a sojourner upon the bosom of the Atlantic, I often and often experienced a profound anguish at the uncertainty in which I remained with regard to your fate. I remembered — oh, indeed, how could I forget — that you were left, when I saw you last, in the power of that princely ruffian whom I knew to be merciless and unprincipled, pitiless and inhuman. I trembled for you — my God! I trembled for you, Rose —"

"But Heaven shielded me, my good friend," murmured the maiden; for she felt that the answer which she had just given him was in effect a declaration that her innocence remained intact and that she had passed pure and spotless through the ordeal of temptation, persecution, and violence.

"Yes, the moment that I saw your beauteous countenance," exclaimed Meagles, "when you raised your veil ere now in the Edgeware Road, I knew that Heaven had shielded you, for virtue, candour, and chastity are depicted upon your features the same as when I first formed your acquaintance at the beginning of this memorable year."

The partial excitement, or rather impassioned tone in

which Meagles had just spoken, and which contrasted so remarkably with the low deepness of voice that he had previously adopted, struck Rose Foster with surprise, and she gazed upon him with a half-frightened, half-deprecating look.

“Do you not understand me, Rose? Do you not comprehend all I would say to you, if I could find language wherein to clothe my feelings?” exclaimed Meagles, now for the first time in his life finding himself embarrassed for words to express his thoughts. “You experience a friendship for me, do you not?”

“Oh, most assuredly — most assuredly!” cried the grateful girl. “I look upon you as a benefactor, a kind friend, a brother I might almost say —”

“Well, a brother, then,” interrupted Meagles, feeling as if he could go down upon his knees and worship that pure and innocent girl who thus proffered him as it were her sisterly affection. “But tell me, Rose, tell me,” he said, with strange abruptness, “have you as yet encountered any one whom you love better than a brother?”

The maiden became scarlet, and yet she was not altogether angry. But she was suddenly overwhelmed with shame and confusion; yes, and she now comprehended the fact that Meagles loved her, and that he was floundering in his awkward endeavours to make her aware of his passion. For a moment she had felt vexed and annoyed at the query which he put to her; but on a second thought she remembered all his chivalrous kindness toward her and all he had suffered so uncomplainingly on her account, and her anger, dissolving like snow, was succeeded by a profound sorrow at the fact that she was loved by one who possessed such large claims on her gratitude, but whom she could not possibly love in return.

“Ah! that telltale blush,” exclaimed Meagles, starting from his chair and speaking in a tone of vexation. “Catch a young girl who is not in love,” he muttered to himself. Then, instantaneously feeling how ungenerous it was on his part thus to give vent to any sentiment of annoyance toward the pure-minded artless girl, he caught her by the hand, exclaiming, “God bless you, Rose, God bless you! Not for worlds — no, not for worlds — would I say or do aught to give you pain. Poor girl! you have already seen and known

suffering enough in this world, and if it lay within the power of any man to ensure your happiness by cutting his right hand off, it should be cheerfully done by Tim Meagles."

The tears rolled down the cheeks of Rose Foster as she saw by her friend's swimming eyes, and quivering lips, and muscular nervousness of features how deeply he was moved, how profoundly affected; and she comprehended that he loved her well and that he was waiving all claim upon her heart and hand as a sacrifice which he generously made to her happiness.

"Yes, I was a madman and a fool ever to dream of possessing thee, Rose," he said, after a short pause, during which he gazed upon her with an earnest and yet most respectful admiration; "such a gem as thou art was not formed to place in a diadem made of dross, but in a crown of the purest gold! Well, mayst thou be happy, sweet girl, with whomsoever thou shalt mate thyself, and never, never shalt thou want a friend so long as thou hast confidence in plain, blunt Tim Meagles."

Thus speaking, he imprinted a kiss upon her white and stainless brow; nor with a maudlin prudery did she turn away. On the contrary, she received that kiss as if it were bestowed upon her by a brother, — a kiss from which she would not have shrunk had George Woodfall himself been present, and which she would not be ashamed to own when next they met.

"And now, Rose," said Meagles, after drinking a glass of the wine which had been placed on a side table, "I shall bid you farewell for the present; in a few days you may expect to see me again, and henceforth," he added, with a solemn significance, "I shall regard you as a friend — as a sister."

Rose pressed his hand in acknowledgment of the kind feeling which prompted this assurance, and Meagles then took his leave of the orphan daughter of the suicide merchant.

"Well, I feel happier and more composed now that I have seen her," said Tim to himself, as he threaded the gardens of the priory. "If she had accepted my suit, I should certainly have proved faithless to poor Letitia, and that would have been a scoundrel's trick on my part; but as Rose is already provided with a lover, I am saved from anything like treachery toward the Amazon. So, after all, Letitia will be my wife, — a marchioness, no doubt, —

because it is impossible that the old king, blackguard and scoundrel as he is, can fly from his engagements with me. If he did, I could soon enforce their observance."

Tim Meagles arrived at this very satisfactory conclusion and at the garden gate simultaneously, and the latter being opened, he issued forth. But just as he was in the act of mounting his horse, he beheld a man with a well-known countenance passing along the Edgeware Road; and once more tossing the reins to Lady Bellenden's porter, he bounded on foot after the object of his suddenly awakened interest.

"Melmoth!" he exclaimed, clutching the individual by the shoulder.

"Ah! that voice!" cried the working man, as he stopped short and turned with a sudden start. "Yes, 'tis you, thank God!" and, seizing Meagles by the hand, Melmoth burst into tears of joy at this most unexpected but most welcome encounter. "Where can we go to converse for a short time?" he inquired after a long pause.

"I have just left Miss Foster. She resides in that handsome building, and will be truly rejoiced to see you," said Meagles. "Indeed, not ten minutes have elapsed since we were both talking about you. Come along with me, then —"

"No, I cannot face that young creature, Mr. Meagles," interrupted Melmoth, bitterly; and now Tim noticed for the first time that there was something wild and strange in the expression of the man's eyes.

"Why not?" demanded Meagles. "You have never done anything to injure her, and she speaks of you with gratitude and warm friendship. Indeed, she has been searching after you and yours —"

"Nevertheless," interrupted Melmoth, doggedly, "I cannot think of appearing in the presence of the young maiden, — that is to say, if she is pure, chaste, and innocent as she was when first I knew her."

"She is — she is — beyond all doubt," exclaimed Meagles.

"Then I will not see her," responded Melmoth. "Criminal, vile, polluted, degraded, and infamous as I am," he continued in a tone of wildly increasing excitement, "I should only shock her delicate nature, outrage her best feelings with my fearful confessions —"

"Good heavens! what has happened to you, Melmoth?"

What is the matter with you?" demanded Meagles. "Come, here is a tavern close by, we will enter it, we will engage a private room, and there we can talk at our ease."

"With all my heart," replied Melmoth.

CHAPTER XXVIII

REVELATIONS OF THE MONSTER - MAN

UPON being seated together in a parlour at the tavern, Tim Meagles was enabled to examine James Melmoth more attentively than during the hurried and excited discourse on the foot-way of the Edgeware Road. He now observed that there was not only something strange and wild in Melmoth's looks, but an expression positively sinister and ferocious; now the eyes had a fixed and savage glare like those of a tiger when gazing on an enemy whom he longs to reach but cannot, and then those balls glittered with the vacillating, changeful, but still lurid light which showed a disordered mind and unsettled reason. The man's countenance was pale, sallow, and care-worn, and the melancholy that was expressed in all the lower portion of his features contrasted strongly with the fiercer and darker passions that left their trace on his brow and lighted their fires in his eyes. As for his apparel, he was clad in a decent suit of clothes, and his personal appearance so far indicated anything but penury or distress.

"And now, Melmoth," said Tim Meagles, when the waiter had placed a bottle of wine upon the table and had withdrawn, "now tell me all that has happened to you since we parted off Woolwich nearly three months ago. That terrible and strange things have befallen you, I can divine too easily; your looks, my poor friend, bespeak you an altered man."

"Altered! yes, terribly altered, Mr. Meagles," ejaculated Melmoth, with a burning look and an iron emphasis, as he struck his clenched fist forcibly upon the table. "So altered, my dear sir," he continued, in an accent of satire and mockery now blending with the ferocity of his voice and making it

more dreadful to hear, "so altered, I say, that the man has become a monster!"

"What mean you?" demanded Tim, shuddering, he knew not why, but with that same instinctive feeling which causes a tremor to creep cold and clammy over a man when he enters a room where he knows there is a huge snake, and even before he has yet set eyes upon it.

"I mean," returned Melmoth, "that this accursed state of society which titled rogues, pensioned rascals, high-born demireps, and bloated hypocrites love to applaud as a consummate civilization is nothing more nor less than the cruellest and most savage barbarism; yes, barbarism all the more cruel and all the more savage, because it commits ten thousand crimes daily in the name of humanity, and Christian love, and philanthropy, and justice, and mercy! It plunges families into workhouses, and vaunts its humanity; it dooms four-fifths of the population to misery, wretchedness, and crushing toil, and dares to talk of Christian love being made paractical; it fills the streets with prostitutes and mendicants and inculcates philanthropy; it hangs, transports, or imprisons men who demand their rights, and these it persecutes in the name of justice; it enacts a hundred thousand laws to coerce the poor, and not one to compel the rich to do their duty, and this is mercy. Now can you wonder, Mr. Meagles, if a sensitive man should be goaded to desperation by such a system as this? Can you wonder if an individual, who himself abounds in Christian love and comprehends the true meaning of justice and mercy, should be driven to madness by the horrors which are perpetrated under the cover of our pretended civilization? Can you be surprised if goading tyranny and grinding persecution should pervert all feelings, change all instincts, and turn man's very nature inside out? It would be wondrous indeed if such were not the effects of so vile a system! wondrous if the lamb did not now and then change into the lion, and man become the monster. Well, Mr. Meagles, so was it with me, — and I, a man some short while since, have been turned into a monster."

"How wildly — how terribly you talk!" exclaimed Meagles, almost frightened — brave and dauntless though he naturally was — by Melmoth's words and manner.

"And yet you must prepare to hear things more wild and

terrible still, Mr. Meagles," said the unhappy wretch, "if you persist in knowing my history."

"I do persist — I am anxious to hear it," returned Meagles, still with a cold shudder, as if the dreadful things that were coming already rose looming in spectral shapes and ghastly forms amidst the haze of distance. "Do not be afraid to make me your confidant; if you have committed murder, I would not raise a hand against you, — no, nor even upbraid you, — for I should know that you are a victim, and not a criminal, that society is the real offender, and you only the instrument. Fear not, then, to reveal all, to confess everything, and you may expect pity, but not blame."

"But, my good friend," exclaimed Melmoth, suddenly raising his voice as if it were a whirlwind, "you will have to listen to atrocities that will make your blood run cold —"

"Hush! hush!" said Meagles, in alarm lest the man's loud voice should be overheard.

"And your hair stand on end —"

"Hush! hush! I say."

"And the very flesh creep upon your bones."

"For God's sake, moderate your tone."

"Ah! to be sure," exclaimed Melmoth; "I forgot that we might be overheard. But are you prepared —"

"I am prepared to hear anything, no matter how dreadful — how appalling," responded Meagles. "I shall not wince."

"Do not make too sure. Let me see what you can stand in the shape of horrors, how much your nerves can endure in the shape of monstrosities. But when did you return to London?"

"Nearly a fortnight ago," answered Meagles. "I received a pardon — a pardon for nothing —"

"Well, a fortnight ago," said Melmoth, in a musing tone. "But have you heard or read, since your return, of certain atrocities committed in churchyards, — how the dead have been dug up and horribly mutilated —"

"Yes, I have read of those frightful proceedings," observed Tim, with a cold shudder. "Have you done aught more shocking, more revolting, more unaccountably damnable than the freaks which the unknown monster has performed?"

"Ah! I see that you are not fitted to hear my tale," said Melmoth, almost contemptuously.

“ Why not? Oh! but I am,” exclaimed Meagles, his curiosity now becoming acutely painful and poignantly torturing. “ Come — proceed.”

“ And if I relate deeds as frightful as those to which a faint allusion ere now made you shudder visibly — ”

“ I shall not be shocked, I am prepared for them now.”

“ ’Tis well. Would you like to know, before I begin, who was the perpetrator of those horrors, the fiend that committed those ghastly deeds? If so, I can tell you, for I know him — ”

“ Who is he?” said Meagles, his knees quivering and his teeth chattering with cold horror.

“ I!” was the terrible answer.

Tim Meagles bounded upon his seat, as if suddenly galvanized, or as if a frightful pang had suddenly shot through his entire frame.

“ I told you, sir,” said Melmoth, with a ferocious coolness, “ that you were not half-prepared to listen to such a history as mine. Farewell; I will depart!” and he rose from his seat with a gesture of impatience.

“ No, stay, I conjure you,” exclaimed Meagles, now recovering himself. Then, swallowing two bumpers of wine, the one close upon the other, he said, “ Pardon the excitement which I manifested, and believe me now when I solemnly aver that I am prepared at length to hear all and everything you may have to relate.”

“ You are the best judge of your own nerves, after all,” said Melmoth, resuming his seat. “ Listen, then, and interrupt me as little as possible; because I easily lose the thread of my narrative, as my brain is not always as clear and collected as I could wish. Well, then, you remember that night on which you and I were put into the boat at Woolwich and taken off to the *Diana* as she lay at anchor. I managed to get off my chains, and, watching the opportunity, I plunged into the river. Down, down, under the ship’s bottom I dived, all my wits about me, my memory as keen and my mental perception as clear while thus engulfed, as ever my faculties were strong and lucid in the soberest and calmest moments of my life. I swam under the ship in the lengthwise direction in which she lay, and emerged close by her helm. There I remained clinging to the chains of the rudder for a few minutes, while the hubbub caused by my frolic lasted. Lights were hung over, and I dived again;

then boats were put out, and I dodged about the stern of the ship for upwards of a quarter of an hour, sometimes under the water, and sometimes with only just my head above it. At length I swam cautiously and quietly away, diving incessantly until I reached the Essex shore, about two hundred yards farther down than where the vessel lay.

“I landed and walked along the bank for upwards of an hour, till at last, in the utter darkness of the night, I fell into a deep muddy ditch. Thence I had the greatest trouble to extricate myself, and, being covered with slime, I was forced to plunge into the river to cleanse myself. I suppose that my head must have struck against something, for I became insensible; and when I recovered myself, I was in a hut at the village of Gray’s Thurlock, several miles farther down the river than where I had taken the path that so nearly proved fatal to me. An old waterman had picked me up as I was floating down with the tide; a glimpse of moonlight upon the water had shown him my countenance as I lay senseless on my back. On getting me ashore, he found that life was not extinct; and being a humane man (as most poor people are, by way of set-off to the hard-hearted aristocracy) he conveyed me to his hut, where he and his wife attended upon me. I recovered in a few hours, but for several days I was unable to rise from the humble pallet on which I lay stretched. At length I grew strong enough to get up, and not choosing to remain a burden to my good friends — anxious moreover to see my wife and dear, dear children — I said I should leave them.

“The report of my escape off Woolwich had reached Gray’s Thurlock, as a matter of course; and the old waterman suspected that I was the individual. He spoke kindly to me upon the subject, and I told him everything. Then he became a true friend to me, bestowing upon me a suit of sailor’s clothing as a disguise, and giving me a few shillings to see my way clear with. I returned to London. Oh how my heart beat, how every pulse thrilled with the fervid, joyous hope of embracing my beloved wife and little ones again. Heedless of the risk I incurred of being recognized by any hostile person who might give information to the government, I hurried to the lodgings where I hoped to find my family. Heavens! how long the street seemed from the corner to the house, what an age it appeared before my knock at the door was answered. To clasp my wife in my arms, to embrace

my little ones, to see poor baby's innocent face again, — ah, that would be a reward for all I had suffered! The door opened, and the landlady appeared on the threshold. She was frightened when she saw me, — she guessed that I had escaped, — and she was afraid of getting into trouble by even speaking to me. I beheld all the embarrassment of her manner, and my heart sank within me. I apprehended something dreadful; nor was I deceived in that harrowing presentiment.

“ My family had been compelled to leave their lodging, — in plain terms, they had been ejected. I restrained my fury while I put some questions to the landlady. She was frightened at me and besought me to depart, hinting that the government officials might observe and arrest me. I saw that if I gave way to violence I should only invoke a renewal of the persecution whence I had escaped, and I accordingly maintained a forced composure. But this was all on a sudden interrupted by an outburst of bitter weeping, for my feelings overpowered me. Even the landlady, wretch as she was, seemed moved; and by way of consoling or perhaps of appeasing me, she volunteered the assurance that if any stranger called to inquire after me, she would not say that I had been there. As for my wife and family, the woman knew not where they had gone; and I departed from her presence in a state of mind which no culprit about to ascend the scaffold need have envied.”

“ Poor man!” said Tim Meagles, profoundly touched. “ As for the landlady, she kept her promise to you, harshly though she might have behaved to your wife and children; for Miss Rose Foster has sent to make frequent inquiries at your old lodgings concerning you, and the servants who called there on her behalf never could glean any intelligence with regard to you.”

“ For this reason, then,” observed Melmoth, laconically, “ I will spare her. Otherwise I had intended to immolate her amongst the rest of my enemies. Oh, you may gaze upon me with horrified looks, Mr. Meagles; but you have tremendous things to hear ere we separate! However, — to resume the thread of my story, — I was telling you that I took my departure from the landlady's abode in a condition of mind not to be envied by any living being, — no, not even by the most grovelling wretch that crawls upon the face of the earth,

nor by the condemned felon who looks Death face to face. Oh, my poor wife, my dearly beloved children, whither had ye gone? Wherefore was I thus deprived of your love, your solace? Why were we not permitted to meet and mingle our tears? But I saw it all; I comprehended the villainy that had been perpetrated. It was quite clear that the money which I had sent from Woolwich along with the letter had never reached them. It had doubtless been kept by the villainous peace-officer, and they were turned into the streets. O God! how bitter, how diabolical, how fiendish was the curse that rose up in my soul at that moment, a curse menacing the whole framework of society with ruin, blood, murder, and vengeance, — such a curse, in fine, as a desperate man might be expected to vent upon a world that had lacerated, tortured, scourged, persecuted, and goaded him so cruelly — so maddeningly. Yes, I breathed a curse, — not aloud, no, it was to myself; for that curse was too awful, too hideous, too damnable to be shaped in words or clothed in language, until the mind had become familiar with it by frequent contemplation. And now that I have so long, so steadfastly, so continuously viewed that curse face to face, I may unhesitatingly tell thee, Mr. Meagles, that it summed up all the mischiefs I would possibly work against society and all the horrors with which I could startle it. I looked upon the world as a pandemonium, and I determined to have a fiend's revenge. At all events, if this earth were not really hell already, then I vowed to open hell at the feet of all whom my influence could reach.

“ I wandered out into the suburbs of St. Pancras with these thoughts uppermost in my mind; and I saw a funeral pass. I beheld the mourners weeping, — the friends and relatives with their countenances buried in their handkerchiefs. I heard the sobs of some of them, and thence knew that their grief was real. Mechanically I followed the funeral into Old St. Pancras Churchyard; I saw the coffin lowered into the earth, I beheld the soil shovelled down upon it, I marked the intense anguish of the mourners. And as I thus gazed upon them, I was suddenly struck by the features of the chief mourner as he withdrew his handkerchief from his face for a few moments. Heavens! it was the peace-officer to whom I had entrusted the money and the letter at Woolwich, and who had robbed my poor family of the gold they so much

wanted. Yes, the peace-officer it was; and fortunate was it that his grief was so absorbing as to prevent him from taking any notice of me, or else he might have recognized me, despite my sailor's apparel. Mingling with the spectators, I learned that it was the peace-officer's own father whose remains had just been committed to the ground. Oh! at that moment all hell seemed to flame up and rage in my bosom; terrible thoughts took possession of my brain, tremendous ideas began floating vaguely about in my imagination, as monstrous serpents would seem in the depths of the green sea waters. Shuddering at the appalling promptings which were beginning to influence me, goaded to frenzy by my own thoughts, and endeavouring to outstrip them, I fled from the place.

"For three or four days, however, I haunted the neighbourhood, circling as it were about that lonely churchyard, as a vulture flies around and around the carcass on which it is about to pounce, each time narrowing the circumference of its whirl. At last the fearful ideas which were agitating in my brain seemed to combine all their force, concentrate all their power, and act as a tremendous spell upon me. A violent headache, a cruelly painful nervousness, an audible beating of the heart, and a fever-heat all over my body, — these were now the principal symptoms of the frightful monomania that was gaining so appalling an ascendancy over me. It was an impulsive insanity which I could not resist, a frenzy exercising an indomitable control over my passions, my senses, and my very actions, — the concentration as it were of all the venom, all the rage, all the fury, and all the fire of that stupendous curse which the hell of my feelings had thrown up in their despair! At length, unable to bear up against the torrent of impulses which were overwhelming me, I went and purchased a spade; and when night came, I entered the churchyard of Old St. Pancras, I dug open the grave, I tore up the corpse of the peace-officer's father, and I mutilated it horribly with the shovel."

"Eternal God! this is dreadful!" exclaimed Meagles, bounding upon his chair, while his cheeks grew blanched and his lips quivered with indescribable feelings of terror and disgust.

"Ah! I told you that it was necessary to prepare yourself to hear appalling things," said Melmoth, with a hollow

mocking laugh. "Shall I cease? or shall I continue?" he demanded, after a pause and in a tone of indifference.

"Proceed, proceed," returned Meagles; "and you must make allowances for any display of wonder or excitement on my part. I will however restrain myself as well as I am able. Go on. You were telling me that you exhumed the corpse of the peace-officer's father, and that you mutilated it horribly."

"And the moon shone cold, serene, and placid upon the deed," observed Melmoth. "But no sooner had I accomplished it, no sooner had I hacked and hewed the senseless corpse of the old man with as furious a vindictiveness and as ferocious a heartiness as if it had been the living peace-officer himself, no sooner had I thus yielded, I say, to that monomania of so frightful a character, when an awful reaction took place within me. The herculean strength that I had manifested in hollowing the grave dissolved rapidly into a child's weakness; the raging excitement that had hurried me along subsided into the deepest despondency; the feverish heat that had made my whole frame appear as if every artery and vein were boiling with a lava stream, was succeeded by a cold sweat; and a sense of overpowering debility coming upon me, as if my very life were ebbing away, I sank down by the side of the corpse which I had mutilated. Consciousness abandoned me, and when I awoke to life again, the deep tone of the church clock proclaimed the hour of one in the morning.

"I had remained an hour in that profound lethargy, — a lethargy so closely resembling death itself, while it lasted. And on thus returning to a comprehension of the hideous scene in which I was the principal actor — or at least, the living one — I was seized with a mortal terror, and snatching up my spade, I fled from the spot. For the remainder of that night I wandered about like one demented, now under the influence of a stupendous horror, now giving way to the anguish of indescribable excruciations; at one time rushing madly on as if lashed by invisible fiends wielding whips of scorpions, at another time dragging myself slowly and painfully along as if drooping and sinking beneath the weight of an intolerable burden; now gloating over the revenge which I had consummated, and then recoiling from the bare idea of so tremendous a monstrosity. In the morning I

repaired to one of the low lodging-houses which abound in all the vile neighbourhoods and pauper districts of London, and there I rested for many hours. In the evening I heard the frequenters of the place talking of the hideous deed of sacrilege that had been committed on the previous night in Old St. Pancras Churchyard; and I learned that the whole vicinage of the scene of my fearful exploit was struck with consternation, horror, and disgust.

“ Oh, then, oh, then, how my heart bounded within me, as if a source of enjoyment at once the most savage and the most ecstatic were now open to my comprehension! I had longed, — nay, more, — I had resolved to strike terror into the heart of society, to startle it with stupendous alarms, to dig the pit of hell at its very feet, to outrage all its decencies and violate all its proprieties. Such was my determination, and now I had discovered the means of carrying that resolve into execution. War, war, to the knife against that society which turns men into monsters and goads the best intentioned individuals to desperation; war, war to the death against that society which is composed of selfishness, heartlessness, and injustice! Such was my motto; and all my veins thrilled with delight as, one after another, innumerable means of carrying on that war presented themselves to my imagination. It was the war of one poor outcast against the whole aggregate of society; but I vowed that the war should be terrible nevertheless. And the means to which I have alluded, the ideas which suggested themselves to my brain, — that brain which hell seemed to fertilize at the moment! Oh, these means, I say, were ample, and I laughed inwardly with a savage triumph as I recapitulated them in detail! There was the desecration of the graves of the dead, there was incendiarism in the country, there was the assassination of solitary wayfarers in lonely parts, there was the throwing of vitriol in the faces of passers-by, there was — ”

“ Enough, enough!” cried Meagles, starting from his seat; “ I can hear no more;” but almost instantaneously resuming his place, he said in a tone so altered that it showed how powerful was the effect which a second thought had produced upon his mind, “ And yet I will hear you to the end. Proceed, and once more I demand your pardon for this interruption.”

“ Well, I will continue, then,” said Melmoth, after a few moments’ hesitation. “ The thoughts and reflections of which I have been speaking prepared me for the pursuance of that campaign which I had commenced in Old St. Pancras Churchyard, and I resolved to cumulate horror upon horror for the purpose of startling society. Therefore, when night again spread her sable wing over the earth, I took my spade and bent my way toward the eastern end of the metropolis. In Shoreditch Churchyard — a cemetery situated in the midst of a densely populated neighbourhood — I made my second assault upon the innocent, unconscious dead. When morning dawned a grave was found to have been violated, — its tenant dragged up and horribly mangled. The outrage was incredible, — it exceeded all possibility of belief. The rumour of the St. Pancras affair had reached Shoreditch, but was treated with ridicule; now the same stupendous atrocity was brought to the very doors of the skeptics and scoffers, yet they did not believe until they crowded to the churchyard and beheld with their own eyes the open grave, the shattered coffin, and the mutilated body. Then they were all stricken with an awful consternation, and they looked at each other in dumb horror, as if the plague had suddenly broken out amongst them. Oh, it was a glee, it was ecstasy, it was delirious pleasure for me! I went into the public-houses and heard the frequenters of those places talking upon the subject, — their tones low and solemn. I passed down the streets and beheld ghastly amazement and blank terror depicted upon every countenance that appeared at a window or a doorway. Heavens! how my vengeance was working! I had been trodden upon as a worm, — a miserable, wretched worm, whose loss from the social aggregate would not be missed, and who might therefore be safely trampled and crushed out of existence; but, behold! this worm had made itself potent enough to strike terror into the hearts of thousands! Was that no triumph? Was that no source of joy? Assuredly it was; and therefore you need not be surprised if I tell you that on the third night of my savage campaign, I sallied forth again, I betook myself to another cemetery, and St. Matthew’s, Bethnal Green, became the theatre of my hellish revelry. Oh, then and there I rollicked like a fiend in my unholy pastime, and I vented my rage upon the tenants of two graves!

“ Next morning the whole district was in a state of excitement as tremendous as if the mutilated dead themselves had traversed the streets in their grave-clothes. The infection of a panic terror spread over the entire neighbourhood; men shook their heads and talked of vampires; old women spoke of ghouls and human jackals. I concealed my joy beneath a composed countenance; but in my heart I was mad, frenzied, frantic with the bliss of triumph. But as I was preparing for my fourth exploit in another quarter of the metropolis, strange and awful rumours met my ears, — how the graveyards were to be watched with bloodhounds, how man-traps and spring-guns were to be planted, and how all possible means were to be adopted to protect the dead and discover the desecrator of their earthy homes. I was struck with consternation, my courage vanished, my ferocity received a sudden check, and all my infuriate valour became deadened into a grovelling cowardice. Society was destined, then, to have a respite. Yes, and like a troubled spirit did I wander about at night, remaining all day in some obscure den, where I used to fall into a numbness of feeling and a stupefaction of the senses that made those around me think I had become a moping idiot. But this dulness soon passed, the fearful instinct revived once more, and notwithstanding the struggle which I made to combat against the whelming tide of abhorrent impulses, I felt that all my efforts would be in vain.”

The monster-man paused in his dreadful recital, and Meagles proffered him wine. He drank it with avidity, his eyes flamed up with brighter fires, a glow appeared upon his cheeks, and unsolicited he resumed his tale of horror.

“ After the lapse of some days, I grew so restless that I was compelled to go out in the broad daylight, for I found it impossible to remain indoors. I passed by a churchyard, and, behold! a sudden curiosity prompted me to enter it. I need scarcely observe that I had not carried my spade about with me since the last time I had used it; and therefore my appearance was that of a rough, weather-beaten sailor. I did not wish to enter that churchyard, but an insuperable power urged me on. I was obeying some spell more potent than my own inclinations, some supernatural influence which had more of the demon in its nature than I had of the angel in my heart. I entered therefore that cemetery, but scarcely

had I diverged from the pathway and begun to ramble amongst the tombstones, when an impatient voice cried out, 'Take care of yourself; there are man-traps and spring-guns planted there!' This fearful warning, which reminded me of a danger that I had for the moment lost sight of, made me step back into the pathway; and, looking around, I saw a man coming out of the church porch. He it was who had given me the warning; and, as I speedily recovered my self-possession, I judged by his appearance that he was a good-humoured kind of a person. Nor was I mistaken, and we speedily got into conversation together.

"He told me that he was employed to remain there during the day to see that people passing through the churchyard did not move out of the pathway, as man-traps and spring-guns had been planted in consequence of the late mysterious desecration of the graves in other cemeteries. Affecting to be a blunt, offhand, frank-speaking sailor, I soon won his confidence; and he explained to me how the spring-guns were set, with their numerous wires diverging in all directions, and how the man-traps were concealed in the grass between the graves. In fine, little suspecting that I was the monster whose hideous deeds had led to the adoption of all these precautions, the man explained everything without reserve, and, after a long conversation, I left him."

"During the remainder of that day I wandered about with my mind full of all I had just heard; and the longer I reflected thereupon, the more deeply could I feel the influence of the demon winding itself as it were around my heart. Evening came, and my blood was already boiling at fever-heat. A presentiment of what I was doomed that night to do arose in my mind, filling me with anguish and loathing, and making me curse the hour when I was born. I felt that I was a monomaniac, and I abhorred myself. I knew that a species of madness had overtaken me, imbuing me with appalling tendencies, but not depriving me of the faculty of deploring them. I was goaded on to insanity of action, though remaining perfectly rational in my ideas. But as the darkness of night deepened I became strangely and wildly agitated; and it seemed as if a strong hand seized upon me by the nape of the neck and impelled me onward in the particular course chalked out by an infernal destiny and against which there was no possibility of resistance. Thus was I hurried back to

the den where I had been staying, and thus was I prompted to take my spade and conceal it as well as I could about my person. In like manner was I urged to a cutler's shop, where I expended my last sixpence in the purchase of a pair of scissors. Oh, truly, Mr. Meagles, truly is all this the fearful narrative of impulsive madness the most horrible, the most diabolical!"

"It is indeed, my poor friend, it is indeed!" exclaimed Meagles, who was fascinated by the appalling interest of a tale even as the bird is by the eye of the snake, — a horrible fascination whence the escape which would prove so welcome is impossible.

"But let me hasten and bring my hideous story to a conclusion," said Melmoth, with abruptness alike in voice and manner; "for I myself am getting sick of it, as I am sure you must be. Well, then, I returned to the churchyard which I had visited in the morning; and Heaven knows how agonizing were the thoughts, the instincts, and the impulses which waged their tremendous warfare within my soul. Talk of the roaring, raging, conflicting billows of a whirlpool, they were naught to the battling fury of my sensations! Talk of the eddies of sand thrown up in whirling columns by the hurricane on Arabia's desert, they were nothing in comparison with my jarring inclinations! I would have given worlds to go back, but an indomitable power urged me on; I would have laid down my life to be able to turn and flee, but a destiny that knew not pity nor remorse compelled me to go forward. It seemed as if I had two minds, — the one wherein all the better feelings of my nature had concentrated themselves; the other forming the focus of all the influences of hell."

"And the latter triumphed?" said Meagles, in a voice that was low and subdued with mingled suspense and consternation.

"Yes, hell triumphed!" returned Melmoth, a ghastly expression sweeping over his countenance. "I entered the churchyard, though recoiling from the hideous and varied dangers which menaced me. For I knew that the spring-guns were charged ready to vomit forth death or inflict disabling wounds, and that the steel traps were yawning in all directions like serpents with their mouths open in the long damp grass. But hell which gave me its instincts

lent me also its cunning; and, mounting upon the tombstones, I used them as a bridge to convey me safely over the perils that lay concealed below. Nevertheless, every sound alarmed me, filling my soul with terrors the most excruciating, as if the voice of Death were whispering upon every breeze and his footfall were heard in the waving of the grass. Did a dog bark in the distance, I instantaneously fancied that it was the bay of a bloodhound scenting me in my unholy work; and the tread of a passer-by in the adjoining lane was taken to be that of a pursuer. Thus was my course frequently interrupted by my fears and imaginings; but all those apprehensions proved groundless on that occasion.

“ At last, through the faint glimmering of the moonlight, I beheld a new-made grave; and then, as the instinct of the tiger warms for blood when its prey approaches, did my soul experience its horrible longing to desecrate the earthy solitude of the dead. By the exercise of a little caution I discovered in which direction the wire of the spring-gun ran, and with the scissors I cut a piece clean out of the middle. For you must understand that the spring-gun revolves upon a swivel, and turning in the direction of the wire which is trodden upon, explodes pointblank at the trespasser; therefore, by delicately feeling for the wire and cutting a portion of it away, it became perfectly safe to tread on this particular spot whence the wire was thus removed. And now I am touching upon a sad, a mournful, a horrible episode in a narrative where all is sad, or mournful, or horrible; but you will understand how previous horrors could be outvied, — so far as the magnitude of the desecration and the anguish of my soul were concerned, — when I tell you that, having hollowed the grave, dragged up the coffin, and torn off the lid, I beheld the marble countenance of my own wife! ”

“ Your own wife! ” echoed Meagles, starting with a spasmodic shock. “ This is horrible, horrible! ”

“ Most horrible, most horrible! ” groaned Melmoth, now covering his countenance with his hands; and for upwards of a minute he remained in this position, silent and motionless. “ I saw that it was a pauper coffin in which she lay, ” he continued, at length revealing his features again, — those features which were now so hideous in their pallor,

so ghastly in their expression of mingled anguish and horror; "and it was not difficult to conjecture how she had died, or how her remains had found the rites of sepulture. Misery and starvation had done the former, — the cold charity of the parish had done the latter. But I will not dwell upon the churchyard scene of that dreadful night. Suffice it to say that once more did the curse rise up from the depths of my soul, — that curse which had sprung into existence when I found that my family had been turned adrift on the wide world. Yes, this fearful curse did I now renew, adopt again, and swear to carry out to the best of my ability. I sought to steel my soul against all pity and all remorse; my wife was murdered by the cruel laws and institutions of which I had been first made the victim, and a terrible retaliation could alone appease my thirst for vengeance. Vengeance, then, would I have. Need I tell you that I restored the remains of my poor wife to their last resting-place, and that I repeated over her grave the oath I had sworn to avenge her?

"Then I quitted the churchyard, and at a short distance I met a well-dressed man dragging himself along in a state of almost helpless intoxication. I recollected that I had no money left, and I robbed him of the little money which he had about him. He was too powerless to offer resistance, and I did not hurt him. But I hurried away, rejoicing in this new crime; for I saw that it was useless for an outcast wretch such as I to endeavour even to be good. Nevertheless, when the excitement of these exploits began to wear away and the inevitable influence of reaction came, I once more cursed the destiny which branded me like a second Cain; and I would have given worlds, had I possessed them, to undo the deed of the robbery. But remorse was useless and unavailing; and, behold! in a few days the infernal hallucination came back again, and in the depth of the night to another churchyard did I wend my way. Once more did I pass through the hideous ordeal of a frightful conflict with all my better feelings, and once more did the infuriate demon that was within me triumph over the last efforts of my guardian genius to save me. The wire of the spring-gun was found and cut, as on the former occasion, a grave was opened, a corpse was torn up, and, inspired with a diabolical rage and a demoniac fury, I hacked and hewed it with the shovel.

“ Then I fell into a stupor, which lasted for two or three hours, — I know not exactly how long; and, on starting up, I was seized with a horror so profound, an anguish so intense, a panic so insuperable, that, forgetful of the dangers which environed me, I turned to flee from the scene of my atrocious pastime. Yes, I turned and fled; but in a moment there was an explosion, — I had trodden upon the wire whence I had previously cut a portion away, — and my body received the contents of the accursed spring-gun. Oh, horror! what were my feelings at that moment. Ten million harrowing thoughts flashed through my brain swiftly as a flight of arrows cleaves the air, — thoughts of capture, trial, condemnation, and death upon the scaffold. But the next instant I shook myself like a dog on emerging from the water, and though in every part of my body I experienced the tortures of the damned, I found that I was not completely disabled. Dragging myself from the grass into the pathway, I stopped for a few moments to bind up the only wound that was bleeding very seriously, and then, with a celerity that was marvellous considering the shocking state I was in, I rushed from the scene of my crime and its punishment.

“ An alarm was already raised in the neighbourhood by the explosion of the gun; but I got off in safety, and as the pain caused by my wounds was presently succeeded by a strange numbness all over my frame, I was enabled to drag myself along through the by-streets into which I had entered. It was in the northwestern suburbs of London that my exploit of this memorable night had taken place, and I bent my way toward the eastern districts. In fine, at the expiration of about three hours I entered the maze of wretched streets, filthy alleys, and vile courts which constitute Whitechapel; and, almost perishing with exhaustion, I sank down on the door-step of a large building which looked gloomy as a prison in the obscurity of the night. It proved to be the workhouse, and when the door opened, I demanded admission. This was granted when it was understood that I had been severely wounded, — and to account for which I invented some tale. But, behold! it was destined by Providence that beneath the roof of the pauper asylum I should meet my own children, whom necessity had rendered inmates there.”

“ In the workhouse? ” exclaimed Meagles, more and more interested in the strange, wild, and scarcely credible narrative to which he was listening.

“ Yes, in the workhouse — the pauper’s home,” returned Melmoth, bitterly. “ But I was rejoiced to meet them anywhere, poor things, for their mother had been taken from them by the hand of Death. And then I learned that the babe was also dead, and that a surgeon had taken the infant’s corpse, doubtless to preserve it in his pharmacy, and I vowed in my soul that the barbarian should not go unpunished. I learned also that my poor wife had breathed her last on the steps of a great mansion at the West End; and I made another vow, to the effect that the inmates of the lordly dwelling should likewise be marked out as the objects of my future vengeance. To be brief, the very surgeon who took my dead child was one day brought by the parish doctor to see me at the workhouse; and the nature and number of my wounds led to the discovery that I was the monster whose deeds had so lately stricken the entire community with horror. I was removed to a mad cell and treated as a maniac of the most desperate class. But a revolt of my fellow lunatics led to my emancipation, and, accompanied by my children, I quitted the workhouse in safety. Nearly six weeks have elapsed since then — ”

“ And in the interval you have exercised a proper control over your feelings and your actions? ” said Meagles, with an eagerness which showed how rejoiced he would be at receiving an affirmative response; for amidst all the horror and loathing which he experienced for the unhappy wretch, there was blended a deep compassion, an immense pity.

“ Since that period,” said Melmoth, after a long pause and in a solemn tone, while he fixed his eyes with a strange expression of dogged resolution and desperate decision upon Meagles, “ since that period I have certainly experienced no return of the horrible mania, the frightful hallucination, which urged me on to the fury of a ghoul and the atrocities of a vampire; but I still continue my warfare against the world. You observe that my appearance denotes not penury, and yet I labour not honestly to procure raiment, food, and lodging for myself and children. No, there is not a chance for honest industry in this country. I have consequently

become a thief, — a professional thief, — and I am training my children to be thieves — ”

“ Good God! is this possible, Melmoth? ” exclaimed Tim Meagles, profoundly excited.

“ To be sure it is, ” cried the unhappy man, endeavouring to smother all compunction beneath a forced and ferocious glee. “ And why not? Of what use is virtue? What recommendation is character? None at all! And do you forget that our acquaintance first began by means of robbery? Did I not plunder you in St. James’s Square? ”

“ Yes, and how deeply you regretted the action afterward, ” said Meagles, in an earnest tone.

“ Because you were a good man, and because I was only young in the ways of crime then, ” responded Melmoth. “ But now I am as inveterately bent upon a career of what the world calls wrong, and plunder, and spoliation, and violence, as I once was resolute in maintaining my character pure and my name spotless. In sooth, ” he exclaimed, rising abruptly from his seat, “ I have a mission to fulfil, — a destiny to accomplish; and when once all my work is done, I care not how soon I leave this earthly scene of wretchedness and trouble. I am now — yes, even now — preparing for a grand campaign, and you will speedily hear of the enactment of dreadful deeds. There is the surgeon who stole the corpse of my child, there are the inmates of the West End house on the threshold of which my wife sank down and died, and there is the prince whose tyranny first of all tore me away from my family, — there are all these, I say, to punish, — and none of them will I spare. ”

The man spoke with a terrible concentration of bitterness; and for a few moments he paused as he bent his eyes fixedly upon Meagles.

“ My good friend, ” said Tim, in an imploring tone, “ you — ”

“ Nothing you can urge, Mr. Meagles, ” interrupted Melmoth, calmly but firmly, “ will induce me to deviate from my purpose. But with regard to yourself, — with regard also to that angel of beauty and innocence, Rose Foster, — may Heaven bless you both! May God save each of you from such miseries as I have known and such torturing thoughts as I have experienced. ”

With these words Melmoth rushed abruptly to the door

and sped from the room. Meagles, starting from his seat, sprang after him and implored him to remain a few minutes longer. But the monster-man, heeding him not, hastened precipitately down the stairs; and just at the moment that Meagles reached the threshold of the door opening into the street, the unhappy being disappeared around the corner of a narrow lane on the opposite side of the Edgeware Road.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE EARL'S LAST ACT OF REPARATION

ON the same day and at about the same hour when the preceding incidents occurred, an event of a most serious nature took place at Stamford Manor in the vicinage of Aylesbury.

The weather was remarkably fine, indeed it was the most splendid day which had yet gladdened the spring of 1795. All around the manor the scenery was beautiful beyond description, exhibiting every diversity of floral colouring in the gardens and every varied shade of green in the fields. There were the bright meadows of emerald hue,^f and there were the woodlands of a deeper tinge; while the dark hedges stretched out their tracery like veins upon the ample surface of the sunny pasture lands. There, like a broad ribbon of glittering silver, meandered the pellucid stream; and the fields, densely studded with buttercups, appeared like a green carpet all shining with an embroidery of gold. The feathered choristers filled the warm sunny air with their tuneful notes, the lambs frisked in the meadows, and all nature, animate or inanimate, was full of cheerfulness, freshness, and beauty.

In the gardens of Stamford Manor the Earl and Countess of Desborough were walking. They were not arm in arm; but side by side did they slowly thread the bright gravel-paths that were bordered by beds of shining foliage and by parterres of flowers.

Nor did they look at each other, but their eyes were bent downward, and everything denoted a painful reserve and constraint which hung most oppressively about the manner, the regards, the demeanour, and the very gait and gestures of both. Yet no quarrel had taken place between them,

no dispute had occurred to ruffle their temper or produce a misunderstanding. Not a hasty word had fallen from either lip, not an angry look had been exchanged; nothing, in fact, had transpired of an irritable or unpleasant nature between them in their relative capacity of man and wife. Neither was the lady now tortured by unsatisfied desires and tantalizing passions, nor the nobleman shamed and goaded by a sense of humiliation and despair on that account. No; far different thoughts racked their brains and agitated their souls.

The truth was that they experienced a secret and insuperable loathing for each other, — a mingled disgust and horror against which they vainly strove, but which proved stronger than themselves; for the taint of an atmosphere poisoned by the sanguine exhalation of murder had destroyed all possible sympathy in their hearts. Deeply, fondly, madly, devotedly as the earl had loved his beautiful countess, he now regarded her as a murderess; and her presence, even as she walked in all the glory of her loveliness, produced upon him a shuddering sensation as if a loathsome serpent, with a charming woman's head, were in reality concealed beneath that rustling silk and that snowy linen. It seemed to him as if there were pollution in her very touch, venom in her breath, the baleful fascination of a basilisk in her looks; and a cold tremor, like a presentiment of coming danger, was wont to creep slowly over him whenever she approached him. Ah! how different were his feelings now from what they were when he used to worship the very ground upon which she trod, when he was never wearied of gazing upon her as the goddess of his idolatry, and when her touch thrilled him with ecstasy and her beaming looks transfixed him with delight! But as an ungenial rain showers down myriads of poisonous insects upon the germinating plants and the nascent flowers of spring, so had murder sprinkled its crimson drops upon all the brightest feelings and purest affections that had ever flourished in the heart of that nobleman; and as a blight suddenly falls upon the loveliest blossoms and the greenest leaves, turning the delicate beauty of the former into cankered rottenness and the verdure of the latter into discoloured seariness, so had crime shed its corroding, blasting mildew upon the holiest sentiments and the finest emotions that ever harboured in the mortal breast.

On the other hand, if with the Countess of Desborough there were not the same fervid love to be crushed, the same enthusiastic affections to be blighted, and the same worship to be overthrown, there was at all events an equal amount of sensibility to be shocked and a similar delicacy to be hurt; and when Eleanor thought of her husband or beheld him approach her, she could only regard him as her accomplice in a murder. The very circumstance that he possessed all the grandest mental qualities which could inspire admiration, that his principles were the most noble and the most exalted which could possibly ensure respect, and that his public character as a man was the most elevated and the most enviable that could exist, — the knowledge of all this, we say, only increased the horror and augmented the disgust wherewith the countess now regarded him. For to her contemplation the mask was torn from his countenance: she saw him as he was, her accomplice in a murder, and not as he seemed to the world, a stainless man. Although it was her hand which had perpetrated the deed, and he was merely an accessory before and after the fact, yet was not his share of the deed absorbed in the consciousness of her own transcendently superior iniquity; nor did that very chivalrous nature on his part which had led him thus to become her accomplice, nor did an appreciation of such boundless love, we say, have any effect in neutralizing or diminishing the disgust and horror which she felt toward the partner in her crime after that crime was accomplished.

Thus was it that the noble couple experienced a mutual loathing and abhorrence; and inasmuch as they could not possibly conquer or mitigate these feelings, so neither could they conceal them from each other. Restraint and embarrassment, coldness and reserve, rapidly infused themselves into their manners, their looks, their language; so that they became afraid to exchange a glance, afraid to be left alone together, afraid to allow their very hands to come in contact.

On the present occasion they had met by accident in the garden, neither being previously aware that the other was walking in the charming enclosure at the time. And on thus meeting they had started as if each one had come suddenly face to face with a horrible spectre. Then, instantaneously dropping their looks, they had proceeded together side by side along the gravel-walk, exchanging a few com-

monplace observations to which they gave utterance with an effort, and the cold meaningless nature of which only rendered their embarrassment the more cruel, — their perplexity the more painful.

“Eleanor,” said the earl, after a long pause the chill silence of which became intolerable, “there must be an end to all this.”

“My lord!” ejaculated the countess, with a start, as if she did not comprehend her husband’s meaning; and the hurried glance which she threw upon him was instantaneously averted.

“Yes, all this must have an end somehow or another,” cried the earl, in a voice of decision. “It is impossible that we can lead such a terrible existence much longer.”

“A terrible existence, my lord?” said the countess, with a sort of cold astonishment.

“Oh, do not affect inability to comprehend me, Eleanor!” exclaimed the unhappy nobleman; “your heart tells you but too well what I mean. Look you, Eleanor, we are accursed in each other’s eyes,” he continued, in a low, deep, hollow tone; “and until this moment we have not dared confess in words those feelings which nevertheless speak out in all our looks and all our actions. Crime, Eleanor, has opened a tremendous gulf between us, and we are not fitted to dwell together any longer.”

“But if we separate,” said the countess, hanging down her head and speaking in a tone that was scarcely audible, for she no longer affected not to comprehend her husband’s meaning, “if we separate, what will the world say? What scandal will be created? What suspicions may be engendered?”

“True!” murmured the earl. “And therefore it is apparent that we must not separate, eh?” he said, inquiringly.

“No, we must not separate,” responded the countess.

“Nor can we continue to live together thus,” added the earl.

“No, we cannot live together thus,” she rejoined.

And a long pause ensued, during which they walked slowly toward the house, not once glancing at each other, no, not even furtively.

“’Tis a heavenly day — a glorious day,” suddenly exclaimed the earl, as if all in a moment inspired by a joyous-

ness arising from a sense of the beauties and glories of nature. "The prospect from the roof of the building must be charming to a degree. Methinks that our hearts, Eleanor, may derive a balm from the contemplation of the rich and varied banquet which the hand of spring has spread out on nature's table to feast the eye; and it may be also that from the harmonious blending of such varied shades, and tints, and hues, our minds may glean a lesson teaching us how to smooth off the asperities of our own feelings and lead them to commingle in friendly unison."

The countess threw a look of amazement, curiosity, and doubt upon her husband, the longest and most earnest look which she had dared to fix upon him ever since the murder. At first she wondered what he meant by devoting his thoughts to the beauties of nature when the stern realities of the world were pregnant with so fearfully absorbing an interest for him as well as for herself; then she was seized with an anxiety to discover at what aim his remarks were tending; and lastly she was plunged into a strange uncertainty as to whether he had some sinister meaning, or whether he had spoken frankly and ingenuously under the influence of an improving tone of mind.

"Do you wish to ascend to the roof of the mansion?" she asked, as her regards were once more averted.

"If you be agreeable, Eleanor," answered the earl. "Indeed, I should wish you to accompany me, for I have an idea that some good will result from the prospect that will greet your eyes on that eminence."

"Be it so, then," observed the countess; and, with feelings vaguely alarming, though full of uncertainty, suspense, and curiosity, she began the ascent of a winding staircase which led to the roof of the mansion.

The earl followed her, and during the three or four minutes occupied in the task of toiling up the flight, he continued to discourse with a cheerfulness that raised Eleanor's wonder to the highest pitch and augmented her doubts to a positive terror.

"When the mind is fevered," said the earl, "any change of scene, however trivial, any departure, however slight, from the ordinary routine, is productive of incalculable benefit. I long to breathe a fresher and purer air upon an eminence. The atmosphere was stifling in the garden below. Besides,

we shall obtain a view of a range of scenery far wider than the mere landscape which is seen from the railings of our own grounds. And then, too, it seems, my Eleanor, as if we were entering upon a new footing toward each other and resolving upon the adoption of a more pleasant demeanour, by thus seeking this little change of scene together. Can you bring yourself to view it in the same light?"

But the countess was too much a prey to her increasing wonderment and growing fears to be able to vouchsafe any reply to that question; and in a few moments she emerged upon the leads on the summit of Stamford Manor. There was a low parapet which ran along the edge, but so very low that it was dangerous for a person at all prone to giddiness to venture too near.

"Is not this a charming prospect, Eleanor?" exclaimed the earl, stretching forth his arm and sweeping it slowly around as if to fix her attention upon the scenery. "But the finest view may be obtained from this point—"

And he advanced nearer to the parapet as he spoke.

"For Heaven's sake be cautious, Francis!" cried Eleanor, shrinking back in the dismay which suddenly blanched her cheeks and rendered her voice tremulous.

"Is it possible, Eleanor," said the earl, turning abruptly around and fixing his eyes full upon her, — yes, full upon her for the first time during this scene which we are describing, — "is it possible that you can entertain any apprehension for me?"

"Do you doubt it?" cried the countess, returning that gaze, but gazing in mingled curiosity and alarm. "Oh! if you have brought me up here to test my feelings toward you — But, no, you would not do that," she exclaimed, her manner suddenly becoming all perplexity. Then, as it merged with equal rapidity into the most poignant alarm, she said, "How strangely you regard me! your looks fill me with vague terrors! Oh, Francis, surely you do not intend to injure —"

"To injure you!" ejaculated the earl, in a voice which immediately reassured her; and the ghastly, horrified, shuddering look which she had for a moment flung toward the abyss below was once more bent upon her husband. "God forbid that I should hurt a hair of your head! No, no," he continued, with a wild excitement which had some-

thing of the painful joyousness and martyred enthusiasm of self-devotion in its tone and manner, "I would not live to make you miserable, my Eleanor, but I would die to ensure your happiness!"

"Just Heavens! what mean you, Francis?" shrieked forth his wife, a strange and fearful suspicion flashing to her brain, and the perspiration started out in beadlike drops from her brow.

"Eleanor," said the nobleman, taking her hand, — that hand which was not withdrawn, — and at the same time he gazed steadfastly upon her, with a desperate determination written on all his features, "Eleanor, this is the first occasion on which we have been enabled to look each other in the face without horror, and to touch each other without loathing, since that fatal evening —"

"Yes, yes, I comprehend you, Francis," interrupted the noble lady, with a wild impatience. "But what thought, what purpose is now uppermost in your mind? Speak, I conjure you! Leave me not in doubt, I implore you!" and in the agony of intolerable suspense, she laid the hand that was disengaged upon her panting bosom as if to still the painful throbbings of the heart that beat within.

"I will explain myself in a few words, Eleanor," said the earl, all the recent animation of his countenance being now lost in an expression of mournful and despairing resolution. "You have already assented to the proposition that we cannot live together any longer, and you have likewise declared that it would be imprudent for us to separate. In these opinions I coincide with you, and therefore neither alternative is open to us. But is there no other course left? Is there no remedy for the sad position in which we are relatively placed? We are now gazing upon each other without aversion; but it is only because feelings of a nature still more potent have arisen to supersede for the instant that mutual abhorrence and distrust which never can be annihilated altogether. No, that chilling reserve, that sullen formality, and that cold embarrassment will all come back again; and so soon as the present excitement has evaporated, we shall once more shun each other's glance and dread each other's touch."

"'Tis true, my God! too true," murmured Eleanor, in a voice of smothered bitterness and agony.

“ Oh! then a sacrifice must be made by one that the other may be happy,” said the earl, hastily. . . “ And inasmuch as I have been thine evil genius, Eleanor, inasmuch as I drew thee into a marriage which thou hast been fated to deplore from the very first, oh, on account of all this, I will endeavour — now — at last — to make thee a signal reparation! Be happy, Eleanor, may God forgive and bless thee — ”

“ What mean you? ” gasped the horror-stricken lady, her large dark eyes gazing upon him in ghastly consternation.

“ You will make the world believe it was an accident, Eleanor,” said the nobleman; then, dropping her hand after pressing it fervidly for an instant, he threw himself over the parapet.

A scream — a piercing, rending scream of anguish thrilled from the lips of Lady Desborough; and the next moment she grew rigid, transfixed to the spot with an appalling consternation, her eyes dilated, her lips apart, her cheeks perfectly blanched, and her whole attitude that of agonized terror.

The gardeners, who were working on the grounds at the front of the house, beheld the tragedy and hurried to the place where the nobleman fell; but his head was frightfully shattered, and life was extinct. The servants rushed up to the roof to take charge of their mistress, whom they bore, raving with delirium, to her own chamber; and the tidings of the fatal accident which had occurred to Lord Desborough soon spread like wild-fire throughout the neighbourhood.

CHAPTER XXX

OCCURRENCES IN NEWGATE

THE scene changes from Stamford Manor to the gloomy gaol of Newgate, but the day is still the same on which the preceding incidents took place.

It was shortly after the hour of noon, and Caroline Walters was taking exercise in the low-arched, stone-paved hall, whence the door opened into several of the felons' yards. We have already stated that the discipline of Newgate was by no means strict at the period whereof we are writing and that money could purchase many indulgences; hence the privilege which the young woman had obtained of walking in that hall, instead of being confined to the yard allotted to female criminals.

It was now the dinner hour. Those prisoners who received the gaol allowance had their rations duly served out to them; while those who were able to maintain themselves were gathered at the gratings around the doors of the yard, in eager expectation of the arrival of their provender from outside. This was brought either by the waiters of the taverns and coffee-houses in the Old Bailey, or else by the friends of the prisoners; and during the ten minutes that the process of bringing the various dinners lasted, the hall where Caroline was walking was full of bustle and animation.

She stood to watch the scene; and as the doors communicating with the yard now stood open, she was enabled to observe the countenances of the men who thronged around the iron gratings which interposed their barrier between the prisoners in those yards and the visitors, waiters, or friends who came by way of the hall. And many villainous, ill-looking, hideous faces did Caroline now behold, — faces every line and lineament of which bespoke whole catalogues

of misdeeds; but there were two countenances which struck her as being more deeply stamped with crime and more darkly indicative of human infamy than all the rest. Indeed, it was with a cold shudder that she gazed upon those two individuals who had thus particularly attracted her notice, and who were evidently waiting with a surly impatience for the arrival of their dinner.

The friendly turnkey, of whom Caroline purchased the various privileges and indulgences which she enjoyed, was lounging at one end of the hall, keeping watch upon those persons who were now entering the prison; and the impulse of curiosity led her to accost him with an inquiry relative to the two ill-looking fellows who had so especially engaged her attention.

"Who are they, miss?" ejaculated the turnkey, repeating the query which she had put to him; "why, the most notorious scoundrels in all Europe! That fellow with the savage look is called the Magsman, though his proper name is Joe Warren; t'other chap is called the Big Beggarman, though his real name is Stephen Price. They're going to be tried by the Admiralty Court for piracy, murder, and God knows what all. That fellow the Magsman once escaped out of this gaol in a most extraordinary fashion — But see how savage he and his pal look because their dinner hasn't come yet. They're the only two men waiting at the iron bars, and won't Carrotty Poll catch it when she comes?"

"Who is the female you have named?" inquired Miss Walters.

"The Big Beggarman's daughter," responded the turnkey. "She always — or nearly always — comes herself with the dinner —"

"I suppose she lives hard by, then?"

"Not at all, miss. She keeps a low public at Horslydown, but she generally comes up to see her father and his pal at midday, and so she brings in their dinner with her. Lord bless ye, miss, there's no want of money in that quarter, and you'll presently see her come with a devilish nice dinner for those rascals, — a pair of fowls with broiled ham, may be, or a pigeon pie — But here she is."

"Good morning, Mr. Pigman," said Carrotty Poll, bestowing this passing compliment upon the turnkey as she entered the hall at the moment. Then, hurrying toward the

grating, she deposited on the ground the heavy basket which she had brought with her.

"Now, miss," said the turnkey, in a hurried whisper, to Caroline Walters, "if you want to hear Carrotty Poll catch it, you'll just creep behind that stone pillar, and I'm blowed if you won't be amused."

An unaccountable impulse urged the young woman to adopt the hint which Mr. Pigman thus gave her in a jocular mood; and, advancing down the hall, she turned aside midway and posted herself behind the massive stone pillar that was nearest to the particular grating where the expected colloquy was to take place.

"Well, Poll," said the Big Beggarman, gruffly, "what the devil has made you so late, eh?"

"Because I've been making inquiries about the matter you told me of yesterday, and that's why," answered the red-haired young woman in her sharp, vixenish voice.

"And what's the result, gal?" demanded her father.

"Why, I've found the queer Christian name in one of the fashionable books that contain all the noble and great families of the country," answered Carrotty Poll.

"Well, and who owns the name?" asked the Magsman. "Lord! how long the gal is giving us an explanation."

"Because I'm out of breath with running on account of being so late, and also with lugging this heavy basket along from the tavern over the way. But if you'll give me time I'll tell you all about it."

"Go on," said the Magsman and the Beggarman, both as it were in the same breath.

"In the first place, then," continued Carrotty Poll, "I took with me the lad Alfred that I've spoken to you about, — the same who did the business for Lord Florimel up at Rigden's —"

"Yes, yes, we know what you mean," exclaimed the Magsman; "you've told us all about that business already. By the bye, I suppose Florimel paid you devilish handsome for getting him back his papers from Rigden —"

"Five hundred guineas for that business, and a couple of hundred for saving Pauline Clarendon from the power of the prince, seven hundred in all," said Carrotty Poll, with a chuckle; "and so that's a pretty little sum to add to what

we had already mustered up to help us on in the world when we emigrate."

"To be sure," said the Magsman, with a chuckle; "and we mustn't forget that my dear delectable wife, Mrs. Brace, as she chooses to call herself, contributed a thousand pounds t'other day toward that sum. It was lucky she was made to shell out in that manner just before she got lumbered for the murders. Who the devil would ever have thought that she had pluck enough to do such things? And isn't it odd that we should both be in lavender at the same time, — she in one yard, and me in another? I wonder whether she ever inquires after me," added the Magsman, with a coarse laugh.

"Oh, we ain't talking about your splendid wife now, Mr. Warren," said Carrotty Poll, with vixenish petulance. "I was going to observe, when you interrupted me, that there's no harm in increasing our funds as much as possible; and indeed this was the very selfsame remark which you made yesterday when you and father told me for the first time all the curious details about your adventures down in the country three months ago. Perhaps the clue which I have already succeeded in obtaining, in pursuance of all you thus told me, will enable me to push the investigation to the end."

"And if you should find out the parties who were engaged in those adventures in the country," said the Magsman, "it may be worth many thousand pounds to us. I told your father so at the time, didn't I, Stephen?"

"You did, Joe," was the answer. "And let me see, the three distinct clues which we had, were the lady's queer Christian name, the signet-ring taken off the finger of the dead body in the vault, and the fact that the old woman at the last cottage we stopped at called our masked employer 'my lord.' Those are the three clues, and the only three that we possess —"

"Well, but I think that they will prove sufficient, at least to put us upon the right track toward discovering the whole mystery," interrupted Carrotty Poll. "But as I was telling you just now, I took Alfred with me to a bookseller's at the West End, and, under pretence of buying the fashionable guides, he looked over them well. He found the name of Fernanda, and it seems that the lady who bears it is a young one, — her surname is Aylmer, — and she is related to the Earl of Desborough, the Earl of Montgomery, the Marchioness

of Bellenden, and other noble personages. Other inquiries which I afterward made led to the information that this Fernanda Aylmer is now Lady Holderness; and from what I have gleaned of her personal appearance, her hair is of a dark glossy brown, her eyes a deep blue, her complexion is brilliantly fair — ”

“ Just the description of the masked lady of our adventure so far as we could catch a glimpse of her features at all,” exclaimed the Magsman. “ There can be no doubt that you have hit upon the right Fernanda, Poll; besides, the name is so very uncommon — ”

“ And more than that,” interrupted the red-haired young woman, “ the crest on the signet-ring which you gave me is that of the Bellenden family, to which Lady Holderness is related.”

“ Ah! now we are indeed getting into the right track,” said the Magsman. “ What do you think, Stephen, if Poll was to go straight to Lady Holderness’s house, demand an interview with her, accuse her pointblank of being the lady who enticed the young gentleman from the farmhouse, and whose name he called out in his anguish just before we threw him into the hollow buttress of the bridge — ”

“ No, no,” interrupted the Big Beggarman; “ we mustn’t adopt any plan without mature consideration. I don’t approve of Poll’s going on a mere haphazard adventure to Lady Holderness — ”

“ Well, let us think over it until to-morrow, Stephen,” said the Magsman. “ At all events I feel pretty sure we’re upon the right track to unravel the mystery of the murder at the bridge, the shifting of the coffin-plates in the vault, and the altering of the register in the vestry. I really can’t help recapitulating all those incidents, they were so very singular.”

“ I was told this morning,” said Poll, “ that Lady Holderness is engaged with her cousin Lord Montgomery in carrying on a lawsuit against that same Lady Bellenden whose crest is on the signet-ring. The suit is all about the family estates of the Bellendens in Warwickshire — ”

“ And who can tell but that the forgery committed by the masked lord in the vestry was somehow or another connected with this lawsuit?” exclaimed the Big Beggarman.

“ And also the substituting of a new coffin-plate for an old one? ” added the Magsman. “ Perhaps the young fellow that was murdered, too, might have been interested in the case — ”

“ And so after all it's as likely as not that the lord who employed us and who played us such a scurvy trick about our embarkation for America was the Montgomery of whom Poll has been talking,” said the Beggarman.

“ Well, I think it's likely. But Poll must go and make further inquiries this afternoon,” observed Joe Warren. “ And now, my dear,” he continued, addressing himself direct to the red-haired young woman, “ tell us what you have brought for our dinner, for I should think it must have got cold while we have been chattering here.”

“ It's a cold veal pie, Mr. Warren, and so there's no harm done,” said Poll. “ A cold veal pie, with lots of hard-boiled eggs in it and nice seasoning, and a capital salad with mixture won't prove amiss perhaps.”

“ Provided there's enough of the bingo to wash it down, gal,” said the Beggarman.

“ Well, there's a bottle of brandy,” she replied, “ and now, if you will hold out your hands, I'll pass the things through the wicket.”

Caroline Walters perceived that the conversation between the two ruffians and the red-haired young woman had taken leave of the topics which had so unexpectedly and so strangely proved interesting to herself; and, retiring from behind the pillar, she walked slowly toward the end of the hall, meditating upon what she had just heard.

Our readers will be pleased to recollect that when Caroline Walters, disguised as Rao, the East Indian page, was in the service of Lord Florimel, she one evening called at the mansion of Lord Montgomery in Grafton Street. On that occasion her interview with the earl was interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Rigden; and she was desired to step into an adjacent room while the nobleman received his professional adviser. The conversation turned partially upon the lawsuit which the Montgomerys were waging against the Bellendens, and the names of Fernanda and Lord Raymond were incidentally mentioned during the discourse. Not a single word of all which passed on that occasion between Eugene Montgomery and Mr. Rigden was lost upon Caroline. She

listened with the deepest attention, although she did affect to start up from a nap and rub her eyes drowsily when the earl opened the door to tell her that the attorney had taken his departure.

Thus was it that Caroline had already obtained an insight into the particulars of the lawsuit; and now, after the discourse which she had overheard between the Magsman, the Big Beggarman, and Carrotty Poll, she had no difficulty in arriving at the same conclusions to which indeed those individuals also came, namely, that the Earl of Montgomery and Fernanda were the employers of the two men in their country excursion, that Lord Raymond was the victim at the bridge, and that the proceedings in the vault and in the vestry of the church bore reference to the pending Chancery suit.

All these details were of importance to Caroline, not only to aid in her wreaking the fullest measure of vengeance upon Fernanda, but likewise to convince the world that the young lady was capable of the blackest turpitude which could possibly be imputed to her. But if her eavesdropping behind the pillar had made her acquainted on the one hand with particulars thus useful and important to her purposes, it had nevertheless on the other hand brought to her knowledge a fact which filled her heart with rage. This was the stratagem which had been adopted, through the agency of Alfred, to recover the stolen deeds from Mr. Rigden, and restore them to Lord Florimel, and when Caroline thus found that the mistrust with which that sickly-looking lad had inspired her at the lawyer's office was fully warranted, she bit her lip with rage and cursed the want of caution which on Rigden's part had thus enabled Florimel to triumph in the long run.

After walking to and fro in the hall for a few minutes to collect her ideas and compose her excited feelings as well as she was able, Caroline Walters retired to her cell, where she penned the following note to Mr. Rigden:

"The boy Alfred who stole the papers was employed by a woman belonging to an infamous gang, some of whom are at this moment in Newgate. The woman's name is Price, and she keeps a low public-house in Horslydown. Perhaps you can find some means of avenging yourself on the wretches for the loss of the papers?"

Having sealed and addressed this letter, Caroline sent it to the post by the friendly turnkey, who rejoiced in the name of Pigman; and when this functionary returned after executing the commission, she besought him to grant her an immediate interview with the Honourable Mr. Eaton.

This favour was accorded without much difficulty, and Caroline, upon finding herself alone with Arthur, proceeded to relate all that she had learned within the last hour relative to Fernanda, as well as all that her own suspicions or conjectures furnished in addition. Arthur took down in writing everything that was thus detailed; and after a long interview Caroline was warned by the appearance of the turnkey that it was necessary to take leave of the young gentleman. They accordingly separated, and Miss Walters was returning to her own cell in company with Mr. Pigman, when, just as they entered the stone corridor leading thereto, she found herself face to face with the milliner of Pall Mall.

It must here be mentioned that Mrs. Brace had purchased leave and license to take exercise in the stone hall, in the same way as Caroline Walters; and she was proceeding thither, followed by a turnkey at some distance, when she thus encountered the young girl.

"Ah! I am glad that I have met thee, foul procuress," said Caroline, in a voice of smothered passion. "Thou wilt go to the scaffold, and it is I who am the means of sending thee thither."

"Traitor! thou also shalt hang to the gibbet," retorted the milliner, her eyes glancing with an infernal rage and her white lips quivering nervously. "'Twas I who informed against thee, as thou didst against me."

"Ah! but I shall not hang, thou she-devil," returned Caroline, in a voice of malignant triumph and savage taunting; "for I can prove mine innocence, and that is more than thou canst do."

"Wretch! thou shalt die by some means, if not by the executioner," rejoined Mrs. Brace, her whole form trembling with the demoniac passion that made her countenance white and ghastly and her features distorted and hideous.

"I shall live to gloat over thy writhings and convulsions on the scaffold, base procuress," returned Caroline, the words hissing from between her lips as if laden with the venom of the serpent.

“ Little harlot, who murdered Mrs. Lindley! ” muttered the milliner between her set teeth.

“ Wife of the Magsman, Joe Warren, ” cried Caroline, in a tone of bitter contempt and cutting scorn; “ your husband was talking of you ere now! ”

“ Ah! would'st thou push me to extremes? ” said the milliner, in a thick voice; and at the same moment she drew from her person something which flashed brightly across the eyes of Caroline Walters.

“ Murderess! ” ejaculated the girl, recoiling in dismay from the blow which she saw coming; but the next instant a long sharp-pointed pair of scissors which the milliner wielded was plunged deep into Caroline's bosom.

With a low moan she sank at the feet of the infuriate Mrs. Brace, who was instantaneously seized upon by the turnkey that happened to be nearest at the moment; and while the vindictive woman was dragged away to her gloomy cell, the wounded girl was conveyed with all possible care to the prison infirmary.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DEATH - BED

It was late in the evening of the memorable day of which we have been writing, that the chaplain of Newgate called at the mansion of Lord Florimel in Piccadilly; and, on obtaining an audience of the young noble, the reverend gentleman informed him in a few hasty but impressive words that Caroline Walters, mortally wounded and at the point of death, implored a last interview with his lordship. The naturally generous-hearted Gabriel was not the man to refuse such a prayer, and he at once agreed to accompany the chaplain to Newgate. On their way thither the reverend gentleman informed Lord Florimel that the blow which had stretched the unfortunate young woman upon the bed of death was dealt by Mrs. Brace; and the young patrician experienced a kind of dismay as he reflected upon the intimacy which had once subsisted between himself and the wretched milliner.

On arriving at Newgate, Lord Florimel was conducted into a chamber belonging to the infirmary department, and there, upon a humble pallet, lay Caroline Walters. The signs of death were already imprinted on her countenance, from which the vital colouring had entirely fled. A dimness was visible in the pupils of her eyes, her lips were almost bloodless, and her whole appearance was marked with an air of languor, weakness, and depression.

A pang of remorse shot through the heart of Lord Florimel as he entered that infirmary chamber; for his conscience told him that his perfidy had in the beginning led the young girl astray from that path which she might have pursued innocently and happily, and placed her in the course which was thus destined to terminate violently and prematurely.

On the other hand, an expression of penitence and reviving affection appeared upon the countenance of the dying girl as Florimel, with an air of contrition and grief, approached the bed whereon she lay; and he perceived at once that it was not to upbraid him with her last breath that Caroline had sent to beseech his presence there. The chaplain who introduced the young nobleman to the chamber, and the nurse who was in attendance upon Caroline, now withdrew, and Lord Florimel remained alone with the dying girl.

He glanced uneasily around the room, which a single candle lighted. It was naked, dull, and cheerless in aspect, and a cold shudder passed over his form at the idea of any one's last moments being expended there. Then, having thus slowly made the circuit of the chamber with its dingy walls and scanty furniture, his looks settled upon the countenance of Caroline Walters, and he saw that her gaze was fixed earnestly and intently upon him. In that gaze there was a professed mournfulness mingled with a certain tenderness which appeared to deprecate all angry feeling; and, stretching out her hand toward the young nobleman, she said in a faint, low voice, "Sit down by my side, I have much to say to you ere I die."

The plaintiveness of the tone in which these words were uttered and the pathos of the words themselves went to the very soul of Lord Florimel. Bursting into tears, he took the proffered hand, and sank down on his knees by the bedside, exclaiming, "Forgive me, Caroline, forgive me for the cruel wrongs which I have inflicted upon you."

"This is the time for mutual forgiveness, Gabriel," she murmured in her silver voice, that was low and tremulous with emotions profoundly stirred and with the attenuating effect of coming dissolution. "Until within the last few hours I have hated you as cordially as I once loved you; but the approach of death, the counsels and the consolations of the kind-hearted chaplain, and the whisperings of some secret, unknown voice which appears to have arisen in my soul since the moment that I found myself standing upon the threshold of the grave, — all these influences have worked a mighty change within me, and I feel that I shall die more resignedly and more happily if we express and record a mutual pardon for the past."

"Heaven knows how cheerfully, how willingly, how

sincerely I forgive all and any injuries which you have endeavoured to inflict upon me," exclaimed Florimel. "But can you, Caroline, as readily and as unfeignedly pardon me for the first tremendous wrong which I perpetrated against you?"

"Yes, I forgive you, unfeignedly forgive you, Gabriel," replied Caroline, her looks confirming her words.

"Then may Heaven forgive you also the misdeeds which weigh upon your soul," exclaimed Florimel, with a sacred fervour and a pious solemnity such as he had never before expressed or felt, but which were not the less sincere on that account; and having pressed the dying girl's hand to his lips for a moment, he rose from his knees and sat down on a chair by the side of the bed.

"I despair not of the forgiveness of Heaven, Gabriel," said Caroline, in a firmer tone and with a temporary flush of conscious innocence upon her cheeks; "for I have naught to answer for save that frailty into which my love for you betrayed me, and that thirst after revenge which your infidelity engendered in my soul."

"How? What mean you, Caroline?" exclaimed Florimel, regarding her with mingled joy and astonishment. "The crime of which you are accused, which has made you an inmate of this dreadful place — Oh! how happy should I be to learn that you are innocent —"

"I am innocent, Gabriel," said the young woman, in a tone and manner that were imbued with all the deep feeling and profound solemnity of unquestionable truth. "Yes, I am innocent, and my guiltlessness will be shortly made clear to the world. Oh! if God would only spare me until that end shall have been achieved, I should die resignedly — nay, happily —"

"But the real perpetrator of the deed? The murderer of the midwife?" exclaimed Florimel, interrogatively, and still under the influence of an immense surprise, although he doubted not for a moment the truth of all that the dying girl was telling him.

"The Honourable Arthur Eaton, who is likewise the victim of circumstantial evidence, knows everything," returned Caroline, "and he will make his own innocence and mine apparent at the same time. Let us not therefore dwell upon the subject; suffice it for you to be convinced that I am

innocent of the stupendous turpitude imputed to me; and without a sensation of loathing and horror may you therefore remain at my bedside to hear the confessions which I am anxious to pour forth in your ears."

"Even had you been guilty of that crime," said the young nobleman, "I should have experienced no feeling of abhorrence toward you now; but I should rather have continued to look upon myself with additional upbraiding and reproach, inasmuch as I was the author of your ruin, and every incident that has since marked your career, whether misfortune or guilt, must have been regarded as the unavoidable associations of that destiny which my conduct shaped and formed as it were for your guidance. But these revelations whereof you have spoken, Caroline —"

"Listen, and you shall hear," said the dying girl. "Draw close to me, that I may not be compelled to raise my voice too loud, and interrupt me as little as you need. I shall surrender up my breath all the more happily if I make a complete atonement for any injuries which I have sought to inflict upon you. For now," continued the young woman, gazing affectionately into the face of her seducer, "now that I feel the approach of dissolution and that I must speedily quit this earthly sphere for ever, I experience a return of that love which my heart once cherished so fondly, so fervently for thee. Ah! the presence of death doubtless works grand and signal changes in the human mind, quenching the fires of evil passions, and reviving the flames of those which were wont to warm the heart with a holier and purer influence. I could not leave this world in anger with thee; I longed to breathe the word 'pardon' with my own lips, and hear it fall from thine. My wish has been accomplished, and I feel happier, oh, much happier! But let me not waste precious time nor my own energies in giving expression to my feelings; rather let me at once proceed to deal with facts. Gabriel," she continued, in a more measured and a deeper tone, while she gazed half-timidly up into his countenance, as if now shrinking from the task which she had imposed upon herself, "Gabriel, you can but too easily conjecture the motives which led me to seek an introduction to your dwelling in the disguise of the black page Rao. I will not do more — at least for the present — than admit that I was animated by no friendly motive toward thee.

“ You remember that shortly after I managed to obtain admission into your establishment, the Earl of Montgomery called upon you. While you were together I had occasion to enter the apartment to bring you a letter; and just as I opened the door I heard you say that all your papers and parchments were kept in a tin box under your bed. The words struck upon my ears like a clue to something that was as yet unrevealed to me, but which I should sooner or later find out; and, perceiving that your conversation with Lord Montgomery had taken a serious kind of a tone, I listened at the door of the apartment. First I heard the earl speak mistrustfully of me, and subsequently came the long narrative of love and mystery which you recited to the earl, and which was elicited by the incident of the masquerade ticket and the blue domino. When you summoned me and gave orders that the domino should be burnt, I saw by Lord Montgomery’s manner that he was chagrined and vexed, and I was struck by the suspicion that he wished to take your place at the masquerade. At the same instant the thought flashed to my mind that the whole affair might be rendered available to my vindictive purposes, and I resolved at all events not to burn the blue domino. As Lord Montgomery was taking his departure, I spoke to him in the hall; and he bade me come to him at Grafton Street in the evening. Thither I accordingly repaired, and accident led me to overhear a conversation which took place between himself and Mr. Rigden. This discourse related to the lawsuit which Rigden was then about to commence against you; and I heard enough to convince me that it was already in my power to injure you seriously, if not ruin you completely. When Rigden had taken his departure, I explained my business to Lord Montgomery, and he gladly accepted my proposal to give him the blue domino which you had ordered me to burn.”

“ Ah! and it was Montgomery, then, who played the part of your accomplice at the masquerade,” cried Florimel. “ But did he encounter the Unknown on that occasion? ”

“ Most assuredly, and it was for this purpose that he went thither,” returned Caroline Walters. “ Meanwhile Pauline Clarendon had fallen into a snare which I had laid for her, and her jealousy being excited by an anonymous letter — ”

“ I am acquainted with these particulars, Caroline,”

said Florimel. Then, after a brief pause, he added, "Pauline and I are reconciled, and she has told me everything relative to the part which she was induced to play so painfully in the masquerade."

"I am glad that you are reconciled, sincerely, unfeignedly glad," observed the dying girl, in a voice expressive of deep feeling. "May you be happy together, oh, may you be happy together!" and the tears rolled down her pale cheeks.

"You performed the part of a Gipsy on the occasion to which we are alluding," said Florimel, after another pause, which was longer than the previous one. "But let us not dwell upon this subject —"

"You understand that my motive was to estrange you completely from Pauline," resumed Caroline, with the abruptness of one who seeks to dispose as quickly as possible of an unpleasant explanation which it is nevertheless requisite to make. "I saw that you loved her — loved her devotedly; and as the consummation of your unhappiness was then, alas! my fixed, my inveterate, and my implacable aim, I had greedily seized upon the incident of the masquerade to cause a breach between yourself and that amiable, unoffending young lady. But, oh, this was not all the mischief which I worked against you, Gabriel," continued the dying girl, her cheeks faintly flushing for a moment with the excitement of her feelings. "I entered your chamber by night, I took your keys from beneath the pillow while you slept, and I purloined the documents from the tin case under the bed. Those deeds I conveyed to Rigden, who did not hesitate to receive them at my hands. Ah! my vindictive hatred toward you then was fierce, ferocious, intense, diabolical. I would have sold myself to Satan in order to wreak upon your head a vengeance more refined, more excruciating, more torturing than any that unassisted human nature could devise. And do you not recollect the day when I told you the fabricated tale of a seduced and deserted sister? Oh, I saw you writhe and wince beneath the scourge of scorpions with which I was then lashing you so mercilessly!"

"And, by Heaven," exclaimed Florimel, "I suspected at the time that there was something sinister in the meaning of the tale, — something darkly and terribly significant in your looks and words — Oh, yes, I did indeed writhe and

vince, as you express yourself, Caroline, and even in that incident were you signally avenged!"

"The conversation was interrupted at the time by the arrival of your solicitor, Mr. Cresswell," resumed Caroline. "He brought you the intelligence that Mr. Rigden had given him notice of the suit, and you repaired to your chamber to fetch the deeds. I accompanied you thither; and now does a pang of bitter remorse shoot through my heart, as I call to mind the fiendish satisfaction which I experienced when the word 'Ruin,' bursting from your lips, fell upon my ear. But merciless as an avenging angel, I wrote to Mr. Rigden to inform him of the fact that the deeds had been missed, and that their loss had filled you with dismay. On the same evening you went out —"

"Yes, I remember," said Florimel, in a musing tone; "it was to Horslydown. But proceed, Caroline."

"During your absence a tall footman brought a note to the house," continued the dying girl, "and I suspected that he was the same whom you had mentioned in your narrative to Lord Montgomery. Indeed, from the studious manner in which he averted his countenance as he delivered the note and a message, I felt but little doubt upon the point; and the nature of the questions which you put to me on your return ratified my suspicions. The tall footman came back at midnight; you went away with him, and I determined to follow. To be brief, I succeeded in obtaining an entrance into the darkened boudoir at the same time that the unknown introduced you thither."

"Good Heaven! then you know who she is," exclaimed Florimel, in mingled astonishment and curiosity. "Tell me, Caroline, who is the woman that was enabled for a season to render me the slave of her fascinations, the victim of her magic allurements —"

"Patience, Gabriel, patience, and you shall know everything," said Miss Walters, who appeared to acquire an increase of energy as she thus progressed in her explanations. "You doubtless remember the discourse which took place between yourself and the Unknown on the occasion to which I am referring. She told you how passionately she loved you, and the sincerity of the avowal might be gleaned from the fervid tone in which she spoke, more even than from the fond ardour of her caresses. The latter might have arisen

from sensuous passion; but the voice received its intonation and its accent from a feeling that was calculated to survive satiety. Here, then, was another rival for me; and I found that you were well disposed to plunge headlong into the vortex of pleasure, mystery, and folly thus darkly but enchantingly opened at your feet. When completely under the influence of her charms and her fascinations, you were gradually drawn on to give an attentive and even eager ear to the avowals which she made relative to her hope of becoming your bride. She stipulated her conditions, saying, 'Make me your wife, and I will stifle the lawsuit which otherwise must inevitably ruin you in respect to fortune and despoil you of your rank.' I saw that you would yield, for it was easy to perceive how powerful, how subtle, how well applied were the siren's fascinations, and how weak was your power of resistance. On quitting the house at four o'clock in the morning, I did not fail to examine it sufficiently to enable me to recognize it again — "

"And that house, where is it?" demanded Florimel. "Tell me, Caroline, tell me, I am dying with impatience!"

"Would you return to your siren charmer?" asked the dying young woman, in a tone of mild and melancholy remonstrance.

"Not for worlds!" ejaculated Florimel, with the accent and manner of the firmest resolve. "It would be as impossible to entice an angel to sin, as for that Unknown, with all her witcheries and wiles, to allure me back to her arms. No, the dream is dissolved, for ever, the spell is broken, never to be renewed, the magic influence has disappeared before the talisman of Pauline's virtuous love."

"I am rejoiced to hear you speak thus resolutely, thus firmly," said Caroline; "for I shall die with your name upon my lips, accompanied by a blessing, and God grant that you may henceforth prove stronger than all the fascinations, allurements, and blandishments which a refined sensuality can possibly devise or a consummate artfulness be enabled to practise. Let me, however, hasten to the end of my explanatory remarks; and then, Gabriel, and then will I breathe in your ear the name of her who must not any longer be an Unknown to you."

"Proceed, Caroline, proceed," said Lord Florimel, somewhat impatiently.

“ You remember that one evening, when attired in female apparel,” resumed Miss Walters, “ you were insulted in Chancery Lane and that you took refuge in a lockup house. I was following you at a distance, as was frequently my wont, though invariably unperceived by you. You remained in the lockup house, and at the expiration of an hour or two I became wearied of waiting for your reappearance. The bailiff’s follower was standing at the door, and from him I learned that you were to pass the night at the establishment, in company with Mrs. Fitzherbert and Lady Letitia Lade. Further and more particular inquiries, which I caused to be made, led to the discovery that you were actually sharing the same bedchamber with those ladies, although of course your real sex was unsuspected by either the bailiff or his man. Here was a glorious opportunity, as I thought, to advance another step in the working out of my revenge.

“ Straightway to the West End did I repair, and a note, which I hurriedly penned and left at Carlton House, informed the Prince of Wales that Lord Florimel, disguised in female apparel, was sleeping at the sponging-house along with Mrs. Fitzherbert and Lady Lade. But his Royal Highness was not at home when the note was delivered, and I waited in the vicinity of Carlton House until two in the morning to watch for his return. I fancied it to be quite probable that if he felt outraged by the conduct of Mrs. Fitzherbert he would at once repair to the lockup house for the purpose of detecting her in your company, but in this calculation I erred. The prince returned to Carlton House soon after two, and did not issue forth again so speedily as I expected. I accordingly repaired home to Piccadilly, and lay down until seven o’clock. Then I retraced my way to Chancery Lane to watch the issue of the adventure. Soon after nine the Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough arrived at the lockup house, and a little while later his Royal Highness himself made his appearance in a plain carriage. These arrivals I beheld from the window of a neighbouring coffee-house, where I had taken my post. After a time, Lady Desborough and yourself came forth. You entered her ladyship’s carriage, and it was evident from her bearing toward you that she fancied you were really what you seemed, — an elegant lady. Or else, the countess must be the veriest hypocrite in existence — ”

“No; she believed that I was Miss Plantagenet,” observed Florimel. “But pray proceed, Caroline.”

“Well, you drove away in company with her ladyship, and I followed in a hackney-coach at a distance. You repaired to Bellenden Priory —”

“Yes,” exclaimed Florimel; “and now —”

“Patience, Gabriel, patience,” said Caroline. “Three days elapsed after that incident, and you did not return home. I felt assured that the siren had enmeshed you in the trammels of her seductive blandishments, and once more did I penetrate into the boudoir of darkness, where mysterious enjoyments and raptures had intoxicated you aforesaid. And you were there, — yes, there, — in the dense obscurity of the place, and attended by its presiding genius. Most interesting, too, was now the conversation which took place between you. The Unknown brought all the artillery of her wiles, all the seductive powers of her language, all the lavish fascinations of her tone and manner, and all the insidious allurements of her caresses to bear upon your mind and temperament on that occasion. And attenuated as you were by indisposition, it was no wonder if you yielded with more than even your characteristic readiness; and in the infatuation of your soul, you vowed to pay a blind and implicit obedience to the dictates of the Unknown. Could you not see that when she enjoined you to leave London and repair to Dover it was to remove you to a distance where the chance of being reconciled to Pauline was immensely diminished?”

“I had no time for reflection on that occasion,” said Lord Florimel. “All my feelings were in a state of bewildering excitement, all my senses were absorbed in the raptures which that woman, whoever she be, knows so well how to create and maintain in the soul. But is it possible you were a listener to all that discourse which must have made me seem in your eyes the most insensate, rash, and consummate madman in all Christendom?”

“I heard every syllable that was spoken,” returned Caroline, “and I already entertained a presentiment that in the progress of the strange and romantic connection which existed between yourself and the Unknown something would transpire favourable to the one grand object of which I never lost sight, namely, my revenge. Determined, therefore, to be enabled to convince the siren lady at any moment that I

was acquainted with her secret, I took the opportunity to cut away a small piece from one of the curtains surrounding the bed, and another piece from the window drapery. Then, while you were sleeping and the lady had withdrawn, I effected my departure from the mansion. The rest of my narrative may be disposed of in a few words. You went to Dover — you wrote to London to order me to repair thither — and I soon ascertained that the Unknown was likewise a resident at the seaport. Your meetings continued to take place under the same veil of mystery that had shrouded them in London. On an unfrequented part of the sea beach you were wont to meet the tall domestic at night-time; then your eyes were bandaged, and you were conducted to the house which the lady had taken in a secluded spot outside the town.

“In a short time you took me into your complete confidence, you revealed to me the fact that you intended to marry the Unknown, and you explained to me all the stipulations which she had made relative to the mystery that was to enshroud her name and likewise retain the veil over her countenance until after the nuptial knot was tied. Then did the idea strike me that the affair was at length taking a turn calculated to suit my own purposes, and I resolved to put my ingenuity to the rack, strain every nerve, and direct every artifice toward the accomplishment of my end. This was to become Lady Florimel instead of your siren charmer; and scarcely had I formed the idea, when I already pictured to myself the rage and despair, the fury and the affliction, that would seize upon you when the cheat was discovered. The time came; you sent me on before you to London to settle all the requisite arrangements for your bridal, and I need not pause to remind you how nearly I succeeded in becoming indissolubly yours. Had it not been for the sudden entrance of the maniac wretch who subsequently died of hydrophobia — or had he even thus burst in upon us a few minutes later — all would have been over. But fate willed it otherwise, and doubtless the result, as it did occur, was for the best.”

“But the Unknown, Caroline, the Unknown?” exclaimed Florimel. “How did you contrive to take her place? What has become of her? And who is she?”

“By the knowledge of her secret, and by displaying one of

the pieces of drapery cut from the curtains in the boudoir," said Caroline, "I was enabled to coerce her at will. After the failure of my stratagem, and when I fled precipitately from Mrs. Brace's house, I wrote a letter to the Unknown enjoining her on no account to attempt a renewal of her connection with you, if she valued her reputation and her honour; for that I would mercilessly expose her if she dared act in contravention to my commands."

"But wherefore did you adopt this course, Caroline?" inquired Florimel. "Surely it would have been a pleasurable spectacle to you, ere the change came over your vindictive frame of mind, to behold me rush headlong into the vortex of infatuation and folly by marrying that unknown lady?"

"No, Gabriel; I feared that if you married her, she would indeed be able to persuade George Woodfall to abandon the law proceedings instituted against you; and then, previously to the recovery of the documents from Rigden, your case was hopeless in the extreme. I have now told you everything — I have explained all. Having for a season pursued you with unrelenting rancour, having seized upon every opportunity to strew your path with thorns and raise up difficulties around you, I am now brought, by the imminence of death, to that frame of mind which renders me truly contrite and penitent for the past. Though deep were the wrongs which I sustained at your hands, I ought to have tutored myself to pardon them, or at least to bear them resignedly, instead of seeking a detestable revenge."

"No, Caroline, now you are falling into extremes," cried Florimel. "I behaved most vilely to you, and you would have been deficient in a proper spirit had you not smarted under my conduct and sought the means of revenge. But your explanations are not quite complete; you have forgotten to name the Unknown —"

"I am growing faint, Gabriel, my strength is exhausted," murmured Caroline, in a low and tremulous voice; "a dimness comes over my eyes —"

"But the name, Caroline, the Unknown?" whispered Florimel, in as urgent a manner as feelings of propriety and delicacy would permit him to adopt under the circumstances.

"Bend down your head — nearer — closer, Gabriel," said the dying girl, in a still lower and fainter voice. "Let me

imprint one last kiss upon your cheek — Pauline herself would not be displeased were she here now — There — 'tis the kiss of complete reconciliation — ”

“ And you pardon me, Caroline? ” said Florimel, tortured with suspense to have his other query answered.

“ Yes, God knows how sincerely I pardon you, ” was the gentle and scarcely audible response; but the glazing eyes looked up with a last expiring fondness at the young nobleman.

“ And the name — the name of the Unknown? ” he said, in an agony of suspense.

“ Ah! I had forgotten, ” were the words that wavered upon the lips of the dying girl. Then, with a last effort, she breathed a name in the ear of Florimel, and fell back senseless upon her pillow.

At the same instant it happened that the surgeon, followed by the nurse, entered the chamber; and upon beholding the state in which Caroline was, the medical man hastened to adopt restorative means. These succeeded in bringing her back to life, but not to consciousness; and, in answer to a question whisperingly put by Florimel, the surgeon said that she might haply linger on a few hours, but that her existence could not possibly be prolonged to days.

Sad and sorrowing did Lord Florimel throw a farewell look upon the unfortunate young girl whom he had known so beautiful, but who now lay there like a lily which the rude hand of man had plucked from the stem of its pride and the garden of its purity, and thrown aside, crushed and sullied, when the sense was sated with its despoiled loveliness. A fearful pang shot through the heart of the young nobleman as he thus gazed upon that form which he had once clasped glowing and impassioned in his arms, and which now lay slightly quivering and gently convulsing with the pain of returning animation beneath the influence of the restoratives. The thought — the bitter conviction — flashed to his mind that had he never seen her, had he never known her, she might yet be in the enjoyment of a vigorous health and an unalloyed happiness, as well perhaps as of a stainless purity; and then followed the damning, cutting, lacerating reflection that it was he — yes, he, the seducer — who had originally done the deed which turned the whole current of her destiny, and gave the impulse to that career which, commencing

with shame, passed through the phases of blighted affection, terrible accusation, yearning vengeance, dark intrigues, and a criminal gaol, to terminate in a violent death.

And not only was he stricken by remorse, but he was moved to his very soul's foundations by a melting tenderness, because she had pardoned him. Yes, the poor, wronged, injured girl, when stretched upon the bed of death, had laid aside her resentment for the sake of her former love, had renounced her feelings of bitterness in order to woo back the faded reminiscences of brighter times and happier hours; and under this holier influence she had blessed him, and she had promised to die with his name upon her lips. Yes, oh, yes, deeply touching was the contemplation of all this to the mind of the young nobleman; and he felt that there was a voice whispering the bitterest, bitterest reproaches in the profundities of his soul, and he now understood what remorse was and what conscience meant!

"Doctor," he murmured in a trembling tone as he drew the surgeon aside for a moment, "you will devote every possible care to that poor girl, and, should she survive a few hours more," he added, the tears running down his cheeks and his voice almost choked with emotion, "I will return and see her to-morrow."

"My lord," replied the medical man, "every attention shall be devoted to her."

Florimel pressed the surgeon's hand in grateful acknowledgment of this pledge, fixed one long lingering look upon the pale countenance where the light of life still vacillated faintly, and then passed out of the infirmary with a step as slow and a mood as full of despairing sorrow as if he were leaving a funeral scene.

And Lord Florimel felt something within which gave him the assurance that he was an altered man.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE MURDERESS

It was night — deep midnight; the iron tongue of Time had just proclaimed it from St. Sepulchre's tower, and when Mrs. Brace, in her solitary cell, had done counting twelve, the awful silence which followed seemed more profound, more dreadful, more solemn than it was before.

The wretched woman felt as if she were engulfed in a more than Egyptian darkness, and entombed in a more than sepulchral silence; a tremendous consternation was upon her as she sat in the Newgate cell. Horrible thoughts were passing slowly through her brain, — thoughts that peopled the intense gloom with ghastly objects and ever and anon evoked whispering voices from the depths of the very silence itself.

The night was so dark that not the feeblest glimmering could penetrate into her dungeon. She was therefore immured as it were in a pitchy blackness which could almost be felt; and the massive walls of solid masonry beat back all sounds from without, rendering the interior of that cell as still as if it were a stone vault embedded a hundred feet below the surface of the earth. If there were orgies, or rioting, or weeping, or praying going on in other parts of the spacious establishment, not the faintest murmur thereof was borne to the ears of the wretched woman in her own cell; no noise, either of revelry or lamentation, could penetrate the immense wall which stood between herself and the companionship of the various felons' wards; nought could she hear, save the ominous loud-toned booming of St. Sepulchre's bell as it proclaimed the hours.

It was the middle of the night succeeding the day of so many and varied incidents, — that day, too, on which the

milliner had wreaked her deadly vengeance upon Caroline Walters. Nearly twelve hours had now elapsed since the encounter in the passage, and the furious rage and vindictive wrath of the miserable woman had subsided into profound regrets and a terrible remorse. Thrice since the murderous deed was done had the turnkey visited her cell, and on each occasion had she demanded eagerly how it fared with Caroline Walters. The answers were but little assuring for the milliner. She learned that the medical attendant had pronounced the wound mortal, and that it was impossible for Caroline to survive many days, even if she were to linger on beyond a few hours.

Mrs. Brace therefore knew that the blow which she had dealt must sooner or later prove fatal, and thus was she again and again a murderess. Oh! how appalling sounded that word even when breathed by the still small voice of conscience in the depths of the soul. The lips dared not breathe it; but the mind could not help thinking it, and the thought was purgatory itself. A murderess, — something from which human nature recoils with a cold shudder and with an icy trembling, as from the contemplation of a monstrous snake; a being whose gaze even the strongest and most callous men are afraid to meet, and whose touch sends a thrill of horror to the very heart's core. A murderess, — something at which nature herself revolts, as if the deed made the very moon look red, the sun appear to set in blood, and the stars to grow dull and lurid as if their light had to penetrate through drops of gore.

The clock of St. Sepulchre's, we say, had just proclaimed the hour of midnight. Deep-toned and solemn was the bell as its oscillating metallic sound boomed through the heavy air, penetrating those huge walls of stone. The murderess counted each stroke, until she had numbered twelve; and then the excitement that reigned nervously throughout her form while the clock was striking suddenly yielded to the awful consternation produced by returning silence. Her heart seemed to sink within her beneath the tremendous conviction that she was alone, — alone in the utter darkness, alone in the tomblike stillness, alone with her harrowing thoughts.

But slowly, slowly did her imagination begin to people the dungeon with frightful shapes; ghastly forms such as the

disordered mind conjures up from the opening sepulchre and the yawning grave, began to rise in the midst of the pitchy darkness, and low murmurings, such as the troubled fancy conceives to be the voices of the dead, rustled as it were through the portentous silence of the place. Then, as the wretched woman sat in her dungeon cell, with eyes wildly glaring and horribly dilating, with cheeks blanched as those of a corpse, with lips white and quivering, with upheaved bosom and suspended breath, — as thus she sat, we say, it appeared as if she actually and positively beheld real substantial shapes of ghostly horror, and heard whispering voices of unearthly sound.

Although a stupendous consternation held her motionless, paralyzed her tongue, and made her limbs rigid, yet were her feelings as acute and her sensations as keen as if no one faculty were suspended and no single energy held in abeyance. Hell was raging in her soul, — the tortures of the damned were racking her brain. The perspiration stood in large drops upon her brow. She was drenched from head to foot in her own agony. If every sinew, nerve, and fibre were laid bare and torn with pincers, if the scalp were removed and a searing iron applied to the brain thus exposed, if her eyes were torn from their sockets and molten lead or boiling oil dropped into the holes, — in fine, if all the tortures which man could invent or fiends inflict were now applied to her, they could not have exceeded the agonizing sensations which she experienced as those ghastly shapes began to arise in the midst of the darkness and those voices came like the low rustling of withered leaves upon her ear.

The wretched woman could not restrain the play of her imagination, so hideous in its fantastic conceptions. She had utterly lost all control over her disordered mind, which thus ran wanton and wild in the realms of horror. She had no power to check the current of her thoughts and look all the objects of her terror in the face. To her, therefore, did they appear invested with a terrible reality and a ghastly substance. In a word, she laboured under the appalling belief that the spectres were no delusion and the voices no dream.

What, then, was the nature of her reflections now? Reflections, indeed! No; the ideas that traversed her brain were scarcely reflections, because she had no power to weigh

them deliberately or ponder upon their significance. They were impressions of a positive nature, — impressions of a hideous character, — and from which she could not escape. Just Heavens! were the graves of Newgate opening in the deep midnight, and sending up their dead to haunt, appal, and scare her? Were the tombs of murderers yawning in the midst of the prison pavement and yielding up their ghastly tenants to proclaim her doom? Were the ghosts of the hanged rising from their coffins, their winding-sheets, and their cerements, to hail her with the hideous welcome of the dead? O God! with reeling brain and bursting heart and quivering limbs did the wretched woman picture to herself this catalogue of horrors; and the paralysis, which had held her motionless hitherto, now so far relaxed its rigid influence as to enable her to writhe and twist with the spasmodic convulsions of a stricken snake as she sat in her dungeon cell. Then in the excruciation of her feelings, in the rending violence of her agony, her teeth bit through her lips till the blood spurted forth, and her nails dug into the palms of her hands till they were clothed with gore.

For the shapes that were stealing slowly, slowly through the darkness, and crept up as it were from a yawning gulf into her presence, — a gulf that was blacker than the blackness of her own dungeon, — those dreadful shapes gradually appeared to become more distinct, as they ranged themselves in a line along the solid wall. Then she saw — or fancied she saw — that they had all halters around their necks; and she knew — or at least harboured the harrowing conviction — that they were the dead whose worldly histories were black with crime and whose earthly names were associated with the gallows. Tall, stark, gaunt corpses were they, with their features all convulsed by the agonies of strangulation, their glazed eyes half-starting from their heads and fixed upon the wretched woman in ghastly recognition, their mouths partly open, and their long, lank, withered, naked arms extended toward the spot where the milliner was seated. And then the atmosphere seemed to grow damp and raw and clammy as if infected with the breath of those spectral shapes. It was the mildewed atmosphere of the grave, the chill and musty exhalation of the tomb, the earthy and sickly vapour of the sepulchral vault.

Yes, with extended arms and fingers pointing toward the

agonizing, horror-stricken woman, stood the corpses of the hanged ones, with the halters around their necks. And the foremost addressed her in a voice that sounded like the hollow wind moaning through the wintry forest and mingling with the low murmurs of the withered boughs and rustling leaves. A chill more intense, more searching, more penetrating than aught she had yet experienced, struck to the very heart's core of the wretched Mrs. Brace, — a chill that crept throughout her form and along every limb, with the cold clammy feeling of a loathsome reptile.

“ We rise from the grave to welcome thee amongst us,” spoke the corpse; and its looks and its breath shot like ice shafts through the brain and the heart of the milliner. “ From those deep and silent solitudes where the worm pursues its noiseless sport have we risen to give thee the greeting of the dead. Thine hours are told, thy minutes are numbered, and while hell is yawning to engulf thy spirit, the grave is opening to receive thy body. With the world of mortals thou hast little more to do. Thou standest on the threshold of the sphere inhabited by the eternal. For thee the quenchless fire is already raging, for thee the undying worm is sharpening its sting. A little while, and that form will be rigid, those limbs will be stark, those features fixed in death; and the earth will rattle down upon thy coffin-lid, and the huge stone will be set over thy grave, and thou wilt be added to the number of the doomed that sleep beneath Newgate pavement.”

“ And the worm shall prey upon thy flesh,” spoke the second corpse, whose stony looks and chilling breath were sufficient to freeze all in a moment the hottest blood that ever circled in the human veins; “ and even in the very grave shalt thou have a sensation and a feeling that will cause thee to experience all its dreadful gloom. Yes, and thou shalt feel too that thou art imprisoned in a narrow coffin; thou shalt know the stifling, suffocating oppressiveness of that narrow home. Thou shalt long to breathe, thou shalt yearn to throw off that sense of choking and strangulation which will feel like a tremendous stone upon your breast and like pieces of lead upon your mouth and nostrils; thou wilt concentrate all thine energies in the endeavour to put forth one long, deep respiration, and thou wilt not be able.”

“ No, and thou wilt feel the worms creeping over thee,”

said the third corpse, taking up the terrific story; and its pale blue eyes looked cold as marble and its breath was laden with the ice chill of Labrador, mingling with the mouldy rawness of the grave. "The worms shall creep over thee, I say, and thou wilt lie stiff and stark in thy coffin, powerless to throw them off. The relief that is to be found even in the recoil of a shudder will be denied thee. But there shalt thou lie, while the worms will fasten upon thine eyes, force their way through the balls, and eat holes down into the depths of the sockets. And thou shalt experience all the hideous sensations attendant upon their slow and slimy movements, as they creep in and creep out; and thou shalt long to vent thine agony and thine horror in a scream, but the seal of death's silence will be upon thy lips."

"Save at midnight," spoke the fourth corpse, whose stony gaze and chilling breath were as dreadful as his companions', "when thou shalt recover the power of motion and of speech, that thou mayst rise from thy grave and give to others that welcome which we are come to bestow upon thee. Yes, thou shalt form one of the tribe of troubled spirits and spectral shapes that enhance the horror of a Newgate midnight; thy grave shall open and thou shalt come forth from thy coffin and from thine earthy solitude, to render the hours of darkness hideous and appalling. To thee shall this dread privilege be accorded as well as to us; and when thou art no more a denizen of the world of the living, thou wilt revisit this very cell in thy shroud and thy spectral terrors, to affright each doomed inmate in thy turn even as we are here to affright thee now."

Then the band of unearthly shapes all extended their hands and pointed their fingers simultaneously toward the milliner; and their ghastly hollow eyes, leaden and dull with the stony stillness of death, were fixed upon her in a way that made her flesh creep upon her bones. And slowly, slowly, gradually, gradually, they advance toward her, while she, quivering at her very centre and with a feeling as if a block of ice lay upon her heart, had no power to rise from her seat nor to recoil a hair's breadth from the appalling presence. She shrank as it were within herself, — her very soul seemed sinking into a tremendous chasm; while the dreadful shapes drew nearer and nearer, with their extended arms and their steady corpse-like stare, until at length they placed their cold hands upon

the shoulders of the miserable woman. Then, as she felt the sanguine current of life stagnating beneath the touch of those hands so marble cold, a hollow moan escaped her lips; and this breaking of a long and stupendous silence on her part appeared to be the signal for a new phase in the wild and horrible drama. For now the fearful shapes suddenly seemed to become animated with a lurid fire that first spread over them, as it were, with a bronzing effect, and then increased in power so as to give them the appearance of transparency, until the glow heightened to an intensesness which produced an effect as if the spectral forms were moving in the midst of a tremendous furnace. Thus, as horror succeeded upon horror, the brain of the milliner was shattered with the recurring paroxysms, her very soul was riven by the wildest tortures, and a cry, between a shriek and a yell, thrilled from her ashy lips.

The spell of her waking dream was dissolved in a moment; the ghastly phantasmagorian train vanished quickly as the eye can wink; and once again was the milliner entombed in the darkness of utter night and in the silence of the grave.

For nearly a minute did she sit motionless while her ideas resettled themselves in her brain. The stagnation of the blood gave way, the sanguine tide flowed languidly for a few moments, and then faster, but the tide was turned, and the muscles also regained full play. She started up, she swept her open palms athwart her forehead upon which the perspiration stood in large drops, and then, with a sudden half-pace forward, she extended her arms wildly, murmuring in a hurried, hoarse tone and with broken accents, " 'Twas a delusion, — a mere delusion, — but how horrible! "

And then she sank back upon the seat whence she had risen; and her arms fell languid and dead by her sides, and once more was she struck by the stupor of a tremendous consternation and an ineffable dismay. Her very soul was crushed as with the weight of all the human woes that had gathered and concentrated for centuries and centuries; and thus for a few minutes did she remain in the utter absorption and annihilation of blank despair. But all in a moment a pang shot through her heart and a feeling of horror traversed her brain; and as a host of vivid memories swept over her spirit, conjuring up all her former enjoyments and contrast-

ing them with her present agonies, the thought of her position goaded her almost to madness.

“Wretch, wretch that I am!” she murmured to herself, in sharp and impatient accents, as she beat the bosom that palpitated with voluptuous feelings no more; “what a fearful turn have I given to the current of my existence! The other day I was rich, happy, and cradled in luxury; now I am the inmate of a dungeon cell. Though full of health and vigour, the hand of death lies cold upon my shoulder. My God! my God! what have I done? Into what an abyss of horrors have I plunged myself. Oh! is there no retreat? Is there no retracing the path of life for a few weeks — only a few weeks? Is it possible that I am in Newgate, that I shall be tried, that I shall hang to the gibbet? Or am I under the influence of a horrible dream — a fearful nightmare? Let me see,” she continued, more slowly; and, as she sat in the depth of the impenetrable darkness of her dungeon, she placed her elbows upon her knees and rested her face upon her hands as she endeavoured to make her mental vision penetrate through the cloudiness and perplexity of her brain. “Let me see,” she repeated, in a tone of measured precision, as if she sought to establish her points one by one. “I am assuredly the person I believe myself to be — Mrs. Brace — the fashionable milliner. I have been lovely in my youth and handsome in my maturer years; I have been the mistress of the prince, I have been courted by all the highest, and richest, and noblest of the aristocracy. And yet as I now look back upon my life, it appears to have been only a dream, — one long, continuous dream of pleasure and voluptuousness, and not a reality. Yet there are circumstances in my career on which my retrospection looks with a sensation of pleasure. Yes, those hours of burning joys which I passed with the prince when first I knew him; ay, and those nights of bliss which I have spent in the arms of Eugene Montgomery. Ah! now another fact arises to my mind. I recollect that night — that night of alarm and menace — on which a man entered my chamber when Eugene was my companion. And that man — he was my husband! — and Eugene heard all that passed between him and me, and he sprang from the bed and they wrestled a moment, and then Eugene conducted my husband down-stairs and made him quit the house. Ah, how well do I remember all the details of that scene. But

why do I now dwell upon it? Because it was the last time that Eugene Montgomery visited me; no doubt he was disgusted at the discovery that the ruffian was my husband. Since then all seemed to go ill with me: misfortunes accumulated rapidly, and I was enmeshed in the inextricable web of crime ere I had even a moment to pause and reflect upon what course I should pursue. Crime, yes, crime, — crime the most horrible, the most deadly, the most unpardonable!" exclaimed the wretched woman, with thrilling accents of terror, anguish, and despair. "Crime, ay, crime that will send me to the scaffold! Oh, that dreadful word — that shocking idea! Can it be that I am in my sound senses, that I have done all those things, and that I must hang, hang, hang upon the accursed gibbet?"

And the miserable woman's voice rang piercingly through the cell, making the very air vocal with human agony.

"The gibbet!" she repeated, after a few moments' pause, and her dress rustled as her entire frame shook from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet; "the gibbet! Who breathed that frightful word in my ears? Ha! I remember! Yes, they were here ere now, those ghastly things that welcomed me amongst them. Holy God! am I then already looked upon as one dead? Is my coffin made, is my shroud sewn, is my grave dug? Yes, yes, they said it was so. But never, never will I perish on the scaffold!" she suddenly exclaimed, with a wilder excitement as she sprang to her feet. "What! to have the cord fastened around my neck by the rude hands of the executioner, to go forth upon the scaffold, to be gazed upon by thousands and thousands, and then to drop, to hang, and swing — Oh! no — no!"

And the wretched woman clasped her hands together with all the violence of an excruciating anguish.

But her excitement increased; it rose to a delirium — a frenzy of terrors. She tore her hair, she beat her bosom, she dashed her open palms violently against her brows as she gave vent to ejaculations of mingled despair and woe. Her grief was wild — her lamentations piteous. Through the dense darkness of the dungeon the scaffold loomed to her imagination. She saw it all, — yes, all the dread paraphernalia and procession of death, — the chaplain, the sheriffs, the executioner, and her own self, with the halter around her neck.

Frantic with mingled terror and dismay, despair and horror, the wretched woman rushed across her cell to escape from the spectacle which her imagination had conjured up. But she stumbled over a stool and hurt herself severely. The pain maddened her all the more goadingly; a lava stream was circulating in her veins, sparks flashed before her eyes, her brain was seething. Existence was now a perfect hell, life was an excruciation. No, not life itself; because she would have given her soul to save herself from a premature death, she would have surrendered all her hopes of a hereafter to prolong the present. It was not exactly life, that had become intolerable; but it was the prospect of ending this life on the scaffold that was infusing a horrible madness into her veins, and torturing her whole being into an agonizing frenzy.

What could she do? Was there no hope? To this latter query did every conviction of her mind and every circumstance of her position give back a stern, uncompromising negative. There was no hope. Her doom was fixed; her death was certain. Then to anticipate the penalty which human justice was sure to inflict. Ah! that now became the dominant idea in her brain, and the maddened woman resolved upon self-destruction.

There was such a fearful hurry in her brain, such a wild excitement in her manner, that she did not pause to reflect upon the resolve to which her agonizing, burning, torturing, scorching, searing sensations hurried her. A demon appeared to have taken possession of her mind, — a fiend was ruling her senses. With desperate hand she unfastened her apparel, drew forth the stay-lace, and tore away as many tapes and strings as the female vesture can ordinarily supply; then, refastening her dress as well as she was able, she sat down upon her iron-framed pallet to twist all those tapes and strings into one strong cord. The whole of this proceeding was the work of a very few moments; and though the hands of the wretched woman trembled as nervously as her entire frame quivered, though her pulses were beating with a rapidity beyond all counting, and her veins were running with a lava stream that was as furious as it was burning, though madness was raging in her brain and the demon of despair was tugging at her heart-strings, — nevertheless, she achieved her dread preparations with a marvellous rapidity.

The rope was woven, — woven by her subtle fingers in the midst of the dense impenetrable darkness; and then she bethought herself of the bars that defended the window of the dungeon, and likewise of the stool against which she had stumbled a few minutes back. All the means of death were thus at her disposal, within her reach, fearfully available, and she hesitated not, no, not even for an instant. On the contrary, her proceedings were as quick and her movements as rapid as if there were no darkness to impede her. It appeared to her as if she could see her way easily, as she felt it through the pitchy darkness in which she was entombed. But then her mind had a horrible clearness with regard to all the details of that suicidal process; for she was resolved to cheat the hangman, the gallows, and the multitudes that throng to the spectacle of death, as the carrion crows gather around a corpse.

Great, then, was the precision with which the determined desperate woman tied a running knot in the cord which she had woven; and it was even with a feeling of triumph — dreadful, savage, ferocious triumph — that she flung the noose over her head. Then mounting upon the stool, she fastened the other end to the bars of the window; and now —

And now, all her suicidal preparations being complete, and the impenetrable, immeasurable abysm of eternity already opening before her mental vision, she stopped short, for a sudden consternation overwhelmed her. Still standing upon the stool, with the cord of twisted tapes around her neck, the miserable woman was struck with dismay as she now looked death face to face. Hell seemed to be opening at her feet; beyond the more than Egyptian darkness which prevailed in her dungeon, the lurid fires of Satan's kingdom appeared to burn.

But at the moment when, thus stricken with dismay and overpowered by dread horror, the murderess was experiencing a revulsion of feeling which would inevitably have ended in the abandonment of her suicidal project, — at the moment, we say, when her thoughts reached that turning-point and her ideas arrived at that juncture at which she was on the point of flinging off the noose and leaping down from the stool, — at this moment was it that the clock of St. Sepulchre's proclaimed the hour of one.

Suddenly broke that iron sound upon the deep silence of the dungeon cell; suddenly rolled the metallic din upon the ear of the murderess. And with such startling, fearful, thrilling effect did it thus break through the utter stillness of the place, that the milliner was shaken with a strong convulsive spasm which made her totter upon the stool. With a desperate effort she strove to recover her balance. The struggle was as brief as the passage of a single idea through the brain, but it was the last frenzied effort of one who stood on the black brink of eternity. A sound between a shriek and a cry burst from her lips as she felt that the stool was upsetting beneath her, and down she fell.

But her fall was instantaneously broken by the abrupt jerk of the tightened cord; there was a sudden sensation as if all the blood in her body had gushed up, hot and boiling into her bursting brain, and myriads of bright sparks flashed before her eyes. Desperately she threw up her arms and applied her fingers to the noose that was strangling her; but the cord was woven strongly and her weight was heavy, and thus she could neither break nor loosen it. Maddened by her dying agonies and by the rending thoughts that swept with the keen sharpness of razors through her brain, she tried to regain the stool with her feet, but it had upset and was below her reach; and then she strove, with the last energy of desperation, to raise herself up against the uneven, rugged masonwork. But her attempts were unavailing, a sense of weakness came upon her with giant strides, and she swung and dangled, in her hideous convulsions, against the wall up which she could not climb. Her struggles — her death-agonies and writhings — had now lasted nearly a minute and were horrible beyond all delineation, frightful beyond any human power of description; but their acme was reached, their height was passed, and as their intensity subsided with a proportionate rapidity, their excruciating torments yielded to a numbness which speedily passed into death itself.

When the morning dawned and the turnkey visited the cell, Mrs. Brace was discovered hanging to the bars of the window. She was instantaneously cut down, and the surgeon was sent for; but he found the corpse quite cold and declared that the wretched murderess must have been dead some hours.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE EARL OF MONTGOMERY'S VISITORS

THE day that dawned upon the deed of self-destruction which we have just narrated was the 31st of May, — a day that was destined to prove memorable in respect to the conflicts between the Montgomerys and Lady Bellenden. Indeed this was the day on which the Master in Chancery had undertaken to deliver his report upon the various points at issue; and as the eventual judgment of the Lord Chancellor himself was certain to be influenced, if not altogether guided by the nature of that report, it was feasibly assumed that the long pending process between the Montgomerys and the Bellen- dens would be virtually settled on this day.

The Earl of Montgomery rose from his couch at an early hour, and, gazing upon his image in the looking-glass, he murmured to himself, "I am pale, but not so pale nor ill as might be expected after the sleepless hours which I passed, and after the troubled dreams that haunted me during the brief slumber that visited me at length."

The nobleman then proceeded with his toilet; but in the midst he stopped short, pressed his hand to his brow, and said impatiently to himself, "How is it that I cannot divest my soul of this gloomy presentiment? It is the influence of those unpleasant visions still overshadowing my imagination. Wherefore should my heart sink within me? Why should my hand tremble thus? And how is it that I experience this feverish heat all over me? I have nothing to fear — nothing to apprehend. My secrets are all safe, Fernanda is staunch, and Rigden declares that I must gain the suit. Why, then, do I yield to apprehension? Why am I a prey to terrors so indefinite and vague? Oh, it is that one fearful incident which has never ceased to haunt me since the date of its

occurrence, — an incident so full of mystery that I am as much at a loss to comprehend it now as I was on the morning after it took place! Fatal, accursed longing that impelled me to accept that domino and proceed to the masquerade. Madman, idiot, dolt, and dotard that I was to suffer myself to be so completely enmeshed in the fascinations of that siren, whoever she might be! And who could she have been? who was she?" exclaimed the earl aloud, his tone and manner both indicating the excitement and petulance of a most painful, torturing perplexity. "The only being really and positively interested in playing such a part in order to worm out of me all my most precious secrets is Laura Bellenden herself; and she could not have been the wanton who found a Montgomery in her embraces when she expected to receive a Florimel!"

The earl's musings were interrupted by the entrance of Gilbert, his confidential valet, who was somewhat surprised to find that his noble master had risen so early.

"It is scarcely seven o'clock, my lord," observed the dependent.

"I am aware of it, Gilbert," replied the nobleman; "but I could sleep no longer, and my bed became irksome. Wherefore have you sought my chamber so early, — a full hour before the usual time?"

"An old man requests an immediate audience, my lord," returned the valet, "and I therefore came to see whether your lordship was awake. He says that his business is important —"

"His name?" demanded the earl, impatiently.

"Chapman, my lord," was the response.

"Ah! Chapman from the village of Bellenden," exclaimed Montgomery, his heart sinking within him; for he could not possibly augur anything favourable from the visit of the old stone-mason. "Tell him that I will be with him in a few minutes."

And while Gilbert was absent from the room delivering this message, the earl performed the remainder of his toilet with feverish impatience; for, the longer he reflected upon the singularity of Chapman's visit, the greater became his apprehension that it could have originated in nothing favourable to his own interests. Having at length dressed

himself, he hurried down-stairs to the parlour where Chapman was waiting for him.

"What tidings, my good friend?" demanded the earl, as he closed the doors of the apartment behind him.

"Something which your lordship ought to know," returned the old man, who had a forbidding countenance and a sinister expression of the eyes.

"Good or bad? Speak!" ejaculated Eugene, impatiently.

"Good, I should say," was the rejoinder.

"Then we may now converse at our ease, Chapman," said the earl, flinging himself upon a sofa with the air of a man who has just had a considerable weight taken off his mind. "I felt assured that it must have been business of no ordinary importance that could have brought you up to London and made you come to me thus early in the morning; and I was fearful that something might have transpired relative to the vault —"

"There's nothing to apprehend on that score," interrupted Chapman. "Nobody in Bellenden village has learned as yet, or ever will learn, that your lordship had most particular and private reasons for ordering your agents to employ me to open the Bellenden vault when they went down to the village three months ago. Of course Northwitch the sexton was very savage at the preference; but he could make nothing more of it than a mere preference."

"Good. And now about your visit to London?" said the earl, inquiringly.

"Your lordship told me I was always to let you know anything that transpired," observed Chapman; "and therefore I thought I would lose no time in coming up. I left Bellenden the evening before last, took a chaise-cart over to Birmingham, and then got a place outside the heavy stage which landed me in London an hour ago —"

"After two nights on the road, eh?" remarked the earl. "Well, and you hurried away to me at once the moment you dismounted at the coach-office?"

"Just so, my lord," was the reply.

"And the object of your visit?" exclaimed the earl, interrogatively.

"Lady Bellenden has been down at the village, my lord —"

"Ah! But for what purpose?"

"To examine the vaults and the registers —"

"The registers," ejaculated Montgomery, with a start; then instantly muttering to himself, "But Chapman knows nothing about the register," he collected all his presence of mind and made a motion for the old man to continue his explanations.

"Her ladyship arrived at Bellenden the day before yesterday, in the early part of the afternoon," proceeded Chapman; "and soon after her arrival, her footman Richard took a post-chaise and went off somewhere else, but I don't know where. Then her ladyship proceeded to the church along with Parson Roberts, while Mrs. Margaret came and called upon me. I saw that she was up to something; for she was so tremendously polite, and I pretended to be very friendly and communicative the better to draw her out. At length, after beating about the bush a good deal, she began to touch upon your lordship's visit to Bellenden upwards of three months ago; then she talked of your lordship's agents coming down here immediately afterward and employing me to open the vaults; and then she began to pump me as to why your lordship showed a friendly disposition toward me, until she at length said plainly and openly that her mistress was the lady to bestow handsome rewards upon those who espoused her cause and furthered her interest. So then I let Mrs. Margaret see pretty clearly that if she meant bribery and corruption, I was not the man to be bribed and corrupted, and away she went quite in a tantrum."

"What on earth could she mean? What object could she have?" exclaimed Montgomery. "Unless she suspected that there was some little trivial incident on which you could throw some light, I am at a loss to comprehend her proceeding."

"Or perhaps she fancied that I know much more than I really do," observed Chapman.

"Possibly so," said the earl, in a musing tone.

"For, after all, what could I have told her even if I had been inclined to talk freely?" continued Chapman; "merely that your lordship came to me about three months ago and told me that in a few days from that time your agents would be down at the village to inspect Bellenden vault, the job of opening which should be given to me; but that I must not show any surprise on finding the mortar of the stone quite soft and other evidences that the vault had very recently

been opened. Well, I promised to obey your lordship's instructions, and sure enough I did find that the stone had been lifted very lately. But I took care to hold my peace, and not even your lordship's agents suspected the fact. As a matter of course I can very well guess that your lordship, or at all events some persons employed by your lordship, had visited the vault with the utmost secrecy a few days before it was opened and examined in the official manner when my services were required; but whatever reasons your lordship may have had, or what you may have wanted to do in the vault, is no business of mine, especially as your lordship paid me liberally to hold my tongue; and therefore not a living soul, in Bellenden or out of Bellenden, is a whit the wiser for anything I may know."

While the stone-mason was thus indulging in the garrulity which was characteristic of his old age, and which was also inspired by a feeling of pride at being in any way enlisted in the confidence of the Earl of Montgomery, no matter how slightly and partially, while he was thus chattering, we say, the nobleman remained plunged in profound meditation; for the visit of Lady Bellenden to the village which bore her name, and the evident attempt of Mrs. Margaret to tamper with old Chapman, were calculated to trouble and perplex him.

"You say that the marchioness proceeded to the vaults?" he at length observed in an interrogative manner when the stone-mason had ceased speaking.

"She went there with Parson Roberts and Northwitch, my lord," replied Chapman; "but I don't know what took place, beyond the fact that the corpse of the late marquis, her ladyship's husband, was seen half-hanging out of its coffin — Ah! I noticed it when I opened the vault for your lordship's agents three months ago," observed Chapman, interrupting himself in the course of his explanations; "but I didn't know at the time that it was the late marquis —"

"Nor did I suspect that such was the case," thought Montgomery within himself, "on that memorable night when the coffin exploded with a din that terrified the two men — But proceed with your narrative, Chapman," suddenly exclaimed Eugene aloud, thus cutting short the current of his own retrospective musings. "You were telling me that when the marchioness, accompanied by Mr. Roberts,

and attended by Northwitch, visited the vault the day before yesterday, they saw a corpse hanging half-way out of its coffin — ”

“ Yes, my lord,” said Chapman; “ and it appears that before they ascertained whose body it was, some observations were made which confused and irritated her ladyship most strangely. Northwitch’s assistant told me about it within an hour after the visit of the marchioness to the church; and it was on hearing of this matter that I resolved to come up to London and see your lordship.”

“ Well, my good friend,” exclaimed Montgomery, inwardly cursing the garrulous circumlocution of his rustic partisan, “ and what was it that thus agitated and annoyed the marchioness? ”

“ Because the corpse of her late husband, my lord,” responded Chapman, “ was so blue and swollen, and presented such an extraordinary appearance, that Northwitch declared the deceased must have been poisoned — ”

“ Poisoned!” ejaculated Montgomery. “ Ah! a light breaks in upon me — But go on, go on, my good friend.”

“ Well, my lord,” continued the stone-mason, “ it seems that her ladyship was sadly put out, and she read Northwitch a long lecture on the subject. Altogether, Northwitch’s assistant assured me that the incident had excited the strangest suspicions in his breast, — the more so that Northwitch also observed, quoting me as the authority and calling me a scandalous fellow for my pains, that her ladyship was reported to have detested the marquis when she was forced into a marriage with him, and to have even loved another — Besides,” exclaimed the old man, interrupting himself all in a moment as another idea flashed to his recollection, “ did not the Marquis of Bellenden die very suddenly and suspiciously? ”

“ That was precisely the thought which struck me just now and which broke upon me like an inspiration,” said Earl Montgomery. “ But go on, Chapman, what more have you to tell? ”

“ Nothing particular, my lord,” was the answer. “ I thought you would like to hear that there is some reason to suppose the marchioness poisoned her husband,” he added, lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper; “ and it was in reference to those tidings that I assured your lordship at the

beginning that my errand was not of an unfavourable nature."

"I am obliged to you, Chapman, — much obliged to you, — for the interest which you have taken in my affairs," said the earl, rising from his seat and pacing the apartment in a reflective mood. "What, after all, if my cousin Laura should prove to be a consummate hypocrite? If she were really guilty of the crime of murder — if she were capable of poisoning — she could also play the wanton and the harlot, and conceal her debaucheries beneath that eternal garb of widowhood. Heavens! if it were indeed she on whose panting, heaving bosom I lay pillowed in the boudoir of darkness and mystery, when in a moment of rapturous idolatry and sensuous intoxication I revealed to the ears of the enchantress those tremendous secrets —"

The earl's musings were interrupted at this point by the entrance of a domestic, who came to announce that Mr. Rigden's head clerk requested an interview with his lordship.

"Where is he?" demanded the nobleman, the quiver of suspense and excitement shooting through his frame, for he knew that the individual in question had been despatched into Warwickshire to make inquiries concerning his brother Raymond.

"I have shown him into your lordship's private sitting-room," responded the domestic.

"I will join him there," said Montgomery. "Take this worthy man with you to the servants' hall," continued the earl, indicating Chapman by a look, "and see that he is well and bounteously treated."

Having issued these instructions, the nobleman hastened to the sitting-room where Mr. Rigden's head clerk was waiting his presence. By the travel-soiled appearance and untidy toilet of the individual, it was easy to perceive that he had just come from a long journey and that he had passed the night in a vehicle; and the earl trembled from head to foot as he thought within himself, "It must be a matter of no ordinary importance that could have induced this man to come straight hither the moment he set foot in London again."

But the earl had time to master his feelings and compose his looks while the head clerk, who was naturally of a servile and cringing disposition, made him a low obeisance.

"You have just returned from Warwickshire, I presume?" said Montgomery, adopting a tone of curiosity, and subduing the feeling of painful suspense which was really dominant in his breast. "Have you succeeded in obtaining an interview with my brother? And has he complied with the conditions of that clause in our ancestor's will —"

"My lord," interrupted the clerk, assuming a tone and demeanour suited to the tidings which he was about to impart, but which he was not altogether sure would prove totally new to the earl, for the man of business had imbibed certain suspicions not very favourable to the nobleman, "my lord," he said, with demure look and solemn voice, "you must prepare yourself to hear the most distressing intelligence concerning your poor brother, the Lord Raymond Montgomery."

"Good heavens! what mean you?" exclaimed Eugene, apparently labouring under the most torturing suspense.

"I mean, my lord," was the answer, "that your brother Raymond is no more," and the clerk, who had hitherto spoken with looks mournfully bent downward, now raised his eyes suddenly and fixed them upon the earl with so peculiar an expression as to strike the guilty noble that Rigden's factotum was endeavouring to read the effect which his communication would have upon him.

"No more! my brother Raymond no more!" cried the earl. Then, covering his face with his hands and turning aside, he burst into a painful ebullition of woe, or at least appeared to do so.

"I am wrong," thought the clerk within himself, "and I have done the earl an injustice. He is deeply affected at his brother's loss, and it was most uncharitable in me to suspect him of so foul a deed."

And having arrived at this conclusion, the clerk, who took snuff after the example of his employer, Mr. Rigden, regaled himself with a copious pinch of the pulverized weed; but he took it with a careful noiselessness, the grief of Lord Montgomery now appearing to be too violent for the slightest interruption.

"But tell me, my good friend, tell me," exclaimed the earl, suddenly turning toward the clerk and speaking in broken accents, the profound grief of which corresponded

with his looks, "tell me when and under what circumstances my poor brother died."

"My lord," resumed the clerk, his tone and demeanour increasing in solemnity, now that his suspicions relative to the earl were allayed and that he could respect the nobleman's grief, "my lord, your brother has been most foully and mysteriously dealt with: in plain terms, his death has been a violent one, and murder has done its frightful work."

"Murder!" echoed Lord Montgomery, his countenance becoming livid and ghastly. "No, no! you cannot mean that my poor Raymond has been murdered."

"It is, alas! too true, my lord," answered the clerk. "Yesterday morning, between seven and eight o'clock, and in the company of the Marchioness of Bellenden, who was present at the mournful scene, I beheld the remains of Lord Raymond dragged forth from the buttress of Malden bridge."

"You are talking strangely — most strangely," exclaimed the earl; "or else my brain is confused and bewildered by grief. The Marchioness of Bellenden present at the time — my brother's remains — the buttress of a bridge —"

"Oh! my lord, it is indeed too true," cried the clerk; "and the terrible spectacle will haunt me for the remainder of my life. I am sorry that accident led me to the spot at the moment when the young lord's body was discovered beneath the stone."

"But the Marchioness of Bellenden?" exclaimed the earl, whose fearful excitement and alarm were taken by the clerk for a genuine affliction and horror at his brother's appalling fate; "how came she there at such a time and on such an occasion?"

"To fulfil some ceremony with regard to the bridge," responded the clerk; "and as it was deemed requisite that her ladyship should deposit certain coins in the hollow of the buttress, the crowning stone was raised for that purpose. The dreadful discovery was then made that there was a corpse beneath, and this corpse proved to be the remains of your lordship's brother!"

"Good heavens! what will my poor mother feel?" cried Eugene, clasping his hands with all the apparent agony of despair. "It will be the death of her! But the Marchioness of Bellenden, how took she the dread spectacle?"

"Her ladyship was as much shocked and affected as any

one present," replied the clerk, "although every one bearing the name of Montgomery must be considered her enemy. But the Marchioness of Bellenden is a true Christian and a most excellent lady, — you can read her character in her countenance —"

"And she was both shocked and affected?" exclaimed the earl, interrogatively.

"Very much so, my lord," was the answer. "Indeed, it was a scene —"

"I can well understand how distressing it must have been! Oh, my poor brother! my poor brother!" he cried, in a tone of bitter lamentation. "But is there no way of accounting for his death? Does suspicion fall upon no one? Or what is the impression that the awful tragedy has left upon the minds of those who witnessed it?"

"No one seemed able to form a conjecture, my lord," answered the man of business. "But I came away so hurriedly that I had no time to glean any particular opinions — ah! stay though," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself, "I recollect that something was said about a private carriage being seen in the vicinity of the bridge, on the morning that the huge stone fell down, or was let down — for your lordship must know that the crowning stone had not been purposely lowered by the masons —"

At this moment a domestic entered the room, to inform his master that Lord Florimel requested an interview with him.

"Lord Florimel at this early hour," exclaimed Montgomery, glancing at a timepiece which showed him that it was only eight o'clock. "I have just received intelligence of so distressing a nature that I cannot see any one save upon business of urgency and importance."

"His lordship desires me to say," remarked the domestic, "that his business is of a pressing nature, but that he shall not detain your lordship many minutes."

"Then I will see him," observed Lord Montgomery, and he repaired to the apartment to which Florimel had been shown.

The young nobleman was pale and care-worn; a profound melancholy sat upon his features so femininely handsome; and, mingled with that mournful aspect, there was a certain sedateness which showed that the mind was influenced by no

merely temporary impression, but that it had undergone a great and signal change. Tossed upon the waves of doubt, suspense, and anxiety as Earl Montgomery was, and having all his thoughts absorbed in the grave and momentous position of his own affairs, he nevertheless was struck by the altered appearance of his friend; and, hastening to take him by the hand, he exclaimed, "My dear Florimel, what is the matter with you? Has anything unpleasant occurred that you visit me so early?"

"Give me your patience for a few minutes, Eugene," said the young nobleman, "and I will explain myself. You remember my page Rao — But of course you do, for more reasons than one. Well, that sable youth was none other than Caroline Walters, — the young girl whom you saw at Mrs. Brace's —"

"And whom you seduced, Gabriel," observed Montgomery. "But is this possible! Rao and Caroline Walters, the murderer, identical —"

"She is innocent, Eugene, of the crime imputed to her," interrupted Florimel; "and a strange tale will no doubt transpire shortly, when the trial of Arthur Eaton, Lord Marchmont's son, comes on. For it appears that the cases are to some extent connected. But of that no matter. Caroline Walters, mortally wounded by Mrs. Brace —"

"What! Mrs. Brace perpetrated another crime," exclaimed Montgomery. "Wretched woman that she is! and to think how intimate she and I once were together."

"Her mortal career is closed, Eugene," said Lord Florimel, in a solemn tone. "During the past night she committed suicide by hanging herself in her cell —"

"Better to die thus than perish upon the scaffold," exclaimed Montgomery, with a singular emphasis. "Oh, the gallows must be dreadful — dreadful!" and he shuddered, as if he himself had some apprehension of the possibility of being overtaken by such a doom. "But when did you hear of Fanny Brace's death?" he inquired, almost immediately.

"Late last evening I was sent for to Newgate to receive the dying confession and the sincere pardon of Caroline Walters," answered Florimel, who did not observe the sinister nature of his friend's emotions; "and I promised the medical man that I would return this morning and see whether she still lingered on. Having passed a sleepless

night, I rose very early and have already paid my promised visit to the gaol. Caroline Walters still lives, and indeed retains her full consciousness; but there is no hope of her ultimate recovery. As I was coming away the rumour was spreading through the prison that Mrs. Brace had just been discovered hanging in her cell, and on making the inquiry, I found that such was indeed the case."

"And thus terminates the career of the fashionable milliner of Pall Mall," said Lord Montgomery, rather in a musing than a mocking tone. "The mistress of a prince, a courtesan in whose arms have reposed some of England's proudest peers, a procuress and a go-between —"

"Wherefore enumerate her failings now that she is no more, Eugene?" interrupted Florimel, in a reproachful tone. "Let us remember that if it were not for such voluptuaries as you and I have been, there would be no scope for the avocations of a Mrs. Brace. But let that pass. My object in paying you this early visit is dictated by those feelings of sincere friendship which have mutually animated us from our boyhood. In a word, I have resolved upon communicating to you a secret which poor Caroline Walters revealed to me last night —"

"A secret which regards me?" exclaimed Montgomery, wondering what it could possibly mean.

"I am not sure, perhaps it may," said Florimel; "at all events I shall be pursuing the safer course by breathing this revelation in your ear. Eugene," continued the young nobleman, after a few moments' pause, "I am acquainted with all the particulars concerning that masquerade at Covent Garden —"

"Ah! then the secret regards the Unknown?" ejaculated Montgomery, his whole frame trembling with the poignancy of a suspense suddenly excited to the most painful degree. "But you will forgive me for having undertaken to play your part upon that occasion?"

"You were impudent — most impudent, Eugene," returned Florimel; "and you know not all the mischief that has resulted from your freak. But the friendship of years is not to be destroyed by such a thoughtless, foolish act on your part, and therefore we will not talk of forgiveness in the matter. The important point is whether you know who the siren lady is —"

"I do not," cried Montgomery, his impatience amounting to a positive excruciation. "But I would give worlds to learn that secret, and if you be acquainted with it, Gabriel —"

"Softly, one moment," said the young nobleman. "Is it possible that, intoxicated by her wiles and infatuated by her seductiveness, you made any communications which ought not to have been revealed to an enemy —"

"Ah! an enemy," repeated Montgomery, with a terrible sinking at the heart. "Do you mean me to understand, Gabriel, that the Unknown is —"

And he whispered a name in Florimel's ear.

"It is she!" replied the young nobleman. "But as a point of honour you will retain this secret — Good heavens! what ails you?" exclaimed Florimel, as he beheld his friend sink down, ghastly pale and trembling all over, upon an ottoman.

"Nothing — nothing," said Montgomery, the words seeming to come gaspingly from the agitated recesses of his heart; "a sudden indisposition —"

"No, my dear friend," interrupted Florimel, energetically, "it was no sudden indisposition. But it was a fright — a shock — Ah! if you in any way placed yourself in that woman's power, you will bitterly, bitterly rue your folly, your madness; for assuredly nothing short of utter madness could it have been."

"It was, Gabriel, it was," said the earl, in a stifling tone. "But I know something relative to herself, — a crime which places her in my power —"

"Beware how you war against that woman," exclaimed Florimel, with a voice and manner of solemn warning. "I have reason to know that she is a consummate adept in intrigue, — a veritable diplomatist in all the worst arts of duplicity, deceit, and guile. Full nearly did she enmesh me irrecoverably in her snares; and now that I look back upon the past, I shudder when I think of the narrow escape that I have experienced. She is a snake that fascinates its victim, a serpent gifted with a dreadful power of charming and enrapturing those around whom she intends to wind her coils. Oh, Eugene! if I told you all, — but I cannot now, I have not either the heart or the leisure —"

"Would to God I had some proof that she is indeed the

siren that practises her debaucheries under the cloak of the most tremendous hypocrisy that ever veiled the dissolute life of a Messalina!" ejaculated Eugene Montgomery.

"Proofs! do you require proofs?" exclaimed Florimel. "And if you possessed them —"

"I think that I could silence her relative to any unfortunate admission which, in a moment of infatuated madness, I was beguiled to make," said the earl, eagerly.

"Then behold the proofs!" cried Florimel, producing two pieces of drapery and handing them to Montgomery, who received them with mingled surprise and incredulity. "These are cut from the curtains in the boudoir where utter darkness was wont to throw its veil upon the wanton revels of that lascivious woman and her paramours. Display them before her eyes, and she will sink, ashamed and humiliated, at your feet. Caroline Walters possessed herself of them, and she gave them to me when I visited her ere now."

"Thanks, a thousand thanks, Gabriel!" cried Montgomery, his countenance lighting up with joy. "You have indeed proved yourself a friend — a sincere and loving friend — on the present occasion!"

"I do not attempt to penetrate into your secrets, Eugene," said Lord Florimel, "and therefore I do not ask you how you have placed yourself in that woman's power. But when I learned from the lips of the dying Caroline that you had encountered the Unknown at the masquerade, and when I remembered that you were battling against each other in affairs of the utmost importance to both, it struck me that a siren so proficient in all the artfulness of a captivating seductiveness would not have allowed such an opportunity to escape. I felt assured that she must have probed your heart to the very bottom, wormed out of you all your most sacred secrets, and every man has his secrets, of some kind or another —"

"True, true," exclaimed Montgomery, with nervous excitement.

"Knowing, I say, her disposition and her character," continued Florimel, "and suspecting that she would not fail to turn to her own purposes the accident which threw you into her arms, I thought that I would come and give you a warning which I foresaw must prove useful. I was aware, moreover, that this is the day on which you reckon so much;

and hence the early visit which I have paid you and my importunity to see you."

"You have conferred upon me an obligation which I can never forget," said the earl, pressing his friend's hand with the warm effusion of gratitude. "Alas! I have this morning received terrible tidings. My poor brother Raymond is no more; he has been foully murdered —"

"Murdered!" repeated Florimel, with the convulsive start of unfeigned horror.

"Yes, murdered, most foully, diabolically murdered," exclaimed the earl, with an outburst of grief that was apparently most violent and rending. "But I have not time to enter into particulars now, Gabriel," he added, in a less excited but deeper voice; "and moreover I recollect that I have not as yet broken the dreadful intelligence to my poor mother, who will be driven to despair."

"This is shocking — most shocking, my poor friend," said Lord Florimel, his tone and manner displaying the deepest sympathy. "But you must lose no time in revealing the lamentable occurrence to the countess; for should it reach her abruptly and without due preparation, from any other source, it may prove a mortal blow."

"That is what I fear," said the earl; "and I will therefore lose no time in discharging this most painful, most agonizing task."

"I sincerely sympathize with you, Eugene," exclaimed Lord Florimel; and, unwilling any longer to intrude upon his friend's privacy, the young nobleman took his departure.

The moment he was gone, Lord Montgomery repaired to his mother's apartment, where he gradually broke to her the intelligence of her younger son's death. The wild agony of grief into which the unhappy lady was thrown exceeds all power of description; her haughty, overbearing nature was bent, crushed, and overwhelmed beneath the stupendous weight of affliction which thus came down upon her. She raved, she tore her hair, she beat her bosom, and then she fell into a kind of torpor which lasted till medical aid arrived.

The earl watched his mother narrowly throughout those paroxysms, until their agony was absorbed in the numbness of a partial stupefaction. The significance of every working of her countenance did he scrutinize, the meaning of every word she uttered did he catch with an intense anxiety; but

he could not trace therein the slightest indication of any dark suspicion on her part. No, the poor lady imagined that her younger son had been foully dealt with by murderous robbers; and when, after the arrival of medical assistance, she regained full possession of her faculties, the piteous lamentations which she poured forth all proved that such indeed was the painful idea she entertained on the subject.

With a sensation of indescribable relief, amounting almost to a triumphant satisfaction, the earl entrusted his mother to the care of the medical men and her own female attendants; but with every outward symptom of a heart-felt woe, he ordered his carriage and drove straight to the dwelling of Lord and Lady Holderness in Cavendish Square.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE LAWSUIT

IN those bygone days when the "wisdom of our ancestors" is supposed to have flourished so preëminently, many curious conditions were frequently attached to the heritage of estates, the enjoyment of real property, and the succession to testamentary bequests. In those ages when the Roman Catholic Church was dominant in England, the inheritance of a vast fortune or an immense estate was frequently made conditional upon taking the oath in acknowledgment of the papal supremacy, or in confirming some monastic establishment in the enjoyment of certain tenures, rentals, privileges, and immunities; and, oftener still, the heir of a small property found himself obliged to make certain oblations to a particular shrine or pay for so many masses to be chanted on behalf of his predecessor's soul. On the other hand, and in later times, when Protestantism had erected its temples upon the ruins of the papal establishments, the frantic holders of estates frequently bound their posterity, as the condition of inheritance, to make a vow abjuring the Romish doctrines altogether; and it is well known that many estates are inherited at the present day upon conditions which, though pared down into the simplest technicality or merest form, nevertheless originated in some such ancestral prejudices or whimsicalities as those at which we have hastily glanced.

A condition of this nature was traditionary in the Montgomery family; and thus it arose: In the reign of Queen Elizabeth the Bellenden race was threatened with extinction, the then possessor of the marquissate being eighty years of age, childless, and without any near relatives. He accordingly adopted the second son of the then Earl Montgomery;

and Queen Elizabeth granted letters patent to enable the youthful scion of the Montgomerys to inherit the title of Bellenden in pursuance of that adoption. At the death of the old marquis, therefore, the young Montgomery became possessor of the honours, rank, and estates of Bellenden, and he married a lady belonging to the family of Aylmer. They had one son, who, on growing up to man's estate, was seized with a violent inclination to travel upon the Continent, and he set off accordingly. But years and years passed without affording any tidings of him; and his parents advanced toward the grave in the painful belief that their only son was no more. The disconsolate father was accordingly necessitated to make some testamentary arrangements relative to the disposal of his property at his death; and he bequeathed his priory estates to the then Earl of Montgomery, and the Warwickshire estates partially to that earl's brother and partially to the Aylmer family. But as there had recently been a monastery upon the Warwickshire estates, the old nobleman, who abhorred papacy, inserted a clause in his will to the effect that the heritage depended and was made conditional upon the formal abjuration of the doctrines of the Romish Church; and the heir was likewise required to sign a formal pledge that he would never rebuild nor restore that monastery, which had been destroyed in the reign of Henry the Eighth. In default of signing this abjuration and promise the forfeiture of the Warwickshire estates to the next heirs was to be the consequence.

The clause in the will prescribing these conditions stipulated that the deeds of abnegation were to be duly signed and recorded on or before the heir's attainment of the age of twenty-two (which in those days was the period of majority); and moreover, the same will settled the entail of all the estates, thenceforth and for ever, in such a manner that the possessor of the Earldom of Montgomery should always hold the priory property in the vicinage of London, and his nearest relative the larger portion of the Warwickshire estates, the smaller section of which was to be enjoyed by the Aylmers. Such were the terms of the will made by the Marquis of Bellenden who lived in the latter half of the sixteenth century. But scarcely had the grave closed over him, when his son — the long lost one — returned to England, after having escaped from a lengthened and horrible

condition of slavery into which he had been sold by Algerine pirates. As a matter of course he claimed the paternal estates; and the Montgomerys of that day, either through ignorance of the specific terms of the will made in their favour or else through good feeling, did not attempt the slightest opposition.

The existence of the will itself was soon forgotten; years and years passed away, and the Bellendens continued to inherit and enjoy undisputedly the vast estates which bore their name, until a prying, penetrating, astute attorney discovered the famous will and brought it to light. This occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century, about the time of the Great Rebellion; and the then Earl of Montgomery, on being apprised of the nature of the will, threatened the then Marquis of Bellenden with a lawsuit. The matter was, however, compromised without litigation. The then Marquis of Bellenden agreed to make over to the Montgomerys a certain portion of the estates as a settlement of the points at issue. This was done; and the conveyance deed was duly drawn up and signed. But scarcely had the transfer been thus made, when the Montgomerys were plunged into serious pecuniary difficulties by the failure of certain speculations; and the then Marquis of Bellenden proposed to advance a large sum of money to repurchase the portion of his estates which had been transferred. This transaction took place; the money was paid, and the conveyance deed was restored to the Bellendens. The whole matter then slept for about twenty years, when the Montgomerys initiated law proceeding in good earnest. This step was taken by Eugene Montgomery's father, about thirty years previously to the date of our narrative; and as the matter was in due course more closely looked into, it transpired after a time that if the Montgomerys' claims were good at all, it must be Raymond on whom the Warwickshire property would devolve, while the priory estates would fall into the hands of his elder brother. Eventually the Aylmers asserted their pretensions, and thus originated and progressed the memorable lawsuit of which so much has been said in the course of our narrative.

The reader will now understand how great was the importance necessarily attached to the conveyance deed above mentioned. On the side of Lady Bellenden it was urged that

this deed contained the terms and evidences of a final compromise effected between the litigant families, — a compromise which quashed the Montgomerys' rights and claims for ever. On behalf of Fernanda — or rather Lady Holderness — it was urged that her family had been no parties to the compromise at all, they at the time being actually ignorant of the circumstance that they had any claims or pretensions whatsoever to a single acre of the Bellenden property. Lastly, on behalf of the Montgomerys it was at first alleged that their predecessor had no power to make any such compromise in a matter where, if the claims were good at all, the estates were all partitioned and entailed in a particular manner and upon specific conditions; and within the last three months of the suit, Eugene Montgomery had advanced another and more formidable plea, which was to the effect that the conveyance deed was a forgery, although he did not charge the Marchioness of Bellenden with having fabricated it.

The conveyance deed bore the date of 1795; but it was alleged, on behalf of Eugene Montgomery, that the Marquis of Bellenden (the father of Lady Bellenden's late husband), whose name was alleged to be affixed to that document, had died in the year 1793, consequently that he had been dead two years at the time when he was represented to have signed the deed. In proof of these statements Earl Montgomery advanced the facts that the plate upon the coffin of the Marquis of Bellenden alluded to bore the date of 1793; and that the parish register of deaths, containing the entry of the said marquis's demise, furnished the same date.

Such was the position of the lawsuit on the 31st of May, — the period fixed by the Master in Chancery for delivering his report upon the various points at issue. Nor did the legal functionary fail to keep his engagement, — an occurrence in Chancery proceedings which deserves special mention. The report was ready, and its tendency was precisely as Mr. Rigden had foreseen, namely, in favour of his clients and hostile to Lady Bellenden. In short, the Master admitted the validity of Fernanda's plea that her family were no parties to the alleged compromise, even if any such compromise had taken place at all; and therefore, whether the conveyance deed were a forgery or a genuine document, the lady's claims were pronounced valid. With regard to the

Montgomerys, the Master thought that if the conveyance deed were genuine, their claims must be considered as null and void; but he did not believe it to be genuine, — he was of opinion that the proofs of forgery were sufficient, and indeed unanswerable, — and he therefore pronounced in favour of the claims of the Montgomery family. Finally, and inasmuch as it appeared that one of the claimants (Lord Raymond Montgomery) was not forthcoming, but was reported to be dead, and inasmuch as it was at all events certain that he had not complied with the conditions laid down in the will of his ancestor, it would result from the various points treated of in the report, that the Right Honourable the Earl Montgomery had established his claims to the priory property altogether; and that the Warwickshire estates must be partitioned between the said Earl Montgomery and Lady Holderness, in the proportion of one-third to the former and of the remaining two-thirds to the latter.

Such was the report of the Master in Chancery, and although it operated not as a final decision, yet was it regarded as the basis on which the Lord Chancellor's judgment would be eventually founded. In a word, then, the triumph of Earl Montgomery and Fernanda over the Marchioness of Bellenden was regarded as complete by the gentlemen of the long robe.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE FIRST ORDEAL

It was between four and five o'clock in the afternoon of the same day, that Eugene Montgomery and Lady Holderness alighted from a carriage at the gate of Bellenden Priory. They were immediately conducted into the drawing-room, the servant informing them that the marchioness would join them in a few minutes.

The moment the domestic had retired, the earl said in a low hurried voice to his beautiful cousin, "I wonder what terms Laura is about to propose?"

"You have already wondered, Eugene, a thousand times since we received her note inviting us hither," observed Fernanda; "and all the wondering in the world will not help you to a solution of the mystery."

"Do you think it is a snare, my dear cousin?" inquired the earl.

"For what purpose?" exclaimed Lady Holderness. "If Laura meant to hand us over to the grasp of justice, she need not have invited us hither for the purpose; she could have more easily sent the constables to our houses."

"How coolly, how dauntlessly you take everything, Fernanda!" said the earl, contemplating her with mingled admiration and envy. "You would have made an excellent general for an army of Amazons."

"I certainly do not meet misfortunes half-way," observed Lady Holderness, smiling. Then, instantaneously resuming a serious expression of countenance, she said, "For Heaven's sake do not be pusillanimous, Eugene! You are trembling with nervous excitement, your agitation is positively visible. Take courage; we have gained the suit, and Laura is doubtless anxious to make terms. In fact,

she says as much in the letter which she sent just now to request us to call upon her, and in pursuance of which invitation we are now seated beneath the roof of Bellenden Priory. I wonder whether she will ask you to accompany her to the boudoir," added Fernanda, with an arch look.

"Were you not astonished when I revealed all those startling things to you this morning?" said the earl.

"I must confess that I was amazed," replied Fernanda. "Not that I ever entertained a particularly high opinion of my own sex —"

"Because you yourself are a wanton, my sweet cousin," interrupted the earl, patting Fernanda's cheek familiarly. "But tell me, are you very much afflicted by the death of Lord Desborough? And why are you not in mourning?"

"As for being afflicted, Eugene," returned the heartless lady, "I have no leisure to devote to grief; and as for the mourning, I have not had time to order it. The intelligence of the accident which proved fatal to my uncle only reached London last night, and all my thoughts have been engrossed by the lawsuit."

"It struck me that your husband seemed very care-worn and ill," observed Eugene. "He evidently was not over-well pleased at my soliciting an interview with you alone this morning, — still less at your accompanying me *tête-à-tête* in my carriage —"

"He doubtless supposes that I ought to have no secrets from him," observed Fernanda, hastily.

"And he is also rather jealous, perhaps?" said the nobleman, whose spirits appeared to be reviving somewhat.

"Think you, Eugene," said Fernanda, her scarlet lip curling with contempt, "that I am a being to be in any way moved or ruffled — unless it be to scorn — by a jealous man? No, no; I am too strong-minded to heed the more grovelling passions of human nature, when there are so many fiery and fierce ones meriting attention and worthy to stir up deep feelings."

"Whence comes this marvellous strength of mind, — this indomitable courage on your part, fair cousin?" demanded Montgomery, with an expression of interest and curiosity.

"It is partly constitutional," replied Fernanda, "and it partly arises from the circumstance that I have taught

myself to despise death, come in what shape it may. Or rather," she added, her voice sinking to the lowest audible whisper, while her violet eyes deepened into a sinister blackness, "or rather, I am always prepared to encounter death, and even to rush forward to meet it in case of emergency."

"What mean you, Fernanda?" asked Eugene, gazing upon his cousin in mingled astonishment and dismay.

"I mean," she responded, in that low deep voice which was scarcely audible and seemed like the end of a harmony dying away, "I mean that I am always prepared for the last extremity, rather than endure exposure!" and as she spoke she drew from her bosom a small phial, not so large as her own little finger, and which contained a few drops of a fluid colourless as water. "Now do you understand me, Eugene?" she said, in a louder tone and with an accent of triumph, as she replaced the phial in the corsage of her dress.

"I do — I do," returned Lord Montgomery. Then, after a few moments' pause, he added, "And should not I adopt a similiar precaution? Should not I also carry about with me the means of instantaneous death?"

"I question, Eugene, whether your crimes are so numerous as mine," said Lady Holderness, fixing upon him strange looks of sinister mystery; "and if they are not, you do not incur so many and such constant chances of detention as I do."

"Good God! what would you have me understand?" exclaimed Montgomery, startled by these words which seemed thrown out as the preface to some fearful revelation. "Have you committed any crimes beyond that which — you know what I mean —"

"The one that we perpetrated together, or rather caused to be perpetrated," added Fernanda; "and of which we shall doubtless hear mention made by the marchioness presently — But how long she is keeping us waiting!"

"Hush! she comes," whispered Montgomery, in a hurried manner, as he heard footsteps approaching.

The next instant the door was thrown open, and the Marchioness of Bellenden entered the drawing-room. She was clad in her usual mourning garb, and her countenance, though somewhat pale, wore that expression of sereneness

which amounted to a benignity that nothing appeared able to disturb or ruffle. At the same time there was a certain dignified self-possession in her looks and manner which seemed to denote a mind not only at ease in respect to the opinion of the world, but also with regard to its own secret thoughts.

Advancing thus into the room with a mingled graciousness and matron-like dignity, the Marchioness of Bellenden saluted Lady Holderness and Earl Montgomery with a sufficient courtesy to be consistent with her position as the lady of the mansion, and with just enough reserve to convince them that she was by no means disposed to cringe and fawn, although the lawsuit was as good as decided in their favour.

Placing herself upon a sofa, she made a motion for Fernanda to take a seat by her side, while she indicated a chair close at hand for the earl. And thus were the three relatives grouped together, — those three relatives, two of whom had been waging such a desperate warfare against the third.

While proceeding to take the chair pointed out to him, Lord Montgomery threw a hurried, furtive, but scrutinizing look upon Lady Bellenden, as if he sought to pierce down into the very profundities of her soul; ay, and more than that, for the searching glance had also a less refined object; inasmuch as it endeavoured to penetrate her very garments and trace beneath them every contour and every outline of the splendid form which they enveloped. And at the same time he thought within himself, as his looks swept over her placid, almost heavenly countenance, "Is it possible that a volcano of raging desires and frenetic passions lies concealed beneath that calm and tranquil exterior?"

While he was asking himself this question he encountered her glance, and it struck him that a slight flush appeared upon her cheeks and that a momentary embarrassment sprang up in her manner; but on darting another rapid, furtive look upon her, he found her aspect as serene and her deportment as untroubled as at first.

"I know not what to think," said Montgomery within himself; "she is either the most accomplished hypocrite that ever out-Heroded Satan's duplicity, or else Florimel must have been deceived concerning her. But we shall see,

we shall see," he added, in his silent musings; and his doubt and uncertainty increased as he flung another look upon the marchioness, whose serenity bespoke a mind so profoundly at peace within itself and with all the world.

Meantime Fernanda had also taken her survey of Lady Bellenden, but in a less furtive manner than was observed by her cousin Eugene. Indeed, she had fixed her fine violet-coloured eyes full upon the countenance of the marchioness, who however met their steadfast gaze with the most imperturbable tranquillity; and when the earl noticed this further proof of extreme self-possession on her part, he was all the more perplexed, — all the more bewildered. He knew not what to think; he could not possibly form a conjecture as to the probable result of the present interview. Would it end in exposure and ruin to all? Or would it terminate amicably? Was the marchioness about to enact the part of a suppliant or a dictatrix? Would she make use of conciliation or a menace?

All those rapid exchangings of looks and all those thoughts that swept not only through the brain of Eugene Montgomery, but likewise of Fernanda herself, occupied but a few moments in reality, although they have taken us as many minutes to describe. For, in fact, almost immediately after Lady Bellenden joined her visitors in the manner narrated, the proceedings commenced.

"You were doubtless surprised," said the marchioness, glancing first at Eugene and then at Fernanda, "to receive a note from me requesting your presence here. But on learning the result of the step which the lawsuit advanced this morning, I thought it better that we three who are so deeply interested in that process should assemble and try the case ourselves, so as to avoid the expense of any further litigation."

"Try the case for ourselves!" echoed Fernanda, gazing upon the marchioness with indignant surprise.

"We are already in as good a position as if we had won it," exclaimed Lord Montgomery.

"But you will both be so kind as to remember that it is not irrevocably won yet," said the marchioness, with all the coolness of an imperturbable self-possession. "The Chancellor must pronounce his judgment —"

"It will be based upon the Master's report," cried Fernanda, petulantly.

"Additional evidence may be offered, Lady Holderness," returned the marchioness, in her quiet manner, the very serenity of which was a reproof and a warning.

"Additional evidence!" repeated Earl Montgomery, feeling that this ejaculatory taking up of Lady Bellenden's words would bring the discourse to a crisis.

"Yes, additional evidence, my lord," replied the marchioness; "and inasmuch as the testimony to which I allude will throw much additional light upon the case, I repeat my proposition that we three should constitute ourselves the judges thereof, and I will answer for it that within a couple of hours we shall come to a decision, whereas in Chancery we may still be kept waiting for years. Now, Lord Montgomery, and you, Lady Holderness, what say you?"

"Is this a jest, madam?" inquired Fernanda, burning with vexation and spite.

"I never was more serious in my life," returned the marchioness; "and you have no idea how very serious the matter may also be made for yourself and Lord Montgomery, if you reject my proposition for investigating it amicably. In plain terms, the evidence I have to bring forward must be produced somewhere; but whether in this drawing-room before our three selves, or in the presence of a still more solemn and certainly more terrible tribunal, I now leave for you to decide."

"Let us humour her ladyship and play at judges, Eugene," said Fernanda, her eyes flashing with the fires of concentrated rage, — a rage which was enhanced by the apparently unprovokable calmness of Lady Bellenden.

"Well, let us play at judges, then," added Montgomery, wondering what was to follow.

The marchioness took a silver hand-bell from under the cushion of the sofa, and rang it. A door at the farther extremity of the room opened, and an old man made his appearance.

"Austin!" ejaculated Lord Montgomery, thrown off his guard by this unexpected incident.

"Ah! I see that you know him, then?" cried Lady Bellenden; and turning toward the man, she said, "Do you also recognize this gentleman and this lady?"

“Since your ladyship has bribed me to come over to your side, I must speak out plain, I suppose,” said Austin, putting a bold front upon the matter. “The truth is, then, that I know Earl Montgomery there as well as one man can know another; and I am also aware that the lady is Miss Fernanda Aylmer, or, I should say, Lady Holderness.”

“What have you in particular to relate concerning them?” demanded the marchioness, with a solemn seriousness alike of tone and manner.

“Upwards of four months ago the earl came down alone to my cottage near Bellenden village,” resumed Austin, “and told me that if I would serve him in a particular manner he would recompense me well. I agreed, and he ordered me to go to Birmingham and procure several things which he named.”

“What were they?” inquired the marchioness.

“First, some skeleton keys that would open locks of any size, from a church door down to an iron safe, next, some implements such as resurrection men use, and a box of their peculiar cement, and third, a coffin-plate with a particular inscription upon it. Those were the articles,” continued Austin, “which I was ordered by my lord to obtain; and I did so, with the assistance of some friends that I went to Birmingham. About three weeks after that, as near as I can guess, his lordship sent me a letter to say that he should be at my cottage on a particular morning, along with Miss Aylmer and two men, and that I was to lay in quantities of provender.”

“And they arrived accordingly?” said the marchioness.

“Yes, my lady, they came in a carriage on the morning named in the letter,” returned Austin. “The earl and Miss Aylmer wore masks, and the two men were the greatest ruffians I ever set eyes upon. Miss Aylmer went away in the carriage, which took her to Congleton; but at night it came back without her —”

“Never mind that point,” interrupted the marchioness. “What happened on the night of which you have just spoken?”

“The earl and the two men went to the church, taking the implements, the cement, and the skeleton keys along with them —”

“And the coffin-plate?” inquired the marchioness.

"Yes, his lordship had that with him also," responded Austin.

"And what was the inscription upon it?" pursued Lady Bellenden.

"It gave the year 1743 as the date of the death of the last marquis's father," was the response.

"That will do," said the marchioness. "You may retire, and send in the next witness."

Throughout the preceding examination, Lord Montgomery had remained leaning back in his chair, with his arms folded across his breast, and his eyes gazing up toward the ceiling; while Fernanda assumed a lounging posture upon the sofa, and appeared to treat the whole affair with sovereign contempt.

Austin retired, and forth from the inner room came a very aged woman, but who nevertheless walked with a wonderful agility.

"Ah! and Widow Bushman also!" ejaculated the earl, who had turned his head to glance at the new witness. Then instantly resuming his former attitude, he seemed to be intent only on contemplating the chandelier which was suspended from the ceiling.

"Do you know this gentleman and lady?" demanded Laura; "and if so, what can you tell me about them?"

"I know Earl Montgomery and Lady Holderness, late the Honourable Miss Fernanda Aylmer," replied the crone. "Three months ago Lady Holderness came all in a hurry to my cottage near Congleton, and ordered me to prepare to receive the earl and two men who would arrive within the ensuing twenty-four hours. She likewise bade me go into Congleton and purchase a couple of trunks, each of which was to be filled with a quantity of apparel suitable for working men about to emigrate. This I did, and her ladyship went away. Next morning at daybreak the earl and two men came. The latter were the most murderous-looking villains I ever saw; but their appearance was a little improved when they had shaved, washed, and put on their new clothes."

"While the earl and the two men were at your cottage," asked Lady Bellenden, "did you commit any oversight of which you have a recollection?"

"I remember addressing the earl as 'My lord,'" replied

Widow Bushman, "although particularly enjoined by Miss Aylmer — Lady Holderness, I mean — to be careful on that head. His lordship was terribly angry —"

"That will do, my good woman," said the marchioness. "You may retire, and be kind enough to send in the next witness."

"Is this child's play to last much longer, madam?" demanded Fernanda, no longer able to restrain her impatience beneath the air of contemptuous indifference which she had been assuming.

"Let her ladyship pursue her own course, Fernanda," exclaimed Earl Montgomery, in a bitter tone. "This is our ordeal; she will have to pass through hers presently."

Lady Bellenden started slightly and threw a furtive sidelong look of uneasiness upon the nobleman; but instantaneously recovering herself, she turned her eyes in the direction of the inner room. A third witness had just appeared in the form of a red-haired, scraggy, repulsive-looking young woman, with a very vixenish expression of countenance. She was totally unknown to both Montgomery and Fernanda, and though they did not choose to allow their features to show that they were at all interested in this new phase of the proceedings, they were nevertheless secretly filled with anxiety and curiosity in this respect.

"What is your name?" asked Lady Bellenden, who conducted the inquiry with all the precision and solemnity of an Old Bailey pleader.

"Mary Price, please your ladyship," was the answer; "and my father is one of the men whom his lordship, Earl Montgomery, hired to do a certain business down in the country. Joseph Warren is the other; and they're now both in Newgate."

"And what was the nature of the business you refer to?" continued the marchioness.

"To put a handsome young gentleman out of the way, by burying him alive in the buttress of a bridge," returned Carrotty Poll.

"There was a lady present on the occasion, I believe?" said the marchioness; "and the young gentleman ejaculated some name —"

"Fernanda," said Carrotty Poll.

Lady Holderness threw a fierce look upon the Big Beggar-

man's daughter and the Marchioness of Bellenden, then biting her scarlet lip almost till the blood came, she averted her head and resumed an aspect of consummate indifference.

"The murder of the young gentleman was not the only proceeding in which your father and his friend were engaged?" said Lady Bellenden, inquiringly.

"No, ma'am," returned Carrotty Poll. "There was an entrance by night into a church, the opening of a vault, and a little affair with the parish register; but in this last business the earl only was concerned."

"What proof have you of the opening of the vault?" asked Laura.

"This ring, taken off the finger of a dead body which was all exposed in its coffin," replied the red-haired witness, and she produced the jewel in question.

"It bears the crest of the Bellendens," observed the marchioness. "The young woman," she continued in explanation, "called upon me this morning to know whether certain intelligence which she was able to give relative to some proceedings in the country would be useful to me, inasmuch as she had reason to believe the information bore materially upon the pending lawsuit. She stipulated for a large reward, which I have given her, and she has remained until this evening to repeat her testimony in your presence and proclaim all she knows. Have you any questions to ask her?"

Lord Montgomery made no reply, but kept his looks fixed upon the chandelier, and Lady Holderness tossed her head with a renewed air of indignant impatience.

"You may retire," said the Marchioness of Bellenden.

"But your ladyship had better command this witness and all the others," cried the earl, as a thought suddenly struck him, "to remain quietly beneath this roof until the conclusion of the present proceedings; inasmuch as it will probably seem advisable to your ladyship, in the long run, to place the seal of strictest secrecy upon their lips, which no doubt can be done by means of your ladyship's gold," he added, bitterly. "In a word, I warn your ladyship, that if an exposure should take place, the honour and lives of Fernanda and myself will not be alone involved."

The looks of the marchioness gradually became troubled as the earl spoke; but conquering her emotions, she regained

her usual calmness with a surprising promptitude, although Fernanda darted upon her a fiendish glance of mingled menace, hatred, and defiance.

"The witnesses will do nothing and say nothing elsewhere, unless in obedience to my orders," she observed; then, turning toward Carrotty Poll, who was still lingering in the room, she said, "Retire, and send in Mr. Roberts."

"The canting parson of Bellenden rectory," ejaculated the earl, in a tone of contempt.

"I should perhaps inform you," said the marchioness, taking no heed of the observation, "that the corpse of Lord Raymond Montgomery has been discovered in the buttress of Malden Bridge; but this intelligence has of course reached you, inasmuch as Mr. Rigden's clerk was present on the occasion, and evidence thereof was duly given before the Master in Chancery this forenoon."

While Lady Bellenden was yet speaking, Mr. Roberts entered the room and bowed coldly to the earl and Fernanda, who took not the slightest notice of him. The testimony which the reverend gentleman gave was to the effect that the vault of the Bellenden family had been opened and examined in his presence, and that a particular coffin-plate had been unscrewed and consigned to his care. This he produced. Austin was then recalled, and he at once affirmed that the plate was the same he had procured at Birmingham in compliance with the instructions of Earl Montgomery. When he had once more retired into the adjacent room, the marchioness bade Mr. Roberts conclude his evidence; and the reverend gentleman proceeded to state that there was every reason to justify the belief that one of the registers of the parish of Bellenden had been tampered with in respect to the date properly belonging to the death of the last Marquis of Bellenden's father. The principal ground of this belief was the fact that an entry for the year 1743 was made, by the presumed alteration, to stand in the midst of a number of entries for the year 1745, — an irregularity in the consecutive order of the entries which could only be explained by the suspicion that the original words describing the date in full had been erased and others substituted.

Having thus brought his evidence to a termination, the Reverend Mr. Roberts withdrew.

"The farce is now at an end, I presume?" said Lord

Montgomery, the moment the door had closed behind the rector.

"Call it what your lordship will," returned the Marchioness of Bellenden, "I think you must admit that the affair has assumed a somewhat serious aspect, and that if all this additional evidence were produced before a criminal tribunal, the Lord Chancellor would have to base his final judgment upon the result. Lady Holderness," continued Laura, turning toward her cousin, and addressing her with a deeper solemnity, "it is not difficult to comprehend the part which you played in the tragedy of Malden Bridge. Lord Raymond loved you with an attachment that bordered upon adoration; and his blighted affections prompted him to seek a solitude congenial with his morbid state of mind. But his destruction was necessary to forward the aims of yourself and Earl Montgomery; you coveted the possessions which he claimed, and you were determined to constitute yourselves the heirs to that property, in the presumption that success would likewise attend upon the measures you devised to give a particular turn to the law proceedings. Your plans were settled accordingly, and when the bravos were hired and in readiness to act, it became no difficult matter to induce Lord Raymond to meet you, Lady Holderness, at an early hour in the morning, and in the immediate vicinage of the farm. Indeed, I can readily suppose that a few days previously you had written him a letter containing the most earnest assurances that you repented of your past cruelty toward him, that you had at length learned to love him, and that you were ready and willing to become his bride. But, with that subtlety which never fails your ladyship, you devised some excuse for investing the whole proceeding with the utmost mystery; you perhaps told him in your letter that his mother, the dowager-countess, was averse to the match, and that the people at the farm had been secretly bribed to watch all his actions. Your readiness of invention was at no loss to account for the appearance of the mask upon your features; and a young, ardent, impassioned lover, entertaining the hope that he was about to repair to Bellenden village to make you his bride, was not very likely to be accessible to suspicions of evil."

"Enough of all this!" exclaimed Eugene Montgomery,

starting from his chair. "Your ladyship is affecting to build a history upon surmises of your own; whereas all the details you have just explained with such accurate minuteness, are facts well known to you from imprudent confessions on my part."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE SECOND ORDEAL

ON hearing these words, the Marchioness of Bellenden was seized with the sudden pallor of one on whose soul an accusation falls with the force of a blow abruptly dealt upon the head with a sledge-hammer; and though perhaps this accusation was not altogether unexpected on Laura's part, yet was her power of dissimulation inadequate to conceal the effect which it produced upon her.

"Your ladyship has compelled us to pass through an ordeal," continued the earl, his eyes flashing with malignant hate and a savage triumph; "but I warned you ere now that your turn would come. The first ordeal, then, is passed; the second is on the point of commencing. We have been tortured beneath the harrows of your spite and rancour; you shall now undergo the same pleasant treatment at our hands."

"And inasmuch as you have summoned us hither that we may all three sit as judges and try our own case for ourselves," added Fernanda, her looks lowering ominously and her eye shining with a sinister light, "it is but fair and proper that you should listen as attentively to anything that we may have to bring forward, as we did to the evidence adduced on your side."

"I cannot object to such a course," said the marchioness, who had by this time recovered her wonted self-possession and placid assurance. "But I presume that you do not deny the charges which have been so fully proven against you by my witnesses."

"It is not worth while to deal in duplicity, Lady Bellenden," responded the earl, resuming his seat; "and therefore I will at once plead guilty, on my own and Fernanda's

part, to the various crimes alleged against us. Not that we glory in them; on the contrary, we may look back upon them with regret, but they are irrevocable."

"Regret!" echoed Lady Holderness, with a contemptuous curl of the lips; "I will not allow the term to be coupled with my name. In other respects, Eugene," she added, more mildly, "you may act as spokesman for us both."

"And I shall be as brief as possible," said the earl. Then, after a few moments' pause, he continued in the following manner, while keeping his eyes intently fixed upon the Marchioness of Bellenden: "Your ladyship has adopted a course which is characterized by the most admirable cunning and astuteness. But, with all your powers of dissimulation, you could not avoid the telltale pallor which spread upon your cheek when I just now proclaimed a fact which was in itself an accusation against you. Ah! now you become nervous and uneasy once more, and you are in suspense to learn how much we know of your past history, how far we can criminate you, and to what extent you have to fear us! Oh, it was a fine stroke of policy on your part to pay a visit to Warwickshire and cause certain investigations to be made as if you were altogether ignorant beforehand of what would be the results and to what discoveries those investigations would lead; whereas you well knew that the plate on the coffin-lid had been changed, that the register had been altered, and that Raymond Montgomery lay dead in the buttress of the bridge! Yes, all those circumstances you knew beforehand; because — infatuated, besotted fool that I was! — I revealed them to your ears when, in the mystic darkness of a voluptuous boudoir, my arms encircled your naked, palpitating form, and my head lay pillowed upon your bosom!"

"My lord — this insult — what means it?" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden, springing to her feet, while her countenance glowed with that deep crimson hue which is excited either by shame or by indignation, and which as frequently betokens outraged innocence as conscious guilt.

"I mean, Cousin Laura," said Earl Montgomery, with a semismile of sardonic triumph, "that beneath the placid exterior which you are wont to wear, an Etna of frantic passions is concealed, and that the garb of widowhood which you have worn for twenty years is nothing more nor less than

the veil which a consummate hypocrisy has thrown over a career of unbridled licentiousness."

"Your calumny is as odious as it is false, my lord!" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden, her manner all of a sudden becoming so lofty and dignified and her looks so full of a proud assurance, that the earl was staggered.

"Perhaps her ladyship would allow you to see her boudoir, Eugene," said Fernanda, in a tone of quiet sarcasm; "and although, from what you have told me, the scene of love, and infatuation, and folly, was involved in utter darkness, yet may you have acquired a knowledge of the locality sufficiently distinct to be able to identify it."

"My indignation would prompt me to return a peremptory refusal to comply with any such suggestion," exclaimed the marchioness, her manner acquiring a still loftier assurance; "but I feel so jealous of that reputation which is now assailed for the first time — at least within my hearing — that I shall unhesitatingly adopt any course which is calculated to refute the foul aspersion. Follow me."

And issuing from the room by the door that opened upon the landing, the marchioness led the way along a passage, Fernanda and Eugene following close behind.

"This is my bedchamber," said Laura, in a tone of proud confidence, as she stopped half-way down the passage and threw open the door of an apartment.

"Your ladyship will excuse our impertinence if we enter it," said Lord Montgomery; but as he crossed the threshold, the rapid glance which he threw upon the draperies of the couch and the curtains of the windows showed him that they tallied not with the pieces which Lord Florimel had given him. "But this is not a boudoir?" he exclaimed, fixing his eyes intently upon the marchioness.

"This is my boudoir," said the lady, at once throwing open another door, and leading the way to an inner room.

Again was Montgomery at fault. The draperies matched not the pieces; and moreover the arrangements of the boudoir were totally different from those which he remembered so well, and according to which the table stood between the sofa and the bed, and a large armchair was near the head of the bed itself. But might not the curtains have been changed since the pieces were cut out of them? And might not the arrangements of the room have been altered? These

thoughts suggested another, and, approaching the window, he looked forth. The casement was upon the southern side of the priory, — that quarter of the building which has already been described as the one that had preserved its monastic appearance, with its massive walls, long and deeply set windows, low doors, and high pointed roofs, — and the casement whence Montgomery now looked out commanded a view of the garden. From the gate in the front boundary wall two distinct gravel-walks branched off, one leading to the principal entrance of the mansion (which was on the northern side), and the other threading a shubbery of evergreens and leading to the middle of the southern side.

“It was by this latter path that I was led blindfold on the night of my visit to the boudoir,” thought Montgomery, within himself, as he thus carefully examined the details of the locality. “Yes, there can be no doubt of it. My calculations do not err, and the door by which I was conducted into the building must be on this same side. Then the passage which we have now been threading assuredly leads to the staircase communicating with that door.”

These thoughts passed rapidly through the mind of the earl; and, turning away from the window, he threw a quick and searching glance upon Lady Bellenden. That look, taking her as it were unawares, surprised upon her countenance the reflection of a feeling of uneasiness which was troubling her mind at the moment, as if she had penetrated into the motives of his survey from the window, and dreaded the surmises that he was sure to deduce therefrom.

“Well, my lord,” she said, instantaneously recovering her self-possession, and resuming a look of offended dignity, “do you behold aught in the appearance of this chamber to warrant the belief that you have ever been here before?”

“Nothing,” was the laconic reply.

The marchioness accordingly led the way out of the boudoir through the bedchamber into the passage, along which she began to retrace her steps toward the landing, when the earl exclaimed, “With your permission, Lady Bellenden, we will proceed in this direction.”

And he sped toward the farther extremity of the corridor, passing in his way the doors of two or three apartments.

“My lord, remember that this is not your own house!” cried the marchioness, in a tone of mingled rage and terror,

which she could no longer subdue. "This proceeding is most unwarrantable, most indelicate on your part! Do you hear me, my lord?"

"Ah! now I am upon the right track!" exclaimed the earl, heedless of the lady's remonstrance. "Come hither, Fernanda, come hither."

Lady Holderness was immediately by Eugene's side, and she found that he had halted at the top of a staircase looking down at a door which stood at the bottom.

"Yes, all my suspicions are confirmed, or rather my doubts are dispelled," he said, in a rapid tone of joyous excitement. "That is the door by which I entered the building on the memorable night of mystery and infatuation; this is the staircase so thickly carpeted, and the real boudoir of darkness, perfume, and love must be reached by one of these doors which we have just passed by."

"My lord, I command you to leave the private department of my dwelling, and return to the drawing-room," exclaimed Lady Bellenden, as she came hurrying along the passage, her features now ashy pale, her eyes dilating with rage and terror, and her lips white and quivering. "Do you hear me, my lord?" she cried, as she clutched the earl violently by the arm.

"Beautiful Laura," said the nobleman, with a mocking smile, "you were not thus ferocious when you conducted me blindfold along this passage to the boudoir of love and darkness."

And disengaging himself from her convulsive grasp, he returned rapidly up the passage until he reached the first door on the right hand, which he endeavoured to open. It was locked; but without an instant's hesitation, he burst it open with his foot, and then a cry of exultation thrilled from his lips.

Lady Holderness, who was following close behind him, looked back and flung a glance of malignant triumph upon Lady Bellenden, as this unhappy woman leaned against the wall of the passage for support, so overpowered was she by feelings of mingled shame, fury, and despair.

"Yes, this is the mysterious boudoir," cried Earl Montgomery, as he entered the small but luxuriously furnished apartment, the shutters of which were now open; "here is the sofa on which I lay, embraced in the arms of my then

unknown siren, here is the table whence she took the wine that subsequently deprived me of consciousness, and there is the bed, with the armchair near it."

"'Tis false, all false!" murmured a hoarse voice; and as the earl and Fernanda, both of whom had advanced into the chamber, turned their heads hastily around, they beheld the marchioness tottering over the threshold.

"'Tis true, — all true," exclaimed the earl. "And if your ladyship requires proofs —"

"Proofs!" echoed Laura, with a sudden start. "What proofs —"

"These!" replied Montgomery; and he flung down the pieces of drapery upon the table.

"Ah! then I am indeed betrayed," moaned the Marchioness of Bellenden; and, staggering to the sofa, she threw herself upon it, covering her face with her hands at the same time.

"Yes, there can be no longer any doubt," said Lord Montgomery, as he compared the pieces of drapery with the hangings themselves. "But if the last link in the chain of evidence be required, here it is," he added, as he pointed to a spot in the window-curtain and another in that of the couch, whence the pieces had been cut away.

At the same moment the clock on the roof of the priory proclaimed the hour of seven in the evening; and as the bell hung in a turret on the southern side of the building, it was plainly heard inside the boudoir.

"Ah! there is still another link in the chain," ejaculated Montgomery. "I could swear to that chime beyond all possibility of doubt."

"But after all," said the Marchioness of Bellenden, suddenly withdrawing her hands and revealing a countenance that was ghastly pale and bore the imprint of many deeply concentrated passions, "after all, what matters this discovery which you have made? Ere now, my lord, you set a good example and discarded the use of any further duplicity. I will do the same and confess that I am the heroine of your night's adventure here, — that I am the wanton, dissolute woman I then avowed myself to be. Yes, we all spring from a delectable race in that respect," she added, with a laugh of bitter scorn which has poison in its mirth; "the Montgomerys and the Aylmers never were celebrated for extreme

morality, and the same fires that circulate in your blood, Eugene, — and in yours, Fernanda, — have also rendered every vein in my body the conduit for a lava stream. But what more can be alleged against me? Laura may be reproached as a wanton who veils her dissoluteness beneath a widow's garb and an outward aspect of piety; but Eugene and Fernanda are murderers, — murderers upon evidence, — murderers by their own confession."

And the words came thick, hoarse, and fraught with a deep malignity, from the tongue of that lady who appeared to have been suddenly changed from an angel of benevolence and Christian amenity into a demoness of revenge, hatred, and spite.

"Ah! then you push me to extremities," exclaimed Lord Montgomery; "and you have only yourself to thank if the work of retaliation proceeds to the end! Laura," he added, fixing his eyes upon her countenance with an expression of deep and ominous meaning, "the terms upon which we stand are more equal than you appear inclined to acknowledge, for if Fernanda and I caused the death of Raymond Montgomery, you did the same by your own husband."

The marchioness gave a sudden start, as if a galvanic rod had touched her, and desperately though she struggled against the confusion, terror, and dismay which seized upon her, the attempt was of no avail. The influence of conscious guilt was more powerful than all the arts of dissimulation in which she was so well skilled; and as a mirror darkens suddenly with the image that passes before it, so did her features reflect the tremendous accusation which had just been levelled against her.

Nor did she now endeavour to fall back upon her hypocrisy or her guile; but as her mind gradually recovered its self-possession after this last shock, she put on a degree of hardihood and a front of boldness, as if clothing herself in the armour most fitting to meet her adversaries upon the level which crime had established.

"We now know enough of each other to render it desirable that our differences should be settled amicably," she said, in a deep voice and with looks of profound significancy.

"You speak truly, fair cousin," returned Montgomery; "inasmuch as open warfare will only lead to the destruction of all three. But in case of an amicable settlement, can you

ensure silence on the part of all those witnesses whom you have gathered together at the priory?"

"Beyond all doubt," was the answer immediately given by Lady Bellenden. "And on your side —"

"I can guarantee that the secrets of this mysterious boudoir shall remain unknown," rejoined Montgomery; "and that the world shall never suspect that the late Marquis of Bellenden died by poison."

"And you, Fernanda," said the marchioness, now adopting a more familiar style, "are you agreeable to an amicable settlement?"

"Eugene has truly observed that we cannot continue at war without entailing destruction upon all three," replied Lady Holderness. "As for myself, I have no further animosity against you, Laura; because if you made us pass through an ordeal, we have done the same by you, and therefore we are quits. Nay, more, if you would permit me to offer you a suggestion, I might propound a plan by which the settlement of the whole affair would be easy and natural."

"Speak!" ejaculated the earl and the marchioness together. Then, as a suspicion relative to Fernanda's meaning flashed to the brain of each at the same moment, they could not help exchanging half-smiles and significant looks.

"Ah! you already anticipate me, I perceive," exclaimed Lady Holderness. "Well, I declare it is the best plan you can adopt! Of course you will allow me to take that portion of the Warwickshire property which I have all along claimed and to which the Master has pronounced me entitled; and the sooner the Marchioness of Bellenden becomes Lady Montgomery, the better."

"Laura, you once called me your handsome Eugene — here — in this very room," said the earl, forgetting all his past rancour, not only on the ground of expediency, but likewise because the boudoir had stirred up glowing reminiscences and voluptuous longings in his mind. "Yes, in this very room, Laura, did you pay me the most flattering compliments —"

"And I told you likewise that I was not altogether deficient in personal charms," interrupted Lady Bellenden, her features now expanding into a soft wanton smile; "and if you consider that I did not make an idle, silly vaunt —"

"I always declared that my cousin Laura was supremely

handsome," exclaimed the earl, taking her hand and pressing it in his own.

"Therefore, entertaining such a favourable opinion of each other's personal appearance," said Fernanda, "there is no reason why you should not forgive and forget and become one."

"With all my heart," exclaimed Lady Bellenden, reading a fervid assent in the earl's looks.

And then the strange compact was sealed by an embrace, and the lips of the woman who had poisoned her husband were pressed to those of the man who had murdered his brother, and another aristocratic murderess was the witness of the scene.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A DEED OF VENGEANCE

IT was about eight o'clock in the morning, on the day after the many and varied incidents just related, that Melmoth was walking through Knightsbridge in the direction of Hyde Park. He was apparelled in the same decent manner as when he encountered Tim Meagles in the Edgeware Road a couple of days previously; but his countenance was more deadly pale, and mingled with its expression of wild vacancy and latent ferocity there was a look of stern unflinching resolution, as if his mind were made up to the accomplishment of desperate deeds.

Entering Hyde Park, he traversed the vast enclosure with slow but firm steps; and the clocks of the West End were striking nine as he reached the immediate vicinage of Park Lane. Then he paused and fixed his eyes with some degree of anxiety upon the nearest gate, through which in a few minutes his eldest son James made his appearance.

"I am glad you are come, my boy," said Melmoth, "for I had my misgivings —"

"And why so, father?" asked the lad, who, it will be remembered, was little more than thirteen years of age and who was as respectably dressed as his parent. "What is the matter with you?"

"I don't know, — a presentiment of evil, I suppose," exclaimed the man, abruptly. "In fact, considering the ways to which we have taken, we are never safe for an hour together, and therefore I was apprehensive and low-spirited. Where are your brother and sister?"

"At the Kinchin-Ken in Grub Street, where we've been staying latterly," replied James. "There's plenty of other

children of the same age at the Ken, you know, and the Kinchin-Grand is a good-natured fellow."

"Ah! he's already taught you the principles of his craft, Jem, eh?" said Melmoth; and he was shaken, despite of himself, with a strong convulsive shudder as he contemplated the son whom he had purposely handed over to the teaching of the consummate reprobate that accident had thrown in his way. "But let us change the topic," cried the man suddenly. "What news have you for me?"

"The pair of pistols you told me to buy are in my pocket," answered the youth.

"Come behind this tree," said Melmoth, "and give them to me. There! now I am delighted beyond measure," he exclaimed, his countenance suddenly expressing a ferocious satisfaction and a glare of savage joy beaming in his eyes as he took the weapons from his son.

"What do you mean to do with them, father? And where have you been all night?" inquired the lad, with a mingled apprehension and timidity.

"What I mean to do with the pistols, James, you may guess full easily if you will," said the man, a dark cloud settling upon his features. "Young as you are, I think you comprehend all that I have been endeavouring to instil into your mind since we met in the workhouse? Or is it possible that you have forgotten how deep are your father's wrongs, and how loudly your poor mother's death cries from the grave for vengeance?"

"No, no, I have forgotten nothing of all that," exclaimed the boy, trembling, or rather shivering as if under the influence of severe cold, although the weather was genial and warm.

"And yet you seem afraid, James?" said Melmoth, half-angrily and half-remorsefully.

"Afraid, — no!" ejaculated the boy, instantly recovering his self-possession and his courage. "I am prepared to avenge your wrongs and my dear mother's death, father, in any way that you shall point out."

"And the surgeon's treatment of the poor baby, James?" observed Melmoth.

"Yes, and that also," responded the youth. "But our revenge in this respect will begin almost immediately, for

'tis past nine o'clock, and the nursery-maid will soon make her appearance with Thurston's child."

"You are sure that she walks regularly every morning in the park?" said Melmoth, inquiringly.

"Have I not watched her for some days past? And have I not reported to you that she invariably comes out to give the infant an airing between nine and ten in the morning?" exclaimed the boy.

"True!" observed Melmoth. "I hope she will not fail to-day. And now, James," he continued, in a tone that was serious even to solemnity, "you must understand well and thoroughly all I mean and purpose with regard to this child. On becoming possessed of it, you will bear it straight off to the Kinchin-Ken, where you will give it to the girls to nurse; and you will become as it were its guardian, or its parent. That is to say, James, you will rear it in the midst of vice, profligacy, and debauchery, you will bring it up to be a thief from its infancy, and on no account will you divulge the secret of its parentage until it is at least ten or twelve years old, should it live till then. Rewards will be offered for its recovery, advertisements will be inserted in the newspapers, placards will be posted, and all possible means will no doubt be adopted by Thurston to recover his child. But remember all I have told you, and may my most withering curse alight upon your head if you disobey me!"

"Do not talk in this style, father," exclaimed the youth, shuddering at Melmoth's awful words and the vehemence with which they were delivered. "I have already sworn to do your bidding in everything, and I shall not fail in this instance. Poor baby shall be avenged," added the boy, with bitter emphasis.

"Now you speak as my son, and I am proud of you, James," said Melmoth. "That cruel, cold-blooded, heartless surgeon did not hesitate to keep the poor babe's body to anatomize or to figure in a bottle upon a shelf in his surgery. He doubtless thought that the poor had no feelings, and that he might do as he chose with the infant of the beggar-woman who died upon the door-steps of a rich man's dwelling. But he shall be taught that there is retribution for even such an outrage as this," exclaimed Melmoth, with an expression of countenance that was now absolutely infernal. "Do you hear me, boy? And do you understand me?"

"I do," was the response, delivered with a kindred acerbity of feeling and rancorous vibration of voice. "The child of that surgeon shall be reared as a beggar — trained to become a thief —"

"Until the age of ten or twelve, according as he is more or less imbued with the inveteracy of evil principles," added Melmoth; "and then, James, then shall you reveal to him the astounding secret that he is the son of Thurston the eminent doctor of Mayfair!"

"And, on learning that secret, he can go home to his parents if he chooses," said the boy, with a malignant laugh. "But those pistols, father, are they —"

"For the prince?" exclaimed Melmoth, finishing the lad's sentence for him. "Yes, one is for the prince, the author of all our woes —"

"And the other?" said the boy, gazing intently up into his father's haggard, sallow countenance.

"The other?" echoed Melmoth, in a musing tone; then, suddenly fixing his eyes with a fearful expression upon his son, he said, "James, you will soon be compelled to act as a father toward your little brother and sister, who will have no other father to depend upon!"

"No, no, you must not leave us in this manner!" exclaimed the youth, in a burst of wild anguish, as he caught hold of his father's hand; and he would have fallen at his feet, had not the iron grasp of Melmoth suddenly clutched his wrists and held him up.

"Boy, you must show more nerve than this," ejaculated the monster-man, in a stern tone and with a look of menacing reproach. "The time for child's play is passed, the season for indulging in soft emotions is over. We have a terrible duty to perform, a frightful vengeance to wreak, and we must not shrink from the task. Tell me, James, do you shrink?" and Melmoth grasped his son's arm with the force of an iron vise closing upon it.

"No, no, I do not shrink, father," exclaimed the youth. "The remembrance of my poor mother, how she wept over me, how she died in my presence, and the recollection of your manifold wrongs also, — oh, all this inspires me with the courage of desperation and the spirit of a demon, and you shall behold no more weakness on my part!"

"Bravely spoken!" cried Melmoth, now pressing his son's

hand fervidly between both his own. "Just now you asked me a question concerning the manner in which I spent the past night. This will show you," and he produced from his pocket a soda-water bottle filled with combustible materials.

"What is the use of it, father?" demanded the boy, as he took the bottle in his hand.

"Some night, James," returned Melmoth, "you will make it your business to pass by the great mansion on the door-step of which your poor mother sank down and died, and if you hear the sounds of music issuing forth and behold the elegant forms of the dancers throwing their shadows upon the window-curtains as they glide onward to the notes of the sounding harmony, you will hurl that missile through the casement into the midst of the joyous company. Oh, I can promise you that the gay laughter will in a moment be changed to horrifying shrieks and bitter lamentations! But you must not wait to mark the results; the instant that your vigorous arm has thrown the missile, your feet must bear you with all possible speed away. Do you understand me?"

"I do, father," answered the lad, with a sombre desperation of voice and manner which proved full plainly that he purposed to carry out to the very letter all the details of the atrocious instructions thus minutely given. Then, having secured the murderous though rudely contrived engine about his person, he said, "Society will be shaken to its very centre by all that we now propose to do. When, dear father, shall you put into execution your plan relative to the prince?"

"His Royal Highness," answered Melmoth, in a tone expressive of bitter, burning hatred toward the object of his remark, "has gone to pass a few days at Windsor Castle. If our affair relative to Thurston's child comes off successfully this morning, I shall proceed to Windsor without delay; and in less than four and twenty hours, perhaps, all England will be startled by the tremendous tidings that the heir apparent to the throne has ceased to encumber the earth and disgrace humanity with his presence. Such is my intention, James," added Melmoth, "and therefore it may be, my boy, that you and I shall never meet again in this life."

"Must it be so, father?" said the youth, in a low, deep, tremulous voice, while the quivering of his lips and the tears that started into his eyes showed how impossible it was

for him to restrain his feelings altogether, earnestly though he struggled against them.

"It must be so, James," replied Melmoth. "You would not have me spare the prince?"

"No, ten thousand times no!" exclaimed the lad, resolutely.

"And you would not have me swing to the accursed gallows-tree?" continued Melmoth.

"Heaven forbid!" cried the boy, with accents and looks of horror.

"Then if I slay the prince," rejoined Melmoth, "you will comprehend that there is only one course for me to adopt."

"Give me your hand for the last time, father," said James, with deeper accents and darker looks; then, as he pressed it fervidly, he added, "I already regard you as one who no more belongs to this world."

For a few instants the father and son gazed upon each other in ineffable tenderness mingled with utter desperation; and then, as if afraid to trust themselves any longer to the melting influence of that mood, they loosened the grasp of their hands and averted their eyes with simultaneous abruptness.

At the same moment a young woman, bearing a child in her arms, entered the park. She was a nursery-maid in the service of Mr. and Mrs. Thurston; and the infant, which was now five months old, was not the offspring of that couple, as Melmoth and his son supposed, but was the fruit of the Princess Sophia's illicit amour with General Barth.

The child was sleeping in the arms of the nurse, who began to stroll in a leisurely way across the park, not taking any heed of the man and the youth who followed her at a short distance. Presently she turned out of the gravel-path, and proceeded to a spot where a bench stood in the agreeable shade of some trees, and there she seated herself. Melmoth and his son gazed around, and perceiving that the coast was clear enough for their purpose, they at once walked up to the place where the female was resting.

"Young woman," said Melmoth, in an abrupt tone and with determined manner, "no harm is intended to yourself, but you must give me that child."

The servant-maid was struck speechless with consternation at these words; but she instinctively pressed the slumbering

child more closely to her bosom, as she looked up with mingled terror and amazement into the countenance of the monster-man.

"I am serious, and I have no time to waste in dispute or explanations," said the latter, as he drew a pistol half-out of his pocket; but instantly concealing it again, he added, "I don't want to act in a harsh or cowardly way toward you, young woman; so give me up the child at once, and you will run no danger of any kind."

The nurse was so overcome by the alarms which the appearance of the pistol had naturally excited in her breast, that she was unable to offer the least opposition or resistance as Melmoth took the child from her arms. Half-fainting, she sank back against the trunk of the tree to which the bench was fixed, and while her brain swam around, a dimness came over her eyes.

The child still slept, as the monster-man consigned it to the arms of his son, whose heart smote him with remorse as he gazed upon the infantile countenance of dumb innocence.

"Must it be done, father?" he said, in a low deep tone.

"Remember the poor babe that was your mother's darling," returned Melmoth, in a hoarse voice that was merciless and implacable.

"Yes, this deed of vengeance must be consummated," instantly responded the boy, his own looks changing to sinister darkness.

"You swear, James, you swear, by your mother's memory," said Melmoth, "that you will show no pity and no remorse in carrying out this revenge according to the instructions I have given you?"

"I swear, most sacredly swear, by my mother's memory," rejoined the lad, encouraging all his acerbated feelings to collect their bitterness and arm him with the ferocity of a monster.

"Then farewell, James, farewell for ever," said Melmoth, with a stoicism worthy of a better cause; and he turned his back upon the boy, whom he nevertheless loved so well.

"Farewell, father, dearest father!" was the tremulous reply which met his ears murmuringly, and the words were instantaneously followed by the rapid retreat of footsteps over the grass.

A few minutes afterward the servant-maid recovered

herself sufficiently to experience a sense of the calamity which had occurred to her; and, casting her looks in frenzied wildness around, she could see nothing of either the youth or the infant. But close by her side was the man whose sinister looks and desperate menaces had already struck her with so deep a consternation.

“Young woman,” said Melmoth, in his deep hollow voice, “return to your master, and tell him that his child has been stolen, in order that a vengeance may be consummated. Tell him that the individual who has done this is the same whom he saw in the sick ward of Whitechapel workhouse, and whom he was the means of plunging into the mad cells of that place, — the same whose babe he cheated of the right of burial, and doubtless has preserved as an anatomical curiosity in his own pharmacy. Tell him this; ay, and tell him likewise that he may spare himself all trouble, all expense, and all research in the hope of recovering his child; for those into whose possession that infant has now passed will keep it as their own even though countless treasures be offered for its restoration. And tell your master also that his son shall be dragged through all the mire and filth of misery, beggary, depravity, and profligacy, until the boy shall have become a proficient in every vice and an adept in every iniquity; and then — but not till then — shall he be sent back to his parents.”

Having thus spoken, and without waiting to observe the effect which the terrible tirade was only too well adapted to produce upon the mind of the horror-stricken woman, Melmoth darted away from her presence and was speedily lost to her view.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE LAST MEETING

It was about noon on the following day, when the Princess Amelia stole forth from her apartment in Windsor Castle and hastened into the park.

Changed, oh, sadly changed, was the appearance of the royal lady since we first introduced her, in all the glow and freshness of her voluptuous beauty, to our readers; and this alteration had occurred within the space of a few short days.

But then what harrowing thoughts, what terrible reflections, what remorseful memories had been doing the work of desolation, and what ravenous vultures had been preying upon a heart that was formed to love with such fervid enthusiasm and to palpitate with the gush of such warm impassioned feelings.

How indescribable, how matchless was the woe which had succeeded the dream of bliss wherein the senses of that princess had been lately steeped! It was not the mere loss of the object of an illimitable love, but it was the idea, ever haunting and ever goading her, that this love which she had known was accursed, — this fondness to which she had yielded was an incest. The heart had created a worship which nature now denounced as a blasphemy; the imagination had pictured a heaven where in reality there was a yawning hell.

Henceforth what joy could existence promise for the royal Amelia? How could she even endure to live? Though gems might glitter upon her brow, her heart would be consuming to ashes; all the light and glory of her rank would only render the darkness of her soul the more appalling. For not only was there her own secret, — the stupendous secret of her incestuous love, — but there was likewise her father's secret

which had become known to her at the same time. Yes, since the dread discovery had been made that Sir Richard Stamford was the king's son by the late unfortunate Hannah Lightfoot, the Princess Amelia had no difficulty in comprehending the secret means of coercion which Tim Meagles and Lady Lade had exercised toward her father on that memorable occasion when she was a listener to the interview at Windsor Castle. Therefore, like a weight of lead upon her soul, lay the conviction that her father — the King of England — must have been a perjured monster toward a too confiding, too affectionate, too yielding woman. Yes, there was no longer any doubt in the mind of Amelia as to the meaning of that document which Meagles had produced on the occasion referred to, and which had exercised so talismanic an effect upon her sire.

Thus the unhappy princess had not merely her own tremendous grief — ay, her startling, harrowing, though involuntary crime — to goad her to desperation, but she had likewise the knowledge of a father's black iniquity to drive her to madness. A spell seemed to hang over her family, — a curse to have settled upon those who were nearest and dearest to her. Her father was tortured by the stings of conscience for the misdeeds of his youth, her eldest brother was a disgusting voluptuary and a heartless seducer, her favourite sister was the mother of an illegitimate child, and in the conduct of no one of her other brothers and sisters had she any reason either to rejoice or to indulge in hope. Miserable, then, most miserable in all respects, was the condition of this amiable princess; and small marvel was it if the glories of her loveliness were dimmed and the flowers of her youthful beauty fading fast.

Pale and sunken were her cheeks, hollow were her eyes, trembling with a painful nervousness were her limbs; and all these physical changes, so indicative of rapid and premature decay, had been wrought within a few short days. The fountains of her happiness, the basis of her mind's energies, the springs of youthful hope and confidence had been broken up all in a moment; and the effect of this moral desolation had been terrible indeed in its reaction upon the frame.

But wherefore is she now traversing the park with hasty step? Why has she quitted that chamber the solitude of

which she has devised so many pretexts to ensure since the evening of the fatal discovery? Concealed in her dress — next to that bosom which shall palpitate no more with love's Elysian sensations — is a note containing a few hastily penned lines from Sir Richard Stamford. In this billet, furtively conveyed to her, the baronet tells Amelia that he has resolved to leave England for ever; and he beseeches a last interview ere he shall turn his back upon his native land, to revisit it never.

In the most secluded nook of the spacious park Sir Richard Stamford was waiting for Amelia. His appearance was also changed — much changed, for the load of grief that lay upon his mind was scarcely less than that which appeared to be crushing the soul of the unfortunate princess.

Painful, indescribably painful, was their meeting now; not only painful as an encounter between a brother and a sister may be rendered by circumstances of bitter adversity, but with an enhanced poignancy because their hearts' maddened feelings were mingled with a profound sense of shame.

"We now meet for the last time, Amelia," said the baronet, in a low and tremulous tone. "I thought that you would like to see me once more ere I quit this land for ever —"

"And to what part of the world, Richard, do you intend to repair?" asked the princess, with downcast eyes and with a faint blush upon her cheeks.

"I know not — I have as yet resolved upon nothing," returned Sir Richard; "unless it be that I am decided to abandon my native country for ever. This is the only resolution which I have formed, and I am certain that you will approve of it."

"I do, I do," said the princess, with impassioned earnestness; and now she raised her tearful eyes and fixed them with mingled tenderness and shame upon the baronet's countenance. "Yes, you do well to leave a country where you have experienced so much misery, Richard," she continued; "and whithersoever you proceed, may God Almighty's blessing attend upon you."

"I know that you will often think of me, Amelia, and sometimes pray for me," returned the baronet, in a voice that was profoundly mournful; "and this thought will console me in my voluntary exile. But you, dear Amelia, oh,

how can you bear up against the tremendous calamity that has overtaken us?"

"I shall sink beneath its weight, Richard," answered the royal lady, "for it is stronger than all the energies which I could possibly collect to counterbalance it. Day and night am I haunted by the most harrowing reflections; asleep or awake, the memory of the dread past pursues me, and points to a still more dreadful future. For, alas! I have no more hope of happiness in this world; my heart is breaking, all affections and feelings which constitute its vitality are withered, and the brief remnant of my existence will be deluged in tears."

"Poor girl, too well can I appreciate the bitter, excruciating truth of all you say," returned the baronet, in a deeper despondency than before; "and I feel that it would be a mere mockery of your illimitable woe to proffer the words of consolation. Indeed, I am myself so broken in spirit, all my moral energies are so completely crushed, and I have so profound a sense of my heart's utter desolation, that I could not induce my lips to smile nor my tongue to articulate syllables of sympathy, — no, not even to cheer a being so beloved as thou art."

"Earth has no balm for souls so deeply wounded as ours, Richard," said the princess, in a voice that was scarcely audible in its low plaintiveness; "and the world has no sympathy that can soothe the spirit which is writhing in the tortures of crucifixion. Oh, if it were not cumulating crime upon crime," she exclaimed, in a sudden paroxysm of despair, "I would seek refuge in the grave of a suicide."

"For Heaven's sake talk not thus, Amelia!" exclaimed the baronet, alarmed and startled by her words and the impassioned energy of desperation with which they were uttered. "Come, give me your arm, and we will walk together for the last time. We must not say farewell until our souls are at least more tranquil and resigned."

"Pardon me, Richard, if I said aught to terrify you," observed the princess, in a tone of plaintive entreaty, as she took the baronet's arm; "but you can understand how miserable — how very, very miserable I am," and her voice was lost in the sobs that almost choked her.

"You ere now used the word crime, Amelia," said Sir Richard Stamford, "and you were wrong. Yes, for you are

not criminal, poor suffering girl, you are not guilty, my well-beloved sister! In ignorance you loved me, in unconsciousness of the secret tie which bound us together you gave me your heart. Nature's whisperings were not loud enough to carry an efficient warning to our souls, and therefore thou canst not blame thyself."

"Would to God that I could reason in the same manner!" cried the princess. Then, instantly checking the sudden impetuosity to which she had for a moment given way, and recovering her self-possession, she said, "There is a man near yonder trees who appears to be watching us."

"No, it cannot be," returned the baronet. "Wherefore should he watch us? And who could have set a spy upon our actions? But we will walk leisurely that way and assure ourselves upon the point."

"A vague and terrible presentiment of evil has just come over me," said the princess, and Sir Richard felt her hand tremble as it rested lightly upon his arm.

"'Tis because your nerves are unstrung, your energies so cruelly shaken," he remarked, as he led her gently along; and yet the words which she had last uttered infused a vague and unknown terror into his own soul, as if he had caught the infection of that evil presentiment which the princess already experienced.

"That man is assuredly watching us," she said, in a tone of increasing alarm. "Let us retrace our way."

"On the contrary," observed Sir Richard Stamford, "if he be really espying our movements, we must know what he is and who has employed him. I could not bear the thought of leaving England if it were to abandon you, Amelia, to any danger. Come, take courage, we are close by the knot of trees where he is stationed —"

"Ah! now he issues forth from his hiding-place," said the princess, "and he seems to take no notice of us. I was foolish to give way to such idle terrors, but when the mind is labouring under the influence of a deep dependency it converts the most trivial incidents into a cause of alarm."

Sir Richard Stamford made no reply to this observation, because he and the princess were now within a few yards of the individual whose presence had filled them with such sinister apprehensions. The man, having emerged from behind the clump of trees, was apparently gazing with in-

tentness in a direction exactly opposite to that whence Amelia and the baronet were thus advancing; and the nearer they drew toward him, the more did they feel convinced that their alarms had been groundless.

But all in a moment, the man turned and faced them, and ere the eye had time to wink, he discharged a pistol point-blank at Sir Richard Stamford.

A piercing shriek thrilled from the lips of Amelia, and a cry of mortal agony burst from those of the baronet as he started back and fell heavily upon the ground. The princess threw herself upon her knees by his side, and at the same moment there was the report of a second pistol.

Wild with terror, and in the belief that this latter weapon was aimed at herself, she cast her frightened looks toward the assassin; but there was no cause for alarm on her own account, — the man lay stone dead at a little distance!

Ten minutes afterward a park-keeper, who happened to pass that way, was horrified at the spectacle which met his view.

On the ground lay a man weltering in his blood, and with his head horribly shattered in such a manner that it was easy to perceive he had placed the muzzle of a pistol in his mouth and blown his brains out.

At a little distance a lady was stretched by the side of a gentleman the bosom of whose shirt was saturated with blood. He was quite dead, having received a mortal wound in the breast; but the lady, whom the park-keeper in dismay recognized to be the Princess Amelia, was only in a deep swoon.

Assistance was procured from the castle, whither the unconscious lady was speedily removed, and on regaining her senses, she awoke to the full horror of all the frightful recollections which poured into her maddening brain.

The particulars of so awful a tragedy could not be entirely hushed up; but at the inquest which was held upon the two bodies, the circumstance that the Princess Amelia was present when the murder and the suicide took place was carefully suppressed. To the world the tale went forth that Sir Richard Stamford was assassinated in Windsor Park by some man who was altogether unknown, and who put a period to his own existence immediately after the perpetra-

tion of the mysterious deed. Upon the person of the assassin-suicide nothing was found to show who he was, and his features were so completely disfigured by the means he had adopted to ensure self-destruction, that no description could be given of his countenance so as to lead to his identification.

The remains of the baronet were interred in the parish church at Windsor, and the corpse of his murderer was buried by night in a neighbouring cross-road, without the performance of Christian rites.

To the reader the tragic occurrence is no doubt easy of solution. The assassin-suicide was James Melmoth; and the strong resemblance which existed between Sir Richard Stamford and the Prince of Wales had led the monster-man to mistake the unfortunate baronet for the heir apparent to the British throne.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE SNAKE WITH THE LOVELY SKIN

IT was on the same day and about the same hour when the tragedy took place in Windsor Park that Lord and Lady Holderness were engaged in deep consultation together at their mansion in Cavendish Square.

They were seated together upon a sofa in the drawing-room, and Fernanda held a newspaper in her hand. Her countenance expressed mingled hardihood and triumph; but on the features of her husband might be traced a certain degree of uneasiness which he was evidently struggling to subdue. For the nobleman was afraid of his young, fiery, and impetuous wife. He dreaded her scorn and contempt even more than he feared her anger and her revilings; and having suffered her to plunge him into the deepest abyss of turpitude, he clung to her as it were with a childish reliance for solace and reassurance amidst the terrors that haunted him night and day.

"Well, Walter, are you not satisfied with my reasoning?" she suddenly exclaimed, after a long pause; and as she spoke she bent her violet eyes upon her husband with an expression of mingled annoyance and contemptuous pity. "Your countenance is still gloomy, there is uneasiness depicted upon your features —"

"Do not upbraid me, Fernanda," interrupted Lord Holderness, in a voice of earnest entreaty. "I cannot help it if I still experience some little nervousness; but in a few days — when the storm has completely blown over — you shall find me as gay and happy again as ever I can possibly be in this world."

"Why do you persist in speaking of a storm?" demanded Fernanda, impatiently.

"Well, my dear, I meant to say that so soon as every incident which can possibly menace us shall have passed, my apprehensions will cease altogether," answered the nobleman.

"I do not doubt it," said Fernanda, with a laconic contemptuousness. "In plain terms, you mean me to understand that when there is no danger you will fear none. This is the very acme of moral courage, Walter, and I congratulate you upon your bravery."

"Wherefore indulge in this cruel irony, Fernanda?" exclaimed Lord Holderness. "I deserve better treatment at your hands, for I plunged my soul in crime to save you from danger —"

"And to forward your own interests likewise," added the lady, in a sharp tone of rebuke.

"What object could I have had in aiding you to take the life of the old woman in Fore Street?" demanded the nobleman, with a scintillation of that spirit which Fernanda's domineering treatment had well-nigh crushed altogether.

"Had you no interest in saving your wife from the chances of a fearful exposure and an ignominious death?" exclaimed Fernanda, her eyes lighting up and her cheeks flushing with indignation.

"Yes, to be sure," stammered Lord Holderness, as he gazed with mingled ardour and timidity upon that woman whose beauty was so dazzling and whose soul was so black, and who indeed might so well be likened to the most venomous of snakes with the loveliest of skins.

"And in putting Dudley to death," she continued, in a lower and softer tone, as she perceived that her looks had both overawed and fascinated her husband, "did we not serve a double purpose, by removing a man who was acquainted with secrets the revelation of which would have proved my destruction, and also by the accomplishment of a crime which circumstantial evidence fixed upon Arthur Eaton?"

"True, true!" ejaculated the nobleman. "But what if all that evidence should turn against ourselves to-morrow, when young Eaton stands in the dock at the Old Bailey?"

"I have already shown you the impossibility, or at least the improbability, of such a catastrophe," said Fernanda. "This newspaper," she continued, pointing toward a particu-

lar column in the journal which she held in her hand, "contains the welcome tidings of Caroline Walters's death; and when that young woman breathed her last yesterday in Newgate, the only being whose malignity or whose revelations we had cause to fear ceased to exist."

"But suppose that Caroline and Arthur Eaton have encountered each other in Newgate?" said Lord Holderness. "Depend upon it, Arthur has his suspicions relative to yourself, if not with regard to me; and if Miss Walters has told him all she knew or suspected —"

"It is by no means probable that they met," interrupted Fernanda, an expression of uneasiness now glittering for a moment in her eyes. "At all events," she continued, with the resolution of one who was determined not to meet apprehensions half-way, but rather to discourage the slightest concession to the influence of such fears, "at all events, if such an encounter had taken place in prison between Arthur Eaton and Caroline Walters, the newspaper would have most likely made some mention of the circumstance; or else," she added, in a lower tone, and with a sudden darkening of the looks, "we should have been already arrested."

"And we shall not be safe until after the trial of young Eaton," said Lord Holderness, now shuddering visibly; for that transitory terror on his wife's part was not lost upon him, and he failed not to catch its infection. "I wish to Heaven we were two days older."

"In two days," observed Lady Holderness, with a solemnity of tone and manner not very usual with her, "we shall be either safe and happy, or else dead."

"Dead!" echoed her husband, with a spasmodic start; "what mean you, Fernanda?"

"I mean," she responded, "that if anything should transpire to menace our safety and threaten an exposure, we will anticipate our doom —"

"By suicide?" murmured her husband, with the deep voice and the shuddering look of concentrated horror.

"To be sure!" ejaculated Fernanda. "Should you shrink from such a course? Or do you prefer death upon the scaffold?"

"My God! what alternatives," cried the wretched nobleman, trembling from head to foot, and his naturally sallow countenance becoming absolutely ghastly. "But you do

not think that there is any danger, Fernanda?" he said, with all the grovelling meanness of a coward disposition that seeks to imbibe the inspiration of confidence and courage from the assurances of a bolder and more daring spirit. "You have told me that there is nothing to fear, and yet you yourself are not altogether free from alarm? Oh! speak candidly, frankly, and say whether you think Arthur Eaton will be able to rebut the charge of a double murder and fix the appalling accusation upon us?"

"I have already assured you of my belief in our safety," responded Fernanda; "but I must candidly confess, since you yourself have offered the suggestion, that much — if not everything — depends upon whether Caroline Walters had any communication with Arthur Eaton before her death. The affair of the knife is the most damnatory point in the evidence against Arthur, and if the case remains just as it was when he was committed for trial, his condemnation is certain."

"But may he not offer some explanatory suggestions relative to the incident of the knife?" asked Lord Holderness, whose conscience rendered his imagination poignantly active in conjuring up fresh sources of terror. "Or suppose, for instance, that the cutler of whom I purchased that knife should happen to come forward —"

"How can he, unless sought after?" exclaimed Fernanda. "Besides, did you not choose a knife which happened to have no maker's name upon either blade?"

"True," observed Lord Holderness. "There is, however, another point which troubles me in connection with the affair of the knife."

"What is it?" demanded Fernanda, abruptly.

"I mean," responded her husband, "that is, I fear that Arthur Eaton will be enabled to give a feasible explanation relative to the incident. During the period of his incarceration he has had ample leisure to collect his ideas and concentrate all his reminiscences; and he will not fail to recollect that visit which you and I paid him in Hanover Square immediately after our marriage."

"He cannot well have forgotten it," observed Lady Holderness.

"No, and therefore he will call to mind the fact that while you remained alone with him for a short space," con-

tinued the nobleman, "I found a pretext for retiring to the library; and it cannot possibly fail to strike him how easy it was for me to slip up to his own bedchamber and conceal in the drawer that blade which I had previously and purposely broken off from the knife. Then, if this proceeding on my part be suspected, it will require no ghost to suggest that the same hand which dropped the blade into the drawer also scratched the initials 'W. D.' upon the handle of the weapon —"

"Really, you are allowing your terrors to travel too fast and much too far, Walter," exclaimed Lady Holderness, rising from her seat. "You are pusillanimous to a degree —"

At this moment a domestic entered the apartment to announce that "a man who was waiting in the hall desired to speak immediately to Lord and Lady Holderness."

"Show him up into this room," said Fernanda, without losing a tittle of her self-possession or even changing colour.

The domestic withdrew, and Lady Holderness, turning toward her husband, saw that he was white as a sheet and trembling from head to foot.

"Go into that room, Walter," she said, in an imperious tone, as if speaking to a child; and as she pushed him into an adjoining apartment, with which there was a communication by means of folding doors, she observed, "If any danger be menacing us, we shall know how to act; but if a mere suspicion be alone existing against us, your looks would confirm it."

Then, having shut the door upon her husband, who was already half-dead with terror, she hastened to the window and glanced into the square. An ill-looking man was stationed opposite the house, another was loitering at a short distance, and a third was leaning against a lamp-post a little farther off still.

Fernanda turned away from the window with a fearful tightening of the heart-strings and with a hideous pang shooting through her brain; for she felt convinced that her own hopes of security and triumph were destroyed and that her husband's presentient terrors were but too well founded. It was, however, with a strong and almost incredible effort that this woman, so daring in crime and so courageous in the presence of danger, recovered her self-possession as she

advanced to meet the man whom the domestic was now ushering into the apartment.

"What is your business?" she asked, motioning the servant to withdraw; and her voice trembled not, neither did her limbs, although an ice chill fastened upon her heart's core as she met the sinister gaze of the visitor whose very look denoted the officer of justice.

"I want to speak to your ladyship on a very particular matter," said the man; "but Lord Holderness must be present, if he happens to be at home —"

"Did not the servant tell you that his lordship was within?" inquired Fernanda.

"Why, yes, my lady, the hall-porter said so," returned Crawley, the Bow Street officer, for he indeed it was; but the lady's extraordinary self-possession, so inconsistent with conscious guilt and so far beyond the usual power of hypocritical assumption, perfectly staggered the man despite of all his experience.

"And what is the nature of the business that has brought you hither?" demanded Lady Holderness, with a dignified courtesy that was in admirable keeping with her rank.

"To tell your ladyship the truth," replied Crawley, "it's not a very pleasant business anyway; but I'd rather explain it in the presence of his lordship, whom I want to see as well as yourself."

"Sit down for a moment," said Fernanda, pointing to a chair, "and I will fetch Lord Holderness."

Then, without any visible excitement, she passed into the back drawing-room, closing the leaf of the folding door behind her.

Her husband, who had listened at those doors to the brief dialogue which took place between Fernanda and the constable, seemed now to be armed with the courage of desperation, and the intrepid woman was both amazed and rejoiced — if joy she could possibly experience under such circumstances — at this change which had been wrought in him at the supreme moment.

"All is lost!" she said, in a low whisper, as she took his hand and pressed it in token of satisfaction at his altered demeanour.

"I know it, Fernanda," responded Lord Holderness, with firm but hollow accents. "I listened —"

“And you heard enough to convince you that this man is a constable?” added the lady. “I can tell you more, and that is, there are other officers in the square. Our arrest has been resolved upon.”

“Let us die, Fernanda, let us die!” said the nobleman, clasping his hands in a sudden access of despairing horror. “Oh! my poor children, my orphan, neglected, ill-used daughters —”

“Yield not yourself up to vain lamentations, Walter,” interrupted his wife, in a stern tone. “Every instant is precious —”

“Yes, yes,” murmured Lord Holderness; “we must die now to avoid a more dreadful fate a few weeks later. But the means — the means?”

“Here!” said Fernanda, producing two small phials from her bosom. “I have all along been prepared for the worst, and in providing for myself I was not selfish enough to forget you.”

“One last embrace, Fernanda, one last kiss,” said the nobleman in a voice that was scarcely audible, as he took the phial which she proffered him. “Oh, if you had never tempted me to evil, how happy we might be together; for now that I am about to surrender you to the cold embraces of death, you appear more lovely in my eyes than ever you were before, — lovely though you have always seemed!”

And snatching to his breast that snake with the charming skin, he covered her countenance with kisses.

But disengaging herself from his arms, she said, while the fever of a strong excitement burned in her eyes and glowed upon her cheeks, “Now, Walter, now! Let us court death while we have the courage,” and she seated herself upon a sofa, while her husband took his place by her side.

“We will drink together, Fernanda,” whispered Lord Holderness, whom his wife’s dauntless example armed with an intrepidity equal to the fearful occasion.

And with their eyes fixed upon each other, they placed the phials to their lips.

In the adjacent room Mr. Crawley was anxiously awaiting the return of Lady Holderness in company with her husband, both of whom he was prepared to take into custody, when he was suddenly startled by hearing some object fall heavily in the adjoining apartment.

It fell like a human being, with the dull, dead sound which no other thing on earth sends forth when falling, and a suspicion that all was not right flashed through the brain of the constable.

Springing from his seat, he rushed to the folding doors, burst them open, and precipitated himself into the apartment.

There what a spectacle met his eyes! Upon the sofa lay Fernanda, her head hanging over the side, and her form without the least quivering of vitality left; and, close by, her husband was stretched on the carpet, also stone dead.

The empty phials bore testimony to the fact that some potent poison had served as the means of self-destruction; and such indeed was the last use that the guilty Fernanda made of the Heir's Friend.



"WHAT A SPECTACLE MET HIS EYES"
Original etching by Marcell

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The empty prison bore testimony to the fact that some potent poison had served as the means of self-destruction; and such indeed was the last use that the guilty Fernanda made of the Hermit's Friend.

"WHAT A SPECTACLE MET HIS EYES"
Original etching by Marcel





CHAPTER XL

CONCLUSION

ON the following day the Honourable Arthur Eaton was placed upon his trial at the Old Bailey; but the proceedings now assumed a complexion altogether different from that which they had worn when under investigation by the magistrate at Bow Street. The counsel for the prisoner entered into a full and complete detail of his client's former connection with Fernanda, how he had seduced her, and how her vengeance had adopted such a dark and subtle course in the hope of sending him slowly and silently, but surely to the tomb, how he had discovered the receipts of the poison and the antidote at the midwife's house, and how Mr. Bradford, the eminent chemist, had analyzed them, how he had detected and pardoned William Dudley, and how Fernanda, after she became Lady Holderness, had called upon him at his father's house in Hanover Square and proposed utter oblivion of the past, with friendship for the future. The learned counsel for the prisoner then touched upon the acquaintance which the late Caroline Walters had formed with Fernanda, at the midwife's dwelling in Fore Street; and this matter he especially introduced in order to show that Fernanda had been an accomplice in the murder of her own child. He next proceeded to explain the strong inducements which Fernanda naturally had to make away with William Dudley and Mrs. Lindley; and he concluded by observing that the suicide of Lord and Lady Holderness was a sufficient proof of their joint guilt in respect to the double murder with which the Honourable Arthur Eaton had been hitherto charged. The learned counsel then called Mr. Bradford, who deposed to the analysis of the poison and the antidote, and also a cutler, who identified the

knife with the broken blade as one which he had sold to a gentleman whom he described, and who from that description was evidently the late Lord Holderness. The counsel for the prosecution declined to carry the case any farther, and the Honourable Arthur Eaton was at once acquitted.

We should here observe that no mention was made of the conversation between Carrotty Poll, the Big Beggarman, and the Magsman, which Caroline Walters had overheard in Newgate, and which she had communicated to Arthur Eaton; for not only were the matters involved in that discourse altogether foreign to the case of the young gentleman himself, but he was likewise unwilling to have anything adduced that might blacken the memory of Fernanda more deeply than it was already stained.

When Arthur's trial was concluded, the Magsman and the Big Beggarman were placed in the dock, charged with murder and piracy. Watkins and Bradley, who served with the prisoners on board the *Royal George*, were admitted as king's evidence; and to their testimony was superadded that of Paul Winnington, the surviving sailor of the *Firefly*. The charges were fully made out by these witnesses, and the two villains were sentenced to be hanged at Execution Dock. But the culprits made light of the judgment thus recorded against them, for they felt assured that through the written undertaking of the Prince of Wales, which Carrotty Poll had in her possession, their lives would be spared.

The reader will perhaps recollect that Caroline Walters had penned a hasty note to Mr. Rigden, acquainting him with the fact that the boy Alfred, who had stolen the Florimel papers, was employed by a woman named Price, who kept a low public-house in Horslydown. Now the attorney was not a man to suffer any injury which he received to go unavenged; and he was particularly inveterate against the double-faced youth who had so completely succeeded in outwitting him. Accordingly, after instituting certain inquiries relative to the woman Price and her public-house, he went to Bow Street and laid a complaint to the effect that the boy Alfred, being incited by certain persons who dwelt at or infested the Beggar's Staff in Horslydown, had plundered him of a considerable sum of money. This allegation was of course untrue, but Mr. Rigden did not think it quite

prudent to say anything about a packet of deeds which he himself had originally obtained in so sinister a manner. Upon the representation which he made, warrants were issued against the boy Alfred and Mary Price, and Mr. Crawley was entrusted with the execution of them. Accordingly, in the evening of the day on which the Magsman and the Big Beggarman were tried at the Old Bailey, the Bow Street runners made an incursion into Horslydown, and took the Beggar's Staff by storm. Carrotty Poll and the boy Alfred were arrested, and a number of persons who had long been "wanted" by the authorities for various matters were found in the house at the time and taken into custody. These were the Gallows' Widow, Briggs, Miles the Buzgloak, Dick the Trumper, and the Kinchin-Grand. The premises were moreover searched from bottom to top, and considerable quantities of stolen property were discovered. But amongst the various articles which fell into Mr. Crawley's hands upon this occasion was the document signed by the Prince of Wales and guaranteeing their lives to Joseph Warren and Stephen Price.

Nothing could exceed the rage and despair of the Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll at this misadventure; but their tears and their threats were alike unavailing, and the whole posse of prisoners who were thus arrested at the Beggar's Staff were conveyed to prison.

That very same evening the document was restored to the Prince of Wales, and a few weeks afterward Mr. Crawley was appointed governor of a gaol in some distant part of the country, with a salary of three hundred pounds a year.

But here we must observe that on the same evening when the incursion was made by the constables into Horslydown, a frightful occurrence took place in Grafton Street. A nobleman who lived next door to Earl Montgomery gave a grand entertainment, and as Eugene was returning home from a visit which he had been paying to Lady Bellenden at the priory, he observed a respectably dressed youth lurking about exactly opposite the mansion whence emanated the soft sounds of music and the beams of roseate light. The earl thought nothing of it at the moment, especially as his mind was filled with the suicide of his cousin Fernanda and her husband. But happening to look forth from his parlour window twenty minutes or half an hour afterward,

he still saw the same boy loitering in front of his noble neighbour's mansion; and, now entertaining a suspicion that the youth had some evil intent, he issued forth and demanded why he was lurking in that vicinage. The boy was seized with confusion and endeavoured to conceal in his jacket pocket some object which he had just before been holding in his hand. Montgomery caught him by the arm and insisted on knowing what it was that he thus endeavoured to hide; but the boy struggled to release himself, and in the brief scuffle the object fell from about his person. There was a smash of glass upon the pavement, instantaneously followed by a terrific explosion which shattered the windows of the adjacent houses. Forth ran the affrighted guests from the mansion where the entertainment was taking place, forth also ran the servants from Lord Montgomery's abode. And awful was the sight that met their view. The earl and the boy were stretched lifeless upon the pavement, their countenances disfigured, their bodies bleeding from innumerable wounds. They were conveyed indoors and medical assistance was promptly obtained; but all human succour was unavailing, and thus perished Earl Montgomery, together with the son of the monster-man.

Joseph Warren and Stephen Price found themselves, within a few hours after their condemnation, deprived of all hope and all resource. The document on which they had relied was no longer at their disposal; Fernanda and Earl Montgomery, whose intervention in their behalf they might have ensured by means of threats, were no more.

The two villains accordingly resigned themselves to their fate, and suffered the last penalty of the law at Execution Dock.

The posse of prisoners whom Crawley arrested at the Beggar's Staff were respectively condemned to various periods of incarceration, according to the offences which they had committed, and Mr. Rigden, having substantiated by oath the charge which he had made against Alfred, had the satisfaction of getting the boy sentenced to a couple of years' imprisonment along with the rest. As for Mr. Rigden himself, he flourished to the end of his days, as most roguish attorneys are certain to do.

The Kinchin-Ken was not broken up because the Grand was removed for a time from the sphere of his dominion;

but Shickster Sal and Old Bloak continued to profit by the depredations and thefts committed by the juvenile tribe, amongst whom Melmoth's two surviving children in time attained to a considerable degree of celebrity. The baby stolen from Thurston's nurse was entrusted to the special care of Shickster Sal, who failed not to rear the unfortunate being in all the demoralization of the Kinchin-Ken; and thus was the illicit offspring of royalty trained from its very infancy amongst beggars, thieves, and prostitutes.

The reader will remember that, in pursuance of a diabolically concerted plan between the Prince of Wales and Mr. Page, certain noble French refugees — namely, the Marquises of Saint Croix and Bellois, and the Duke of Villebelle — were induced to repair to France in the hope of finding the Vendéans ready to unfold the banner of a royalist insurrection. But the prince caused a private intimation of the circumstance to be given to the French government, and the betrayed refugees, on setting foot in La Vendée, were arrested, tried, and put to death. By this infernal treachery, the heir apparent to the British throne evaded the repayment of the money which he had borrowed from the Marquis de Saint Croix, retained possession of the funds deposited in his hands by the Duke de Villebelle, and avenged himself upon the Marquis de Bellois in respect to this nobleman's amour with Mrs. Fitzherbert.

The unfortunate Villebelle had confided, through the agency of Mr. Page, no less than forty thousand pounds to the keeping of the prince. This was precisely the sum which his Royal Highness had to pay Mr. Meagles; namely, twenty thousand in settlement of the guarantee given at Stamford Manor, and a similar amount in liquidation of the I. O. U. which Lord Desborough had presented to Tim on the same occasion. Thus enriched, our sporting friend was enabled to cut a fine figure at the West End; and in due course it was announced in the newspapers that Mr. Meagles had laid claim to the dormant Marquisate of Edgemore. The matter was brought before the House of Lords; no opposition was offered, and behold! the dashing, gay, and unprincipled Tim became elevated to the peerage. He soon afterward married Lady Lade, and the remainder of their days were passed happily enough.

The services which Mr. Page rendered the Prince of Wales

in divers and sundry ways were rewarded with an income of two hundred a year, but the payment of which was made conditional on the ex-bagman's betaking himself to some town at least a hundred miles distant from the metropolis. This was no great hardship to Mr. Page, and he accordingly fixed his habitation at Bath, where he managed to thrust himself and his wife into what is called "tolerably good society."

Harriet, the lady's-maid, was acquitted of the charge of complicity in the murder of Grumley; but the constitution of the poor creature had suffered so severe a shock, that she died soon after her release from Newgate.

The Marchioness of Bellenden lived to a good old age, retaining her widow's weeds and pursuing her covert debaucheries unto the end. In this voluptuous career she continued to be assisted by her confidante Margaret, and also by two men servants who had long been in the secret of her dissolute life and who indeed were her paramours as well as her domestics. These individuals — Richard and Mason — have already been alluded to in the course of our narrative; they were both tall, handsome men, and their discretion, being liberally rewarded, helped to throw the veil of hypocrisy over the debaucheries of their mistress.

The Dowager-Countess Montgomery did not long survive the death of her elder son. She perished of a broken heart, and a marble monument in a church at the West End ascribes to her ladyship a thousand virtues, not one of which she ever possessed.

The Countess of Desborough survived her husband, the ill-fated earl, about seven years, which period she passed in a secluded manner at her town residence in Berkeley Square. Her beauty faded rapidly, she wasted and pined away beneath the influence of a crushing remorse; and at the time of her death, rumour declared "that her ladyship's last hours were rendered terrible and agonizing to a degree by the phantoms which her disordered imagination conjured up." It was likewise stated "that amongst the dreadful delusions which haunted her was the belief that she had committed a murder; and that she died with the name of Ramsey upon her lips." Oh, little deemed they who witnessed Eleanor's death-bed how sternly real were the harrowing images which floated in her mind, but which were

thus supposed to be the hallucinations of a disordered fancy!

The suicide of Lord Holderness and the dark tales attached thereto were a terrible blow for poor Pauline, and likewise for Octavia, from whom it was impossible to keep the fatal event concealed. But thanks to the generous care of Florimel and Arthur Eaton, the sad tidings were broken as delicately as possible to Pauline in the first instance, and by this amiable young lady to her afflicted sister afterward. We shall not pause to describe their grief; suffice it to say that it would have been overwhelming, were it not for the unwearied attentions and assiduities of Gabriel and Arthur.

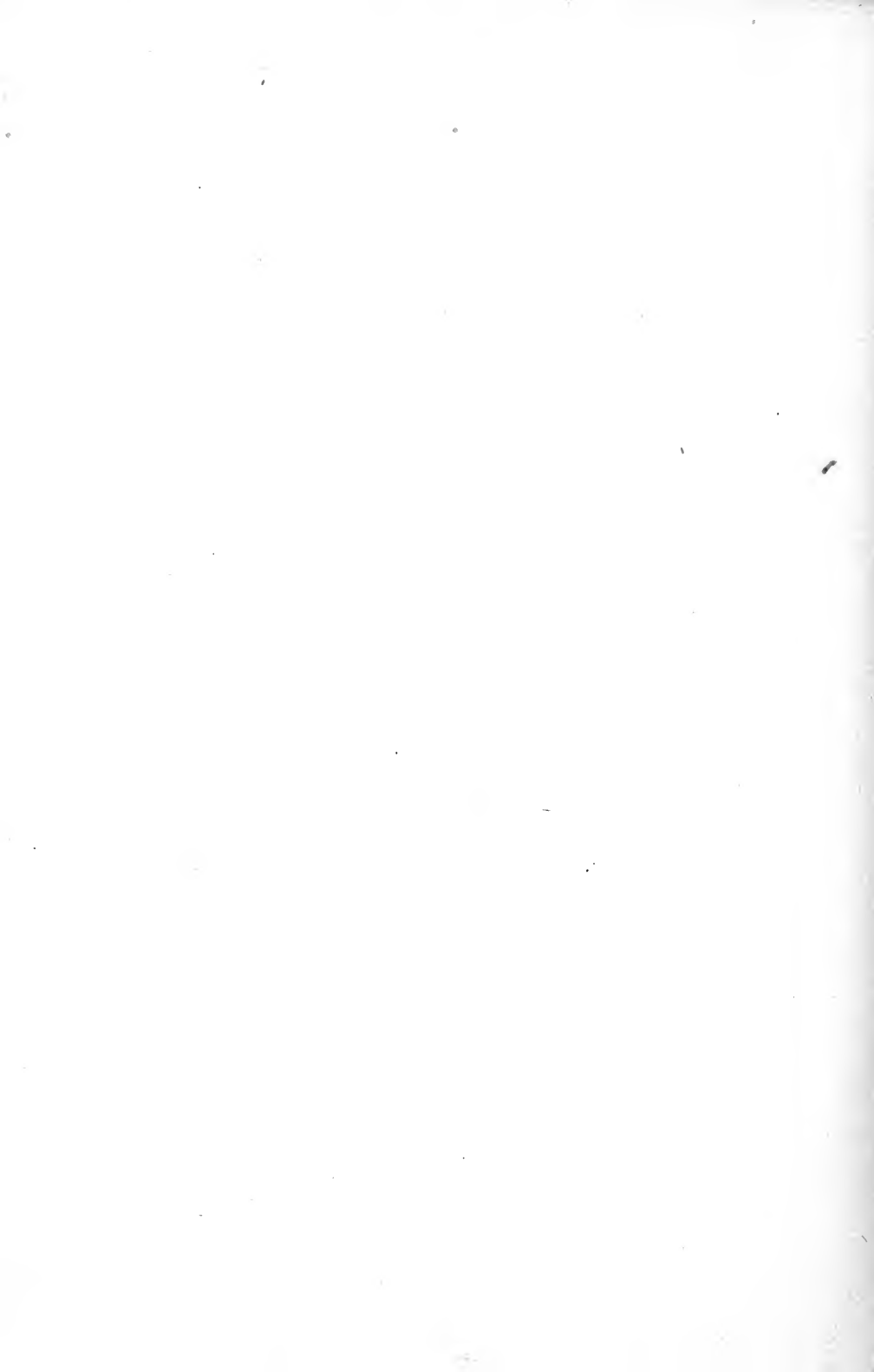
Octavia became the mother of a female child, — the fruit of her amour with the Prince of Wales; and by degrees, as she recovered from her confinement, her reason returned altogether and her mind regained its pristine strength, although its buoyant freshness had fled for ever. In due time she listened to the honourable proposals which the Honourable Arthur Eaton made to her; for, although the sad story of her first love and her shame was now known to him, he generously renewed that offer which had formerly been rejected. Accordingly, about eighteen months after the death of her father, Lord Holderness, Octavia Clarendon became the wife of the Honourable Arthur Eaton, and on the same day Pauline bestowed her hand upon Lord Florimel.

About the same time Rose Foster accompanied George Woodfall to the altar, and the Marchioness of Bellenden, who never omitted any opportunity of sustaining her reputation for benevolence as well as piety, presented the bride with a dowry of five thousand pounds upon the wedding-day. The young artist, having some time previously thrown off the yoke of Mr. Shrubsole, the picture-dealer, was already rising in reputation at the period of his marriage, and in a few years he achieved the celebrity of one of the greatest painters of the age.

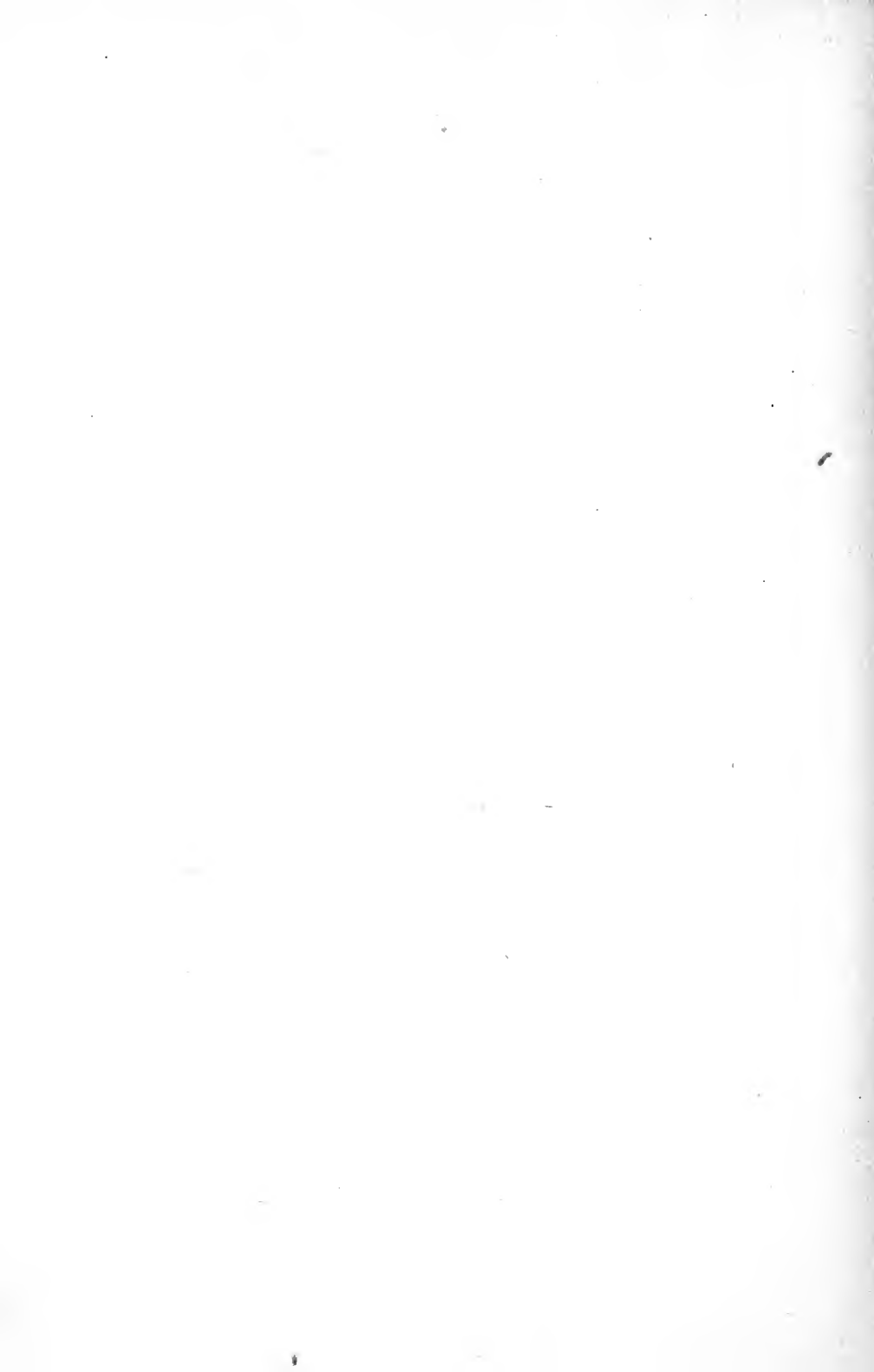
We have now brought the first series of the "Mysteries of the Court of London" to a conclusion. But though the curtain has fallen upon the career of most of the characters who have been figuring upon the stage of our narrative, there are still some the thread of whose history it is our purpose to take up and intertwine with the incidents of another tale. The catalogue of the amours of the voluptuary

George is not exhausted; while the wrongs, the persecutions, and the trials of his hapless wife, Caroline of Brunswick, remain to be delineated. The materials which we possess for our forthcoming labours will afford scope for even a deeper and more absorbing interest than that which has characterized any previous work of ours; and, confident in our ability to realize this promise to its fullest extent, we now invite the attention of our readers to the second series of the "Mysteries of the Court of London."

END OF VOLUME V.

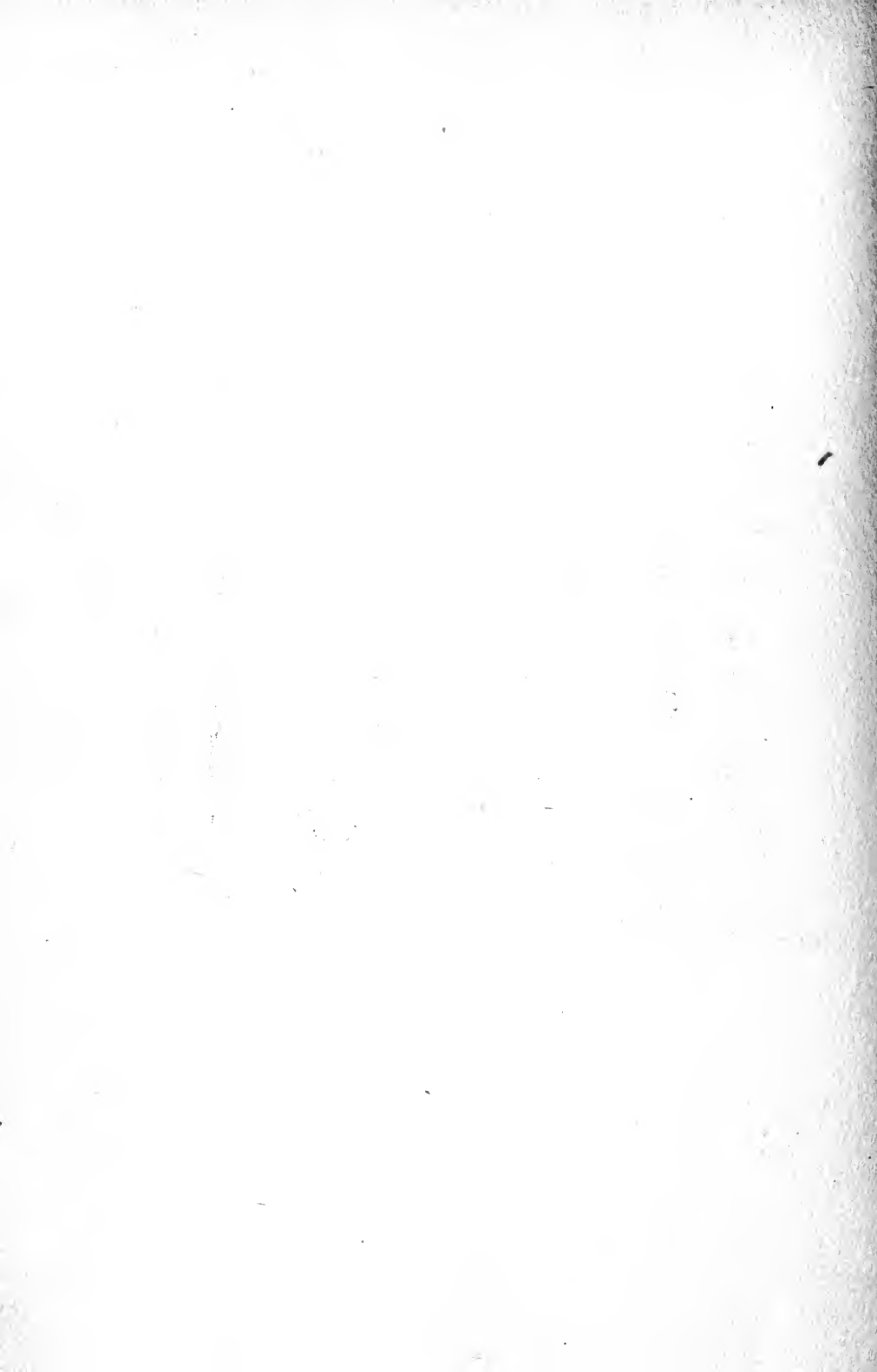












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