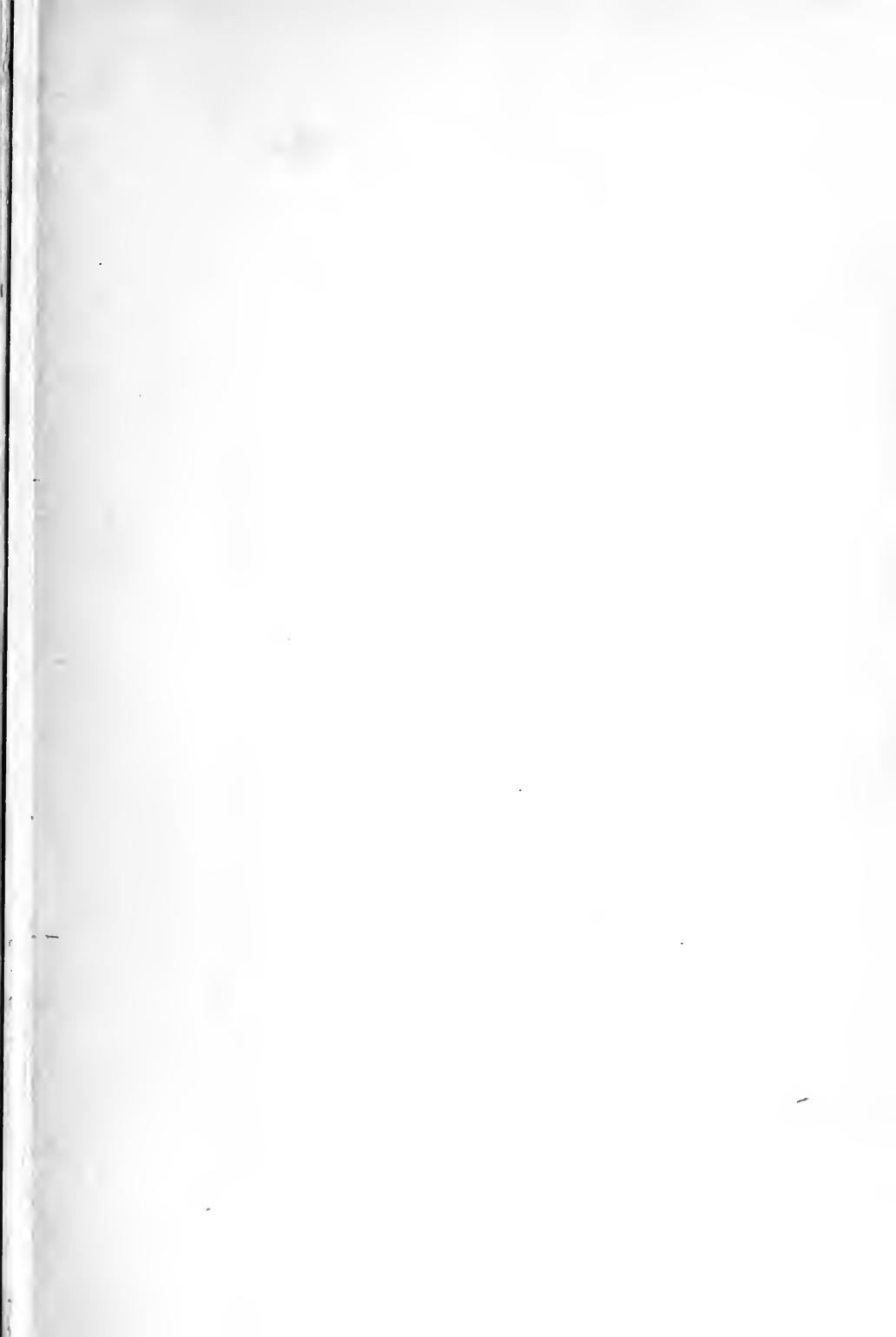
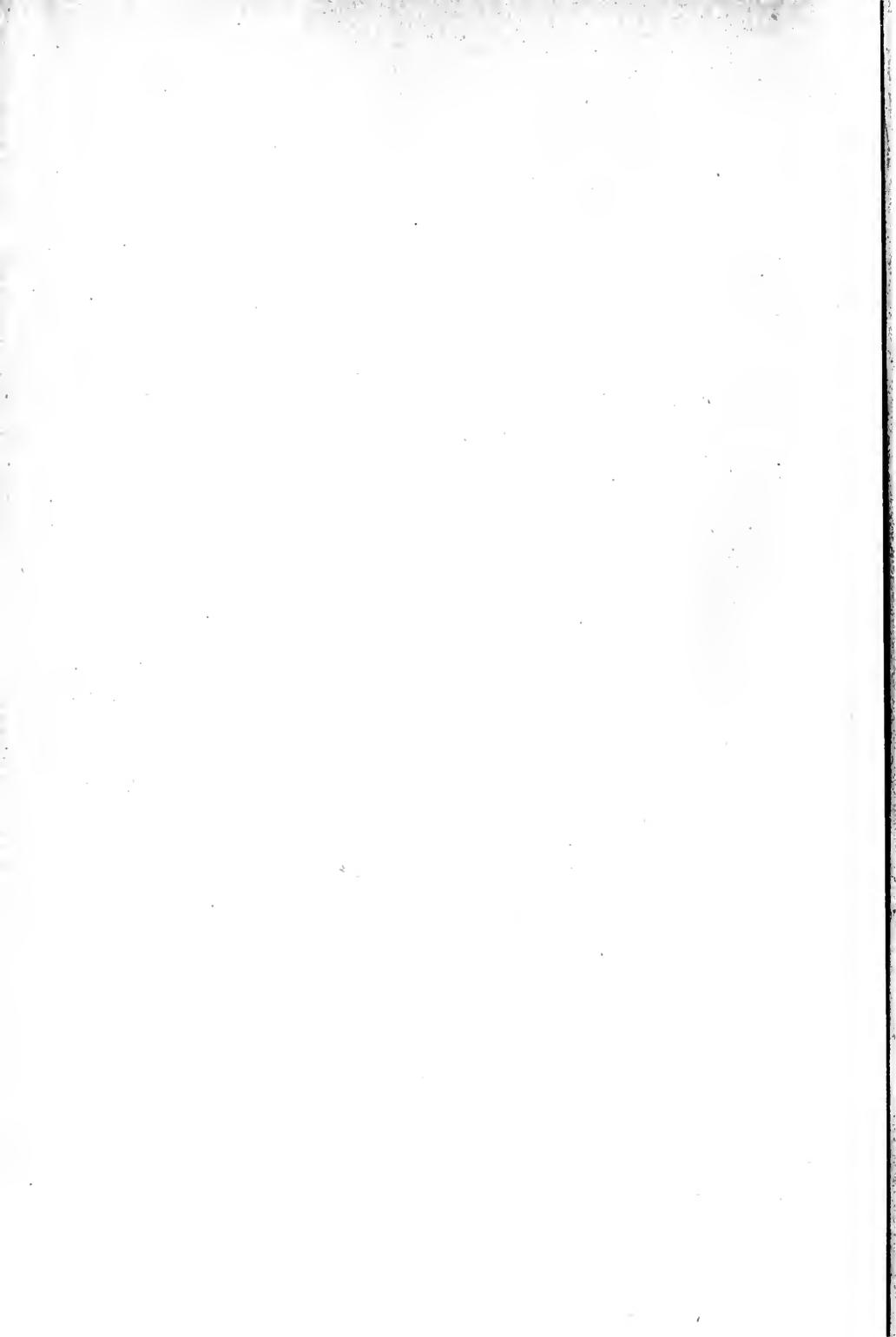


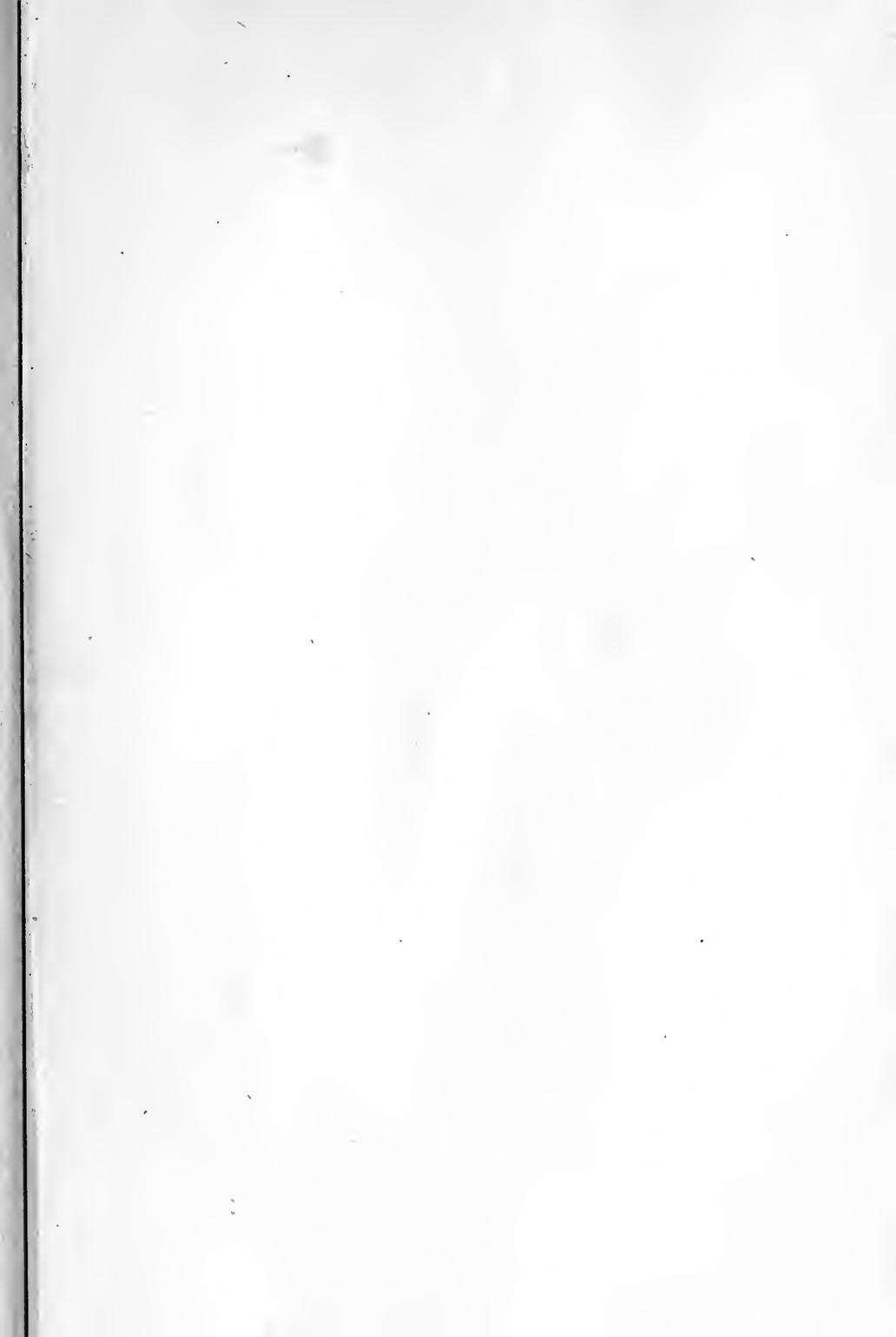


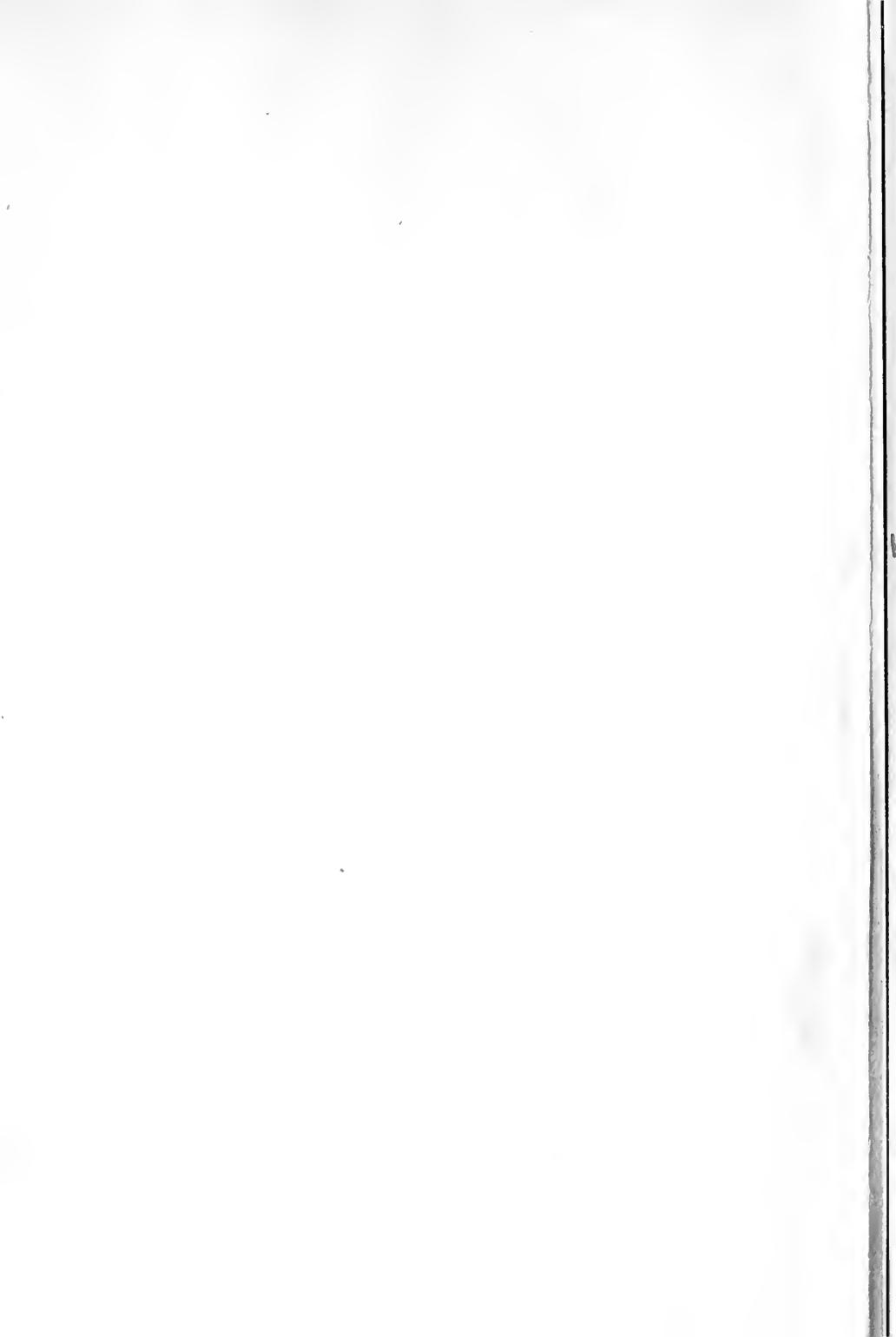
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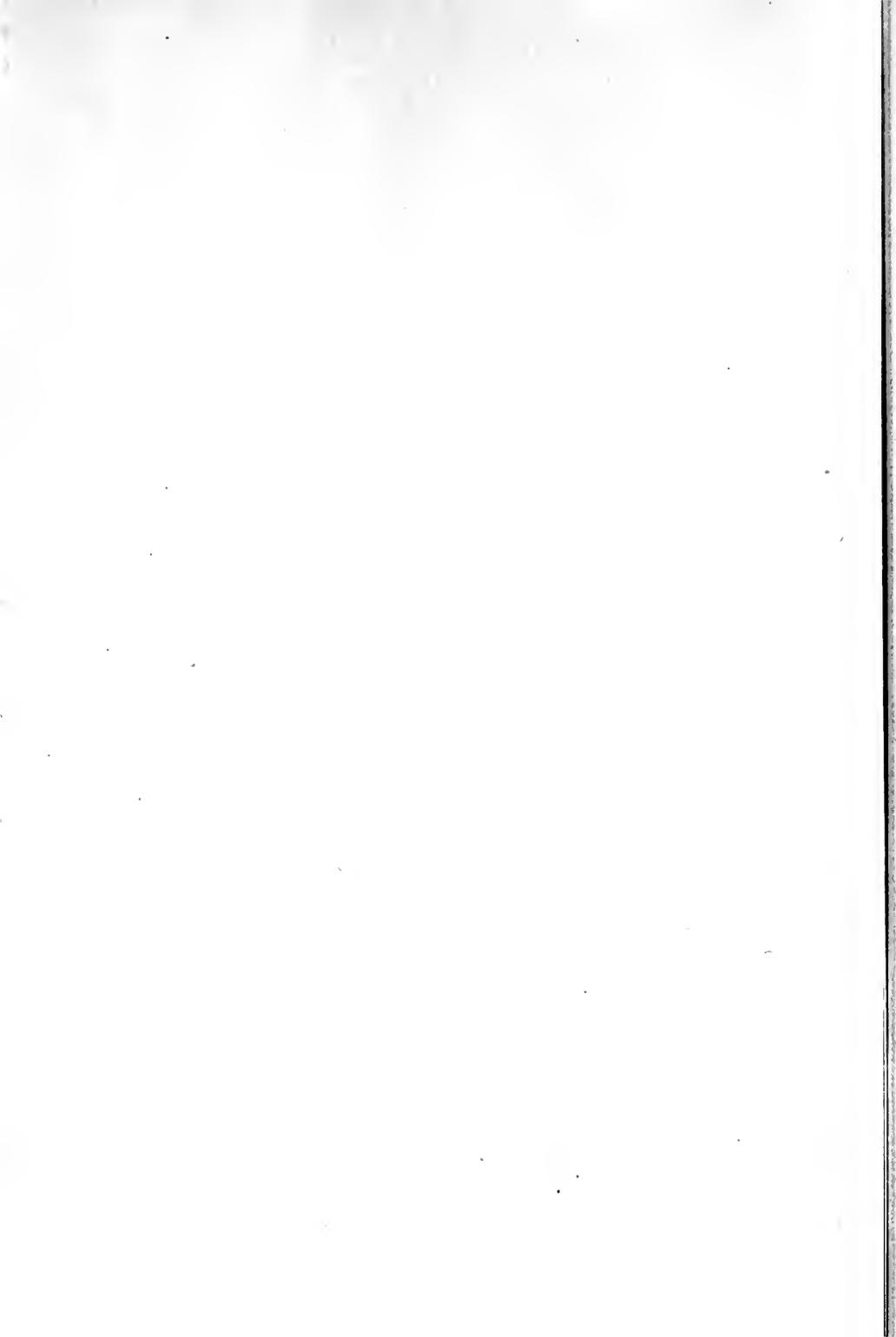


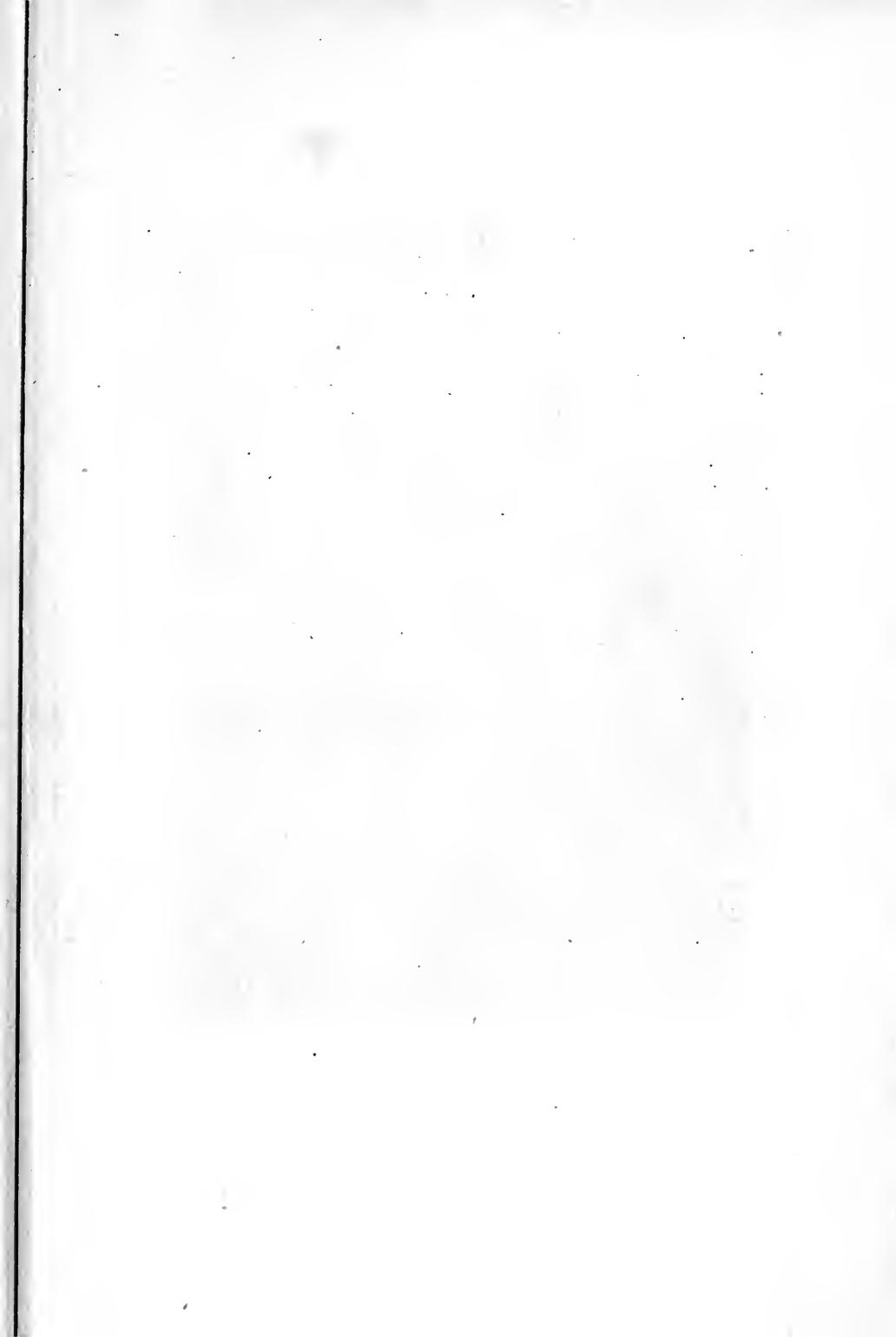




THE FORTUNES OF THE ASHTONS

VOLUME XVII







The Works of
George W. M. Reynolds

The
Fortunes of the Ashtons

Volume II

The Mysteries of the Court
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REYNOLDS' WORKS

CHAPTER I

LETTICE RODNEY

It was about nine o'clock in the morning following the night of which we have been speaking, that Lettice Rodney awoke in a chamber around which her eyes slowly wandered with an expression as if she were not over well satisfied with her quarters. It was a large room, furnished in an antiquated style, and of gloomy aspect, though some recent preparations had evidently been made to give it an air of comfort. The latticed windows were small, the ceiling was low, the walls were of wainscot, the chairs were of a dark wood, massive and heavy. The same might be said of the bedstead, but the bedding materials themselves were all new, and these, together with the draperies, were of a superior quality to the other appointments of the chamber. It was this circumstance which indicated how recent arrangements had been made to render the place more habitable than it would otherwise have been.

Lettice Rodney awoke, as we have said, at about nine o'clock, and looking around her, she seemed smitten with the gloom of her quarters. In a few minutes, however, when she grew more completely awake, a smile appeared upon her exceedingly handsome countenance, as she murmured to herself, "But, after all, it is a change and a novelty, and I am to be most munificently recompensed."

She raised herself up in the couch, rested her elbow upon the pillow, and sustained her head with her hand. In that position she would have formed an admirable study for the

pencil of an artist. No corset now imprisoned the contours of her shape, which therefore took their own natural and voluptuous developments. Her glossy brown hair floated negligently over the hand which sustained her head, and over the shoulders which were covered with the snowy night-dress. Pleasure and dissipation had not marred the gorgeous beauty of her form; the rounded and full undulations of the bust retained their proper position, as if all the freshness of youth had remained associated with the exuberant charms of a superb womanhood. The sweeping length of her limbs was delineated by the bedclothes; all the flowing outlines of her form were traceable, and could be followed by the eye, if an observer had been present. The semi-languor which accompanies the first few minutes of the morn's awakening gave a certain expression of sensuousness to her countenance, or, rather, softly deepened that which it habitually wore. She was a splendid creature, well-grown and fresh coloured, but the fulness of her contours stopped short just at that degree of luxuriance when they touched upon embonpoint, while the hue upon her cheeks was not the ruddiness of the rustic hoiden, but the carnation glow upon a finely grained skin. Her lips were of coral redness, habitually moist, and seeming to invite fervid kisses, as well as to be enabled to give them back with a kindred ardour. Her teeth were somewhat large, but of ivory whiteness and faultlessly even; her nose was straight, her forehead high. It has already been stated that she was about two and twenty, and since the age of fifteen had she dwelt under the evil auspices of Madame Angelique. Her temperament was naturally luxurious; she had fallen an easy victim to the wiles of that abominable woman, and as she was an orphan, she had no happy home to regret. On the contrary, of the four females whom we introduced to the reader at the milliner's establishment, Lettice was the one least accessible to remorseful feelings, and most inclined to abandon herself fully and completely to the mode of existence she was pursuing.

She lay half-reclining upon her pillow in that apartment around which her eyes wandered by no means lovingly at first; yet, as we have seen, she consoled herself quickly enough for this change in her quarters, by the reflection that there was novelty in it, and that she was embarking in

some adventure which would remunerate her well, though she as yet scarcely comprehended the precise nature of the services required at her hands. While she lay thinking, the door opened slowly, and an old woman, with trembling limbs, and head shaking as if it were palsied, made her appearance. She was followed by a buxom-looking young girl of about seventeen, and who was the old woman's granddaughter. This girl carried a large deal box, which was corded, and which she set down upon the floor.

"Ah! then," said Lettice, as she beheld the box, "some one has been this morning?"

"No, ma'am, it was in the middle of the night," answered the old woman, and in a mysterious manner, she added, "It was the duke himself, together with a young gentleman. His Grace told me yesterday morning — as I think I mentioned to you, ma'am — that I was to sit up, as it was most likely some one would be calling."

"I must have slept soundly enough, Mrs. Norwood," observed Lettice, "for I heard no noise of doors opening. I shall get up now. And Phœbe," she added, addressing herself to the girl, "see that you get me the best breakfast you can possibly accomplish. But, dear me, what a place this is, — so lonely and desolate."

"Ah! it was once thriving enough, ma'am," said Mrs. Norwood, "when the late farmer had it."

"And how long has the place been in this condition?" inquired Lettice.

"Oh, upward of the last twelve months, or so," responded the old woman. "His Grace's bailiff let me and my granddaughter live here for nothing, just to keep the rooms aired and take care of the furniture, till some new tenant comes. You see, ma'am, the person who had it last was a bachelor, and he went on at such a pace he soon got ruined and was sent to gaol for debt, where he died of a fever brought on by hard drinking. There was more than a year's rent owing, and so his Grace's bailiff kept the furniture in the house. All the farm stock was sold off, and now there isn't so much as a hen to lay an egg. However, thanks to his Grace's liberality, there is everything in the place to make you comfortable, ma'am, while you are here."

The old woman withdrew, followed by her granddaughter; Lettice rose and dressed herself, and on descending to a par-

lour on the ground floor, she found an excellent repast in readiness. Scarcely had she finished, when the Duke of Marchmont arrived at the house.

"I am glad that you have come," said Lettice, as he entered the room, and she spoke half-poutingly, half-smilingly, "for really you have consigned me to an abode of incomparable dulness."

"But everything is done, my dear girl, to conduce to your comfort," said his Grace, tapping her familiarly on the cheek. "I ordered these people to attend to your slightest wants, and even to anticipate them. After all, you do not look so very unhappy, and you certainly are not pining away. On the contrary, the fresh air of the country has brought a richer colour to your cheeks, and they invite what I am now about to bestow upon them."

Thus speaking, the duke kissed each plump and carnation-hued cheek, and then, by way of variety, he paid a similar compliment to the dewy richness of Lettice Rodney's lips.

"And now that you have thus refreshed yourself, my dear Marchmont," she laughingly and familiarly said, "perhaps you will have the kindness to enter a little more deeply into explanations than you have hitherto done? The box of dresses has arrived, I find —"

"And to-morrow evening, one must be made use of," rejoined the duke. "Listen to me attentively, my dear Lettice, and I will tell you precisely how you are to act."

Marchmont then detailed such explanations as were requisite for the furtherance of his treacherous scheme; but it is not consistent with the immediate requirements of our narrative that we should chronicle them. Suffice it to observe that Lettice Rodney promised to fulfil the duke's instructions on all points, and she received from him an earnest of his munificence in the form of a small casket containing several exquisite and costly articles of jewelry.

"To-morrow night, therefore, my dear Lettice," said the duke, as he rose to take his departure. "But recollect that you do not stir abroad in the daytime; you can take plenty of exercise in the large enclosed garden at the back of the house. I took care," he continued, glancing toward some book-shelves, "to provide you with numerous novels and interesting works, and, by the bye, I have brought you a quantity of newspapers."

Thus speaking, his Grace drew forth a packet of journals, which he placed upon the table, and after a little more conversation, he took his departure. Presently the young woman Phœbe entered the room to clear away the breakfast things, and Lettice, who was standing at the window, inquired, "What is the distance from the bottom of this lane to Oaklands?"

"I should think about a mile and a quarter," was Phœbe Norwood's response. "If you are going there, ma'am, you can't possibly mistake the road; it is pretty nearly straight, except close by the pond, where the late duke was murdered, and there it takes a sort of turn."

"Ah," ejaculated Lettice, with a shudder, "the pond where the late duke was murdered is on the roadside?" and then she said to herself, "A comfortable spot to pass at night-time."

"Oh, yes, ma'am," rejoined Phœbe; "that's the spot where his Grace was murdered a matter of eighteen years ago, or thereabouts. Grandmother says," she added, in a half-hushed voice, "that he walks."

"What do you mean?" inquired Lettice, hastily.

"I mean, ma'am," answered the girl, "that the late duke's ghost haunts the place, and what's more, the howlings of his dog have been heard at the same spot in the night-time."

"How absurd!" ejaculated Lettice, but a shade nevertheless came over her countenance, and for the remainder of the day she felt an oppression of spirits such as she had not experienced for a long, long time.

It must be observed that this day of which we have been writing was Friday. On the following day Christian Ashton had to meet Mr. Redcliffe in the neighbourhood of the turnpike on the Winchester road. The weather was remarkably fine for that January season, and shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon of this Saturday, Christian set out on his walk from Oaklands. As he was proceeding through the grounds he perceived the Duchess of Marchmont walking with the Honourable Mr. Stanhope. She was not, however, leaning on his arm; nor was there aught in her look to denote that she experienced any particular pleasure in the society of her companion.

We have already said that Lavinia was in her thirty-second

year, that she was tall and finely formed. Her hair was of a light auburn, which she habitually wore in massive tresses, and which, as they now floated beneath the simple straw-bonnet which she had put on for her ramble, formed a lustrous framework for a countenance of the most interesting beauty. Her profile was faultless. The forehead was high, and dazzlingly fair, — the delicate tracery of blue veins being visible beneath the pure, transparent skin. Her nose was perfectly straight; the eyebrows, many shades darker than the hair, were finely arched. The large blue eyes had a soft and pensive expression; more beautiful eyes never graced a female countenance. The lashes were darker still than the brows, and thickly fringed the lids. Nothing could excel the classic chiseling of the lips, which were of bright vermilion, and when the duchess smiled, those lips revealed two rows of teeth resembling pearls. The delicately rounded chin completed the oval of that beautiful countenance, — the complexion of which was chastely fair, with only the tint of the rose-leaf upon the cheeks. To gaze upon that charming face, to observe the goodness of disposition which the large blue eyes expressed, it would seem impossible that any man was possessed of a soul black enough to harbour evil thoughts against this lady. Indeed she possessed every charm of countenance and of figure, as well as of mind, to inspire admiration, love, and respect.

The symmetry of Lavinia's form was complete. Nothing could exceed the graceful arching of the neck, or the dazzling whiteness of the throat. The shoulders sloped gently, thus imperceptibly as it were blending with the arms. The bust was finely modelled, but modestly concealed by a dress with a high corsage, and this was the invariable style adopted by Lavinia, whose pure taste and delicacy of feeling would have revolted against any meretricious display of her charms. Elegance was the principal characteristic of her gait and carriage, though her height, rather than her bearing, invested her with a certain degree of dignity. There was, however, about her none of that pride, much less that majesty of demeanour, which the imagination is apt to associate with the rank of a duchess. Indeed, to gaze upon her one would have thought that a less brilliant sphere would have far better suited her tastes and disposition; though it must not be inferred from these observations that she was

deficient in any of the becoming qualities for the social position which she occupied.

As Christian passed Mr. Stanhope and the duchess, he raised his hat, and her Grace bestowed upon him a kind word and a friendly smile. While continuing his way, he felt more than ever rejoiced that accident should have rendered him instrumental in discovering the diabolical plots which were in existence against the peace of mind of this amiable lady, and he had such confidence in the wisdom and determination of Clement Redcliffe that he had no doubt as to the complete discomfiture of the conspirators. Hastening onward, he in a short time reached the turnpike, and at a little distance he beheld Mr. Redcliffe walking slowly along, enveloped in his cloak, and with his hat drawn more than ever over his countenance. After hasty greetings were exchanged, Redcliffe conducted Christian across the fields to a lonely little cottage, inhabited by an elderly couple, and here it appeared that he had taken up his quarters. His lodgings consisted of a small but neat parlour and a bedchamber. The dwelling was altogether secluded, and Redcliffe gave Christian to understand that the elderly couple were not of prying or inquisitive dispositions, and that therefore he had been most fortunate in discovering such a retreat.

“And now, my young friend,” he said, “what intelligence have you for me?”

Christian stated that Mr. Stanhope was at Oaklands, and that he daily walked out with the duchess. He then proceeded to explain how the Duke of Marchmont had made him convey the box to the farmhouse at a late hour on the Thursday night, and how it was left there. Christian also mentioned the circumstance of having seen some shape moving about in the vicinage of the pond during the walk homeward on the occasion referred to.

“I perceive,” said Mr. Redcliffe, after having reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute, “that the incident you have just related produced some little sensation of awe upon your mind. But the duke, you tell me, bade you be careful how you yielded to superstitious fears. I also respect that advice, and perhaps I can give it with a clearer conscience than he. Yes, Christian, it was no doubt some wayfarer — or midnight wanderer,” added Mr. Redcliffe, slowly,

" whose form you beheld upon that spot at that hour. But it is clear," he went on to observe, speaking more quickly, " that the plot is now progressing fast, and that the incidents are thickening. It is time that I should explain to you something which I had not the opportunity to do when you came to me last Tuesday evening. To my comprehension there is no mystery in respect to the box. You heard, from Eveleen O'Brien's lips, that it contained dresses which are the precise duplicates of others recently made for the Duchess of Marchmont. Those dresses, Christian, will be doubtless worn by some one who is to personate the duchess— Ah! now you understand the full extent of the villainy of which the duke is capable."

" I do indeed, sir," responded Christian, almost smitten with dismay as the light thus dawned in upon his mind. " But how will you frustrate this portion of the diabolical conspiracy? "

" Fear not, my young friend," answered Redcliffe. " Rest assured that innocence and virtue shall yet triumph over the most villainous treachery. Come to me again the moment you have anything fresh to impart, but if nothing should transpire for a few days, do not visit me until the middle of the ensuing week. We must be upon our guard, so as to take no step that may excite suspicion."

After a little further discourse, Christian took his departure and returned to Oaklands.

It was about eleven o'clock in the night of this same day that Lettice Rodney issued forth from the lonely farmhouse. She wore an ample cloak over her dress; a thick veil covered her countenance. The night was beautiful and starlit; the air was frosty, with an invigorating freshness totally different from that damp chill which makes the form shiver and the teeth chatter. Quickly threading the lane, Lettice entered upon the road, on gaining which she endeavoured to hum an opera air to keep up her spirits, or, rather, to persuade herself that there was no superstitious terror in her mind as she pursued her way in a neighbourhood rendered so fearfully memorable by an appalling murder. All of a sudden, however, she stopped short and turned hastily around, for it struck her that she heard footsteps following over the hard, frost-bound road. At the same instant that she thus looked back, she fancied that she caught a glimpse

of some dark form disappearing in the shade of the hedge which skirted the road. She was not naturally a coward, — very far from it, — but she could not help trembling all over, half with a superstitious fear, and half with the dread lest some evil-disposed person should be dogging her footsteps. She was somewhat inclined to retrace her way to the farmhouse, but this would be to abandon the enterprise in which she had embarked, and on account of which she had already received so signal a proof of the Duke of Marchmont's munificence. Therefore, mustering up all her courage, she continued her route.

In a few minutes she reached the pond which she knew to have been the spot where the murder was committed, although she was now threading this road for the first time. Through the folds of her veil her eyes glanced rapidly around, and she could scarcely keep back a scream as she beheld, either in fancy or reality, a dark shape on the opposite side of the hedge which bounded the pond. It instantaneously disappeared, and speeding forward, Lettice strove hard to persuade herself that it was merely imagination.

"Nevertheless," she thought, "if these nocturnal journeys are to be frequently repeated, I must positively solicit his Grace to give me some escort. Not," she added, as she thus mused, "that I am afraid of preternatural appearances, — no, no, that is sheer nonsense, — but it is not altogether safe thus to be out so late and in such a lonely road. Yes, assuredly it was only my imagination, and yet it was strange that I should twice fancy I beheld that dark shape."

Lettice continued her way, but frequently glancing around, and ever and anon pausing to listen whether footsteps were in reality pursuing her. Nothing more, however, occurred to frighten her, and as she entered the grounds belonging to Oaklands, she felt ashamed of the apprehensions to which she had given way.

The duke had so accurately described the exact path which she was to take through the shrubberies and the gardens that she had no difficulty in following his instructions, especially as she was so well aided by the clear starlight. That starlight bathed the antique edifice in its argentine lustre, and made the tall chimneys and the pointed roofs stand out in bold relief against the blue sky. All was still, save the rustling of the evergreens as well as of her own dress, and the light

tread of her footsteps as she bent her way toward the private door, which, as well as the other details of her route, had been accurately described by the Duke of Marchmont. On reaching that door, she gave three gentle taps, and it was immediately opened by the duke himself. She entered; he closed the door, and conducted her into a little room opening from a passage. Here a light was burning, and he made her sit down and rest herself for a few minutes. He drew the cork of a champagne-bottle, and the exhilarating influence of the wine cheered her spirits to an extent that she resolved to keep silent as to the circumstances which had affrighted her during her walk from the farmhouse.

She now, by the duke's bidding, took off her bonnet and cloak, and she appeared in one of the dresses which had come down in the box.

"It is most fortunate," said Marchmont, "that her Grace wore the exact counterpart of that dress this evening. Now take the veil from the bonnet and just throw it over your head, so as to shade your countenance and cover the hair."

These instructions were obeyed, and the duke said, "You must follow me on tiptoe. We shall not take the candle with us, but there will be light enough through the windows of the staircase and passages to enable you to see your way."

The duke conducted Lettice Rodney up the private staircase along a passage; then they threaded another corridor, thus reaching the extremity of the building, which was farthest from the one whence they had come.

"Here," said the duke, and gently tapping at a door, it was instantaneously opened by the Honourable Wilson Stanhope.

Lettice passed in, and the duke hastened away.

The principal lady's-maid of the Duchess of Marchmont was a young woman named Amy Sutton. She was tall and handsome, about four and twenty years of age, and of very excellent character. She was, however, of a cold disposition, which often merged into a morose sullenness when with her fellow servants, though she had never any occasion to display her humours in the presence of her mistress. She was selfish, worldly-minded, and calculating, exceedingly fond of money, but with a certain pride, rather than principle, which prevented her from stooping to any underhand or immoral

means to augment her hoards. Though handsome, yet if closely regarded, it would be seen that she had a certain decision of look indicating much of her real disposition, and which at times became sinister in its aspect. If ever a fashionable rake or a patrician libertine, seizing an opportunity, ventured to pat her cheek, her eyes would flame up and her countenance would express a savage fierceness, and if an improper overture were whispered in her ear, she would unhesitatingly reward the individual with the soundest box that his own ear had ever received. She was too selfish in her disposition to entertain any real affection for her mistress, and too independent in character to simulate that which her heart did not feel. At the same time she was perfectly respectful in her conduct, as well as assiduous in her duties, and as the natural amiability of Lavinia prompted her to be kind and indulgent toward her dependents, Amy Sutton's temper was never put to the test by a word or look on the part of her mistress. Thus it was not difficult for Amy to conceal from her Grace whatsoever was rugged, worldly-minded, or sinister in her constitution, while her honesty, her unimpeachable character, and her regularity in performing her duties rendered her more or less a favourite with her Grace.

It must here be observed that the Duchess of Marchmont, though of such high rank, was not one of those fine ladies who cannot do a single thing for themselves, and who require every detail of the toilet — morning, noon, evening, and night — to be performed by the hands of female attendants. Her Grace, on the contrary, dispensed as much as possible with the attentions of her maids on these points, and only invoked their aid for such services as she could not very well render unto herself. All this the duke of course well knew, and he was therefore aware that when his wife retired for the night, she very speedily dismissed the attendant handmaid whose turn it was to be upon duty, preferring to disapparel herself and arrange her hair with her own hands.

The duchess had sought her chamber about half an hour previous to the introduction of Lettice Rodney into the mansion. It was Amy Sutton's turn to attend upon her Grace, and, as usual, she was dismissed for the night a few minutes after accompanying Lavinia to her chamber. Marchmont had watched from the end of the corridor — himself remaining unseen — until Amy quitted her Grace's room

and ascended to her own, and then was it that he stole down the private staircase to await the three raps at the door which were to signalize Lettice Rodney's arrival. He was not kept long waiting, as the reader has seen.

Now that we have given these requisite explanations, we resume the thread of our narrative. Having introduced Lettice into Mr. Stanhope's chamber, the Duke of Marchmont stole up-stairs to the floor above, and knocked at Amy Sutton's door. The maid hastened to open it, for she had not as yet begun to undress herself, and on hearing the summons, it immediately struck her that one of her fellow domestics must be taken ill. She was surprised at beholding the duke, — surprised only, but not startled, for it was in her nature to take things very coolly. For a moment the thought struck her that his Grace was now visiting her for a particular purpose, which she would have resented in no measured terms, but this idea was immediately dissipated when a glance showed her how troubled appeared his countenance. Indeed, Marchmont had studiously put on an excited and agitated look, while perhaps a certain sense of the deep villainy in which he was engaged rendered his features pale, and gave an air of reality to the troubled look which he thus assumed.

Placing his finger upon his lip to enjoin silence, he beckoned the maid to follow him. This she unhesitatingly did, for she saw — or at least fancied she saw — that there was something wrong, and she had no fear of any improper treatment on the duke's part, — in the first place, because he seemed to meditate nothing of the sort, and in the second place, because she had the fullest confidence in her own power to repulse and resent it, if he did. He had come without a light; she was at first about to follow with her own, but he made a sign for her to leave it, and she accompanied him down the staircase.

There was a sitting-room on the same floor as the principal bedchambers of the establishment, and into this Marchmont led Amy.

"Young woman," he said, rendering his voice hoarse and thick, and speaking too in a low tone, as if he were indeed profoundly agitated, "I do not for a minute imagine — I cannot suppose, indeed, that you are an accomplice —"

"In what, my lord?" asked Amy, somewhat indignantly. "I am an accomplice in nothing wrong."

"Be not offended," was Marchmont's hasty response. "You will make allowances for me — you will pity me, when you learn the frightful truth."

"What is it my lord?" she demanded.

"Your mistress, Amy," rejoined Marchmont, now forcing himself to speak in accents of deep, concentrated bitterness, — "your mistress is unfaithful to me."

"No, my lord," replied Amy, firmly and indignantly.

"Ah! I do not blame you for thus thinking so well of her Grace. Good heavens! that such profligacy should be concealed by so much apparent meekness! Alas, it is too true, Amy, or else my eyes must have strangely deceived me. But tell me — for I notice not such things generally — what kind of a dress was it that your mistress had on this evening? Was it such a one?" and the duke gave some explanations.

"Yes, my lord; that was certainly the dress," responded Amy Sutton. "But it is impossible —"

"I tell you it is but too true," ejaculated the duke, in a tone of passionate vehemence. "I was proceeding to my own chamber, the taper accidentally went out, at that moment I heard light footsteps proceeding with unmistakable stealthiness along the passage. A suspicion that there was something wrong induced me to hide in a doorway and watch —"

"And then, my lord?" said Amy Sutton.

"And then I beheld your mistress proceed along that corridor, and she entered — good heavens! that I should have harboured such a villain — she entered, I tell you, the miscreant Stanhope's chamber."

Naturally cold and unexcitable though Amy Sutton was, she could not help being startled by this intelligence, and when she gazed into the duke's countenance — on which the starlight beamed through the window — she thought she read in his looks, which seemed wild and haggard, the fullest confirmation of the tale. Nevertheless, she said, after a few minutes' silence, "It must be a mistake, my lord. Some other female —"

"But the dress, Amy? How could I possibly be mistaken? The light pouring in through the casement at the end of the corridor showed me the dress. It is true that your mistress

seemed to have a veil upon her head — Does she possess a black veil?"

"Yes, my lord, several," responded Amy.

"Well, then, she had a veil upon her head," continued the duke, still speaking as if he were immensely troubled. "Alas, there cannot be a doubt of it. And now I recollect a thousand little things which have hitherto appeared trivial, — a thousand little circumstances which only now assume an air of importance. Vainly have I invited Stanhope to ride out with me, to go hunting or shooting. No, he has always had his excuses; he preferred remaining in the drawing-room — Oh, I shall go mad."

The duke paced to and fro in the apartment, with an agitation so well feigned, that Amy Sutton, shrewd though she were, could not for an instant suppose it to be a mere detestable hypocrisy. She, however, lost none of her habitual coolness, and stepping up to the duke, who accordingly stopped short in his apparently agitated walk, she said, "Nothing is more easy, my lord, than to clear up this matter at once."

"To be sure," he ejaculated, as if suddenly recalled to a sense of what he ought to do, "and that was my motive in fetching you from your room. Go, Amy, to her Grace's apartment. If you should happen to find her there — and God send that you may! — you can easily invent some excuse for the intrusion," but Marchmont perfectly well knew that Amy Sutton was not a person to undertake any such mission, or else he would have been careful to go upon some other tack.

"No, my lord," she at once said in a firm and peremptory manner, "I will not run the risk of being blamed for an impertinent intrusion. It is for your lordship to go to your wife's apartment."

"No, no, Amy," he said, with the air of one who was distracted, "I am not sufficiently the master of my own actions. But we will watch — Yes, that will be the better plan. We will watch in the passage — we will see who it is that issues forth from Stanhope's chamber. I may have wrongly described the dress, but you will be enabled to tell me. Besides, as I have made you my confidante in this most deplorable as well as most delicate business, you must remain with me to keep such watch."

"I will, my lord," answered the young woman, "for I cannot help thinking there must be some terrible mistake. But supposing it should be as your Grace fears, you will pardon me for advising that you take no precipitate step?"

"Amy, I am in that state of mind," ejaculated Marchmont, "when any advice is most welcome — most useful. Yours shall be followed, and I thank you for it. Come; we will watch at this door. Even if we stay for hours we will watch."

Marchmont and Amy Sutton accordingly posted themselves at the door of the room where this conversation had taken place. They kept the door ajar in such a manner that they could both look forth into the corridor, and thus in a profound silence did about twenty minutes pass away. Then a door was heard to open gently at a little distance, the duke nudged his companion as if in an excited manner, and she murmured, "Hush!" in the lowest possible tone.

Footsteps were heard stealing along the corridor, then the rustling of a dress, and in about a minute a figure passed with apparent cautiousness along. Of course the reader understands full well that this was none other than Lettice Rodney, who was acting in accordance with the instructions she had received from the duke. The black veil was over her head in such a manner as to conceal her hair and shade her features, but there was quite sufficient light in the passage for Amy to recognize the dress, and when the figure had passed, she retreated a few steps into the room.

"Now, Amy," murmured the duke, in a deep, hollow voice, as he also quitted the door and closed it, "what say you?"

"I am afraid, my lord, that there can be no doubt of it," she responded. "But is your Grace sure that you beheld my mistress enter Mr. Stanhope's room?"

"Can I doubt my own eyes?" asked the duke, "and does not that stealthiness of proceeding which you have just witnessed, — does it not, I say, confirm all I have told you?"

"And now what will your Grace do?" inquired Amy, who was indeed all but convinced that the mistress whom she had hitherto believed the very pattern of virtue, purity, and frankness was the personification of profligacy, viciousness, and hypocrisy.

"What will I do?" cried the duke. "What in Heaven's

name can I do?" he asked, with the air of one who was bewildered and distracted. "It is true that for some time past her Grace and myself have not been on the very best terms together, and I dare say that I have been looked upon as a cruel and hard-hearted husband who ill-treated his wife. But if the world only knew the infirmities of her temper — However, I need not trouble you with such explanations. You ask me what I will do, and you have counselled me to take no precipitate step —"

"And this advice, my lord, I respectfully but earnestly venture to repeat," said Amy Sutton.

"It shall be followed, — rest assured that it shall be followed," responded the duke. "I will create no disturbance; whatever is to be done shall be performed in a suitable and becoming manner. A divorce, — this is the only course."

"And yet, my lord," said Amy, "there is still the possibility of some mistake, for remember that I have not seen her Grace issue from Mr. Stanhope's chamber."

"True," ejaculated the duke, as if now struck by the fact for the first time. "I will do nothing rashly. I will think over it. Do you return to your own room. I need not enjoin you to keep the dreadful affair secret until secrecy becomes no longer possible. You are prudent and discreet. Ah! you advised me kindly, and kindness under such circumstances must be rewarded. Take this purse, and remember, Amy, not a look nor a syllable to your mistress to-morrow to show that she is suspected. And now good night."

"Accept my thanks, my lord," said the lady's-maid, as she clutched the purse and her ear caught the chink of gold. "Good night."

She stole softly back to her own chamber, and a few minutes afterward the Duke of Marchmont, in an equally stealthy manner, went down the private staircase, and rejoined Lettice, who had found her way to the little room to which she was first introduced, and where a light had been left burning.

"Everything goes well," said Marchmont, with a look of triumph, as he poured her out another glass of champagne. "On Monday night you must repeat the performance. I will manage to run down to you between eight

and nine o'clock, and tell you which particular dress you are to put on. And now farewell. I see that the business will be brought to a termination much more speedily than I had even dared hope or anticipate at first, and in a few days you will be enabled to return to London."

Lettice took her departure, and the Duke of Marchmont stole up to his own chamber, chuckling at the progress that was already made in the vile conspiracy against his innocent wife.

CHAPTER II

THE POND

ACCORDING to the plan which he had in view, the Duke of Marchmont observed on the Monday evening what particular dress Lavinia wore, and he was inwardly delighted by the recollection that there was a duplicate thereof in the possession of Lettice at the farmhouse. At about nine o'clock on this evening of which we are now writing, he rose from his chair in the drawing-room, where he was seated with the duchess and the Honourable Wilson Stanhope, and complaining of a dreadful headache, said he should take a ramble through the grounds with the hope of dispelling it. But on issuing forth from the mansion, he made the best of his way to the farmhouse, gave Lettice the requisite information with regard to the particular dress she was to put on, and then began to retrace his steps homeward.

The evening was very different from that of the Saturday when Lettice took her first trip on her nefarious mission to Oaklands. It was indeed just such an evening as that on which Christian had accompanied the duke, to carry the box to the farmhouse. It was dark and windy, and Marchmont drew his cloak more closely around him as he had to breast that gusty wind on his way back to the mansion. On nearing the pond, the surface of which gave forth a feeble shimmering light, he quickened his pace, but all in a moment he stopped short, and staggered as if about to fall, on beholding a dark form standing on the very spot where he had seen his murdered uncle's corpse on that memorable morning when the foul deed was first discovered by Purvis and Leachley. Yes, unmistakably that form was there, beyond all possibility of doubt it stood upon that spot, motionless as if it were a statue. The Duke of Marchmont stopped

short, we say, and then staggered back a pace or two. A faintness came over him; he passed his hand over his eyes, he looked again: the form was no longer there, but he fancied that he caught a last glimpse of it as it moved farther around the pond, where it either melted into thin air, or was else lost in the deep black shade of the hedge and of the huge trunks of the trees.

"It was nothing, — mere imagination," said Marchmont to himself, now with an almost superhuman effort recovering his self-possession, but he nevertheless hurried along, throwing quick, furtive looks over his shoulder, and he felt not so strong in the conviction that it was really nothing as he endeavoured to persuade himself that it was. Indeed, for a few minutes he was almost staggered in his guilty design with regard to his wife. But when once he entered upon the grounds of Oaklands, he felt more courageous, more strong in his purposes of evil. The influence of the occurrence at the pond had worn off, for his mind was naturally of an iron hardihood, and even if a veritable shape from the dead had confronted him face to face, and laid its cold hand upon him, he was not the man to be deterred from any object which he had taken so much trouble to accomplish. And he endeavoured to confirm himself in his treacherous intents by reflecting that if a divorce were procured in respect to Lavinia, he might in due time conduct another bride to the altar, issue might spring from such new alliance, and the proud title which he bore would not either perish with him, or descend upon some claimant who might rise up from a lower grade of society. And then, too, he hated his wife; her modest virtues and unassuming excellences were in reality gall and wormwood to his evil-disposed heart. In short, he had many motives for ridding himself of her.

"Yes, it was all imagination," he said to himself, "and I was a fool for hesitating in my purpose even for a single moment," with which reflection he reëntered the mansion.

Lettice set off from the farmhouse at about eleven o'clock, and though the night was so dark and tempestuous, she experienced no circumstance to renew the alarm which she had felt on the previous occasion. She reached the private door of the mansion at half-past eleven, and was admitted by the duke in the same way as before. A glass of cham-

pagne was at hand to cheer and warm her; the cloak and the bonnet were put off, the veil was adjusted over her head, and she was conducted by Marchmont to Mr. Stanhope's chamber.

A few minutes afterward the duke tapped at the door of Amy Sutton's room, and the lady's-maid — who had been prepared for such a summons, if circumstances should arise to render it expedient — came forth at once, she not having begun to disapparel herself. Silently did she follow his Grace down the stairs, and he led her to the close vicinity of Mr. Stanhope's chamber. Concealing themselves in a place which appeared the most convenient for the purpose of watching, they remained motionless and silent for some while. At length the door of that chamber opened, and Lettice Rodney stole forth, purposely lingering, and appearing to be listening attentively, just within the sphere of light which glimmered forth from the interior of the room. For inasmuch as no stars nor moon were shining on this particular night, it would have been impossible for Amy Sutton to distinguish the dress worn by Lettice, if this plan had not been adopted. Thus the door was left open, and for a few moments did Lettice linger near it, in pursuance of instructions previously given to her by the duke. She passed on, Stanhope closed the door of his chamber, and at the expiration of a minute, the duke said to Amy, in a low, deep whisper, "What think you now?"

"It is impossible, my lord, to disbelieve one's own eyes," answered the lady's-maid.

"Impossible indeed," rejoined Marchmont. "Hasten you up to your own chamber, keep silence as heretofore, and here is a further proof of my liberality."

Amy accepted the gold which was thrust into her hand, and she retraced her way to her room, while Marchmont, at the expiration of a brief interval, descended to rejoin Lettice, who shortly afterward issued forth from the private door of the mansion.

The darkness had deepened with the presence of midnight, and the wind had grown more tempestuous. Lettice Rodney drew her capacious mantle as closely around her as she could, and pressing on through the grounds, she entered upon the road. The moaning of the wind carried superstitious feelings into her soul. She felt that she had been

assisting at a very criminal proceeding, for she comprehended full well that the ruin of an innocent lady was in contemplation. The effects of the champagne cheered her no longer; she was affrighted at the black turpitude wherein she was mixed up, — a turpitude as black as the darkness which surrounded her. It was the first time in her life she had ever experienced feelings so completely remorseful. She struggled against them; she endeavoured to cheer herself with the thought of the reward she had already received and of the further proofs of Marchmont's liberality which she was yet to have, but these reflections failed now as a talisman to expel unpleasant thoughts from her imagination. She wished that she had not entered into this conspiracy. She was not so depraved that if it had been propounded to her all in a moment, she would have plunged headlong into it, but she had been gradually drawn in and enmeshed as it were in its trammels, till she had gone too far to retreat. The pitchy darkness of the night and the mournful moaning of the wind filled her soul with images of terror.

How she wished that she had not to pass the pond, or that it was already passed. How glad she should be, she said to herself, when once more safe in her chamber at the farmhouse. Marchmont had told her that she would not again have to visit Oaklands at night, and this was at least some consolation. But, oh, how she wished that the remainder of the route was accomplished!

It was so dark that she could scarcely see her way, and thus her progress was slow, while ever and anon the wind seemed to be speaking to her in human tones, as if reproaching her for the wickedness wherein she had played a part. And then, too, these sounds — at times when the wind sank somewhat — resembled the moans of murder borne upon the agitated air. Occasionally, too, she fancied that she heard footsteps approaching rapidly from behind, and she shuddered at the thought of being seized upon by lurking robbers, — shuddered, too, more deeply still at the reflection that this same road might possibly become the scene of another hideous tragedy, — herself the victim. And ever and anon through the deep darkness, shapes — darker than that darkness — appeared to flit, so that there were moments when she shrank within herself, when she trembled to the very confines of her being, while she felt as if awful horror would

turn her brain. Lavinia, thou wast already avenged somewhat, in the frightful sensations which this guilty creature experienced.

And now she knew by the turning in the road that she was drawing close toward the pond, and her limbs appeared to fail her. Her knees knocked together, her teeth chattered; wildly did she seek with straining eyes to penetrate the darkness, and assure herself that there was no unearthly shape standing on that scene of murder. Vividly back to her mind came the incidents of her first night's walk to Oaklands, when twice she fancied she beheld a dark shape, — once disappearing from the midst of the road, and the second time on the opposite side of the hedge. Not for an instant could she now persuade herself that those were mere fancies, as she had hitherto succeeded in doing; they were in her brain with all the awful horror of realities. With a mighty effort she strove to gather up the remnants of her shattered, scattered courage, and she somewhat succeeded as she drew close to the pond. The feeblest possible glimmer rested upon its surface; shudderingly she looked that way to see if any shape of terror intervened to break this glimmering, but there was none. Her courage rose somewhat higher; the pond was passed, she began to breathe more freely, when she became aware that she was not alone, that there was some one by her side. A scream rang wildly forth from her lips, and she dropped as if a bullet had at the instant penetrated her heart.

As Lettice Rodney slowly came back to consciousness, she thought that she was awakening from a hideous, horrible dream, but a sense of awful numbing consternation came slowly and chillingly over her as she gradually became aware of her position. She was by the side of the pond, half-supported in the arms of some one, and water had been sprinkled upon her countenance.

"You have nothing to fear," said the individual, whose voice sounded low and deep to the ears of the appalled Lettice.

"Who are you? For God's sake tell me who are you!" she cried, starting up in a species of frenzy.

"I am a human being, as you are," was the response, "although a guilty conscience may smite you with the dreadful thought that I come from another world."

"And what would you with me?" inquired Lettice, all her fears now suddenly flowing into another channel, and suggesting the horrible thought that she was in the hands of a robber and assassin.

"I tell you that you have nothing to fear in the form of violence," answered the individual, who, we may as well observe, was none other than Clement Redcliffe, "but it is necessary that we should have some little conversation together."

"Conversation?" said Lettice, wildly echoing the word, but so bewildered and lost in terror was she as to be at the moment unconscious of what she was saying. "Conversation — here?"

"Yes, here," replied Redcliffe, "for this is a spot where the guilty conscience becomes too deeply appalled not to make such atonement as may be in its power. Compose yourself. I need not apologize for constraining you to linger yet a little while in the bleak night air, — you who hesitate not to face it in order to pursue your path of mischief."

"What mean you?" asked Lettice, almost in a dying tone, for she at once comprehended that allusion was thus made to the nefarious transactions in which she had been engaged.

Her terror was, however, so far abated, that she no longer apprehended violence on the part of him who was thus addressing her, and she endeavoured, through the darkness, to obtain some idea of his features. Indeed, the suspicion had stolen into her mind that his voice was not altogether unfamiliar to her — at least in its accents, though its deep solemn tone was different enough from the hilarious one he had forced himself to assume on the occasion of his visit to Madame Angelique's abode. But the collar of his cloak was drawn so high up over his countenance, and his hat was pulled so much forward, that Lettice was totally unable to discern his features. She saw that he was tall, and upright as a dart as he then held himself, but these circumstances afforded no clue to the establishment of an identity.

"You ask what I mean, and in a few words I will explain myself," said Mr. Redcliffe, still purposely disguising his voice as much as possible, so as to pass undiscovered through the interview. "It has come to my knowledge — it matters

not how — that you are engaged in the vilest and most abominable pursuit that a human being could possibly enter upon, short of such a deed as that which has rendered this very spot so awfully memorable. But it is a pursuit which becomes doubly atrocious when adopted by a female against another of her own sex. I am no stranger to the outlines of this most execrable conspiracy. At this very moment you wear beneath that cloak a dress which is the counterpart of one belonging to the Duchess of Marchmont. On Saturday night you paid your first visit to Oaklands. I watched you, I dogged your footsteps, as I have done this night again — ”

“ Ah! ” ejaculated Lettice, as Redcliffe’s words explained to her the mystery of that shape which she had seen, and which now after all proved to be a reality, though a reality devoid of the preternatural associations which at one time had seemed to belong thereto. “ For Heaven’s sake, sir, tell me who you are, and what you mean to do with me? Do not — do not give me up to justice. Do not ruin me. I have been led into it — I have been drawn on,” and the wretched creature clasped her hands together in wild, frenzied, shivering anguish.

“ To that extent do I believe you,” answered Redcliffe, “ and if you do my bidding, you shall not be handed over to the grasp of justice.”

“ Oh, a thousand thanks for that assurance,” exclaimed Lettice, infinitely relieved. “ But your bidding, sir, what is it? ”

“ Tell me truthfully all that you have done within the walls of yon mansion,” continued Redcliffe, “ and beware how you attempt to deceive me. Indeed, the endeavour would be vain, for I know too much not to be enabled to discern in a moment whether the things you may relate correspond with and fit into the details wherewith I am already acquainted.”

“ Oh, believe me, sir, I will tell you truly,” exclaimed Lettice. “ But you promise — ”

“ I am not a man who will fly from his pledge,” interrupted Redcliffe. “ And now proceed.”

Lettice Rodney, more and more relieved by Redcliffe’s assurances, at once made a full and complete confession of all that she had done, and the details of which are known to the reader. She concluded by an earnest entreaty that

Redcliffe would save her as much as possible from exposure, and that he would also shield her against the anger of the Duke of Marchmont.

"I will do you no harm," he responded, "and as for the anger of the Duke of Marchmont, you surely can defy it. We will now walk away from this fearful spot. I am about to accompany you to the door of the farmhouse where you are residing, and you will give me those dresses which were sent from London to serve the most diabolical of purposes. To-morrow, at an early hour, you would do well to leave the neighbourhood, and if the incidents of this night have produced any salutary effect upon your mind, I should counsel you to return not to that gilded den of infamy in London whence you came, but to study how to adopt a better course of life. There is one condition which I must impose, and this is that you mention not to the women at the farmhouse what has occurred between yourself and me, and that you give them no explanation in respect to your motive for surrendering up the dresses. I need scarcely add that you are equally forbidden to communicate with the Duke of Marchmont, because you will not be so mad as to place yourself within the sphere of his vindictive rage."

While he was thus speaking, Clement Redcliffe conducted Lettice away from the vicinage of the pond, and they pursued the remainder of the short distance to the farmhouse in silence. Having passed through the gate, Redcliffe broke that silence, saying, "Have the goodness to make a parcel of the dresses in as compact a form as possible; I do not wish to take them in the box. I shall remain outside. Use despatch, bring them to me yourself, and see that you keep back not an article which originally came in that box. Beware how you deceive me, for my pledge guaranteeing your impunity holds good only so far as you execute my bidding honestly and truthfully."

Lettice promised to act as Mr. Redcliffe enjoined her, and he remained at the gate while she entered the house. In about a quarter of an hour she came forth again, with a bundle which she consigned to him. Again too did she endeavour to catch a glimpse of his countenance, but he was upon his guard in this respect; he did not choose to be recognized, and he felt confident that he was not. Still, however, floated through the mind of Lettice Rodney the suspicion

that the accents of his voice were not altogether unknown to her, but she could not for the life of her recollect where they had ever before sounded upon her ear.

“And now farewell,” he said, “and may I hope that the incidents of to-night, together with the mercy which is shown you, will have the effect of leading you, Lettice Rodney, into other and better ways.”

With these words, Clement Redcliffe hastened from the gate, and was immediately lost to the view of Lettice in the surrounding darkness. She reëntered the dwelling, half-bewildered by all that had occurred, and even doubtful whether she were not in the midst of a dream.

The carrier's van which passed along the road on the following morning at nine o'clock was stopped by Phœbe Norwood, and Lettice Rodney took her place therein, to be conveyed to the nearest town whence there was a coach for London. Whether she purposed to follow Mr. Redcliffe's advice and enter upon a new career, or whether she intended to return to Madame Angeliq̄ue's, will transpire in a future chapter of this narrative.

CHAPTER III

THE EXPLOSION

AT a still earlier hour than that on which the carrier's van was thus stopped, a note was delivered on that same morning at Oaklands, addressed to Christian Ashton, and the messenger who bore it — a labouring man — immediately departed without waiting to see if there were any response; in doing which he only followed out the instructions he had received, and for the faithful performance of which he had been liberally remunerated. The note was from Mr. Redcliffe, desiring Christian to come to him with the least possible delay.

It was a little after ten o'clock in the forenoon of the same day that the Honourable Wilson Stanhope suddenly ordered his valet to pack up his boxes and follow with them as speedily as he could by the first conveyance which could be obtained, and having issued these commands, Mr. Stanhope quitted the mansion on foot. He appeared to be much agitated, and the valet knew that the orders were given immediately after his master had been closeted for a few minutes with the Duke of Marchmont. The domestics, too, who were lounging in the hall, were struck by Mr. Stanhope's appearance as he rapidly passed out of the mansion, and as he flung a bank-note to the lackey who was nearest, bidding him divide the amount amongst the servants generally. Thus, in a very few minutes, it became known through the house that there was something wrong, though the only one of the domestics who had an insight into the matter was Amy Sutton. She of course comprehended that the crisis had come and that the storm was now on the point of bursting above the head of her mistress. Of Lavinia's guilt she entertained not the slightest doubt; how could she after all

she had seen and heard? But still, with her habitual caution and cold reserve, she said nothing, — quietly awaiting the moment when she would be called upon to testify to all that had come to her knowledge, or until the tremendous truth (as she supposed it to be) should explode from another quarter.

At the time that the Honourable Wilson Stanhope was taking his departure in the manner just described, Lavinia was engaged in her own private sitting-room adjoining her bedchamber. She was reading a book, and dreaming of no evil. All of a sudden the duke entered the room, and she perceived in a moment that there was something wrong. He had tutored his looks to assume an air of ill-subdued rage, and walking straight up to her as she rose in affright from the sofa, he said, "Madam, you are faithless."

"Good heavens, Hugh! what fearful misconception is this?" cried the startled duchess, becoming pale as death.

"I repeat, madam," responded her husband, sternly and vehemently, "you have violated your duties as a wife, — you have dishonoured me."

Now it was that the countenance of the duchess became crimson with indignation, while her whole form trembled violently, and she exclaimed, "No, my lord. Never was accusation more foul — more false."

"Every woman who is thus detected speaks in a similar strain," retorted the duke. "Here, madam, is one proof, and others have likewise come to my knowledge."

"Oh, this is going too far," cried Lavinia, the tears gushing forth from her beautiful blue eyes, and her bosom heaving with convulsive violence.

"The proof, madam, I say," thundered forth the Duke of Marchmont, and he produced a letter, which he hastily unfolded and displayed to her view.

"Whatever that letter may be, I know not," exclaimed the duchess, and raising her clasped hands, she cried, "Heaven is my witness that I am innocent."

"Innocent?" echoed Marchmont, forcing himself to look and to speak as if he were boiling with rage. "What! innocent in the face of such damning evidence as this? Besides, madam, your paramour has admitted his guilt. This letter, intended for your hands, but accidentally dropped by the villain who has dishonoured me —"

“Hugh,” cried the duchess, almost wild with mingled indignation, frenzy, and despair, “it is a horrible mistake — a frightful error. God is my witness that never by word or thought have I dishonoured you.”

“Ah! you dare persist in this impudent denial?” exclaimed the duke. “Why, woman, here is the letter in which your paramour addresses you in the language of love, speaks of the favours you have bestowed upon him, and entreats their renewal.”

“Hugh, this is dreadful,” murmured the miserable duchess, sinking upon the sofa, covering her face with her hands, and bursting forth into an agony of weeping.

“Oh, there are other proofs yet to come,” continued the duke. “Since Saturday night has your frailty been known to me, but I have dissimulated — I have endeavoured to blind myself against my own convictions. Too merciful, perhaps, and too confiding, — or, rather, too slow to be convinced, — I waited for other evidence — and it is here, — unmistakable, irrefutable, damning.”

As the duke held forth the letter with one hand, he dashed the other against it while he thus spoke with every appearance of infuriate passion. Indeed, though having not the slightest legitimate ground, as the reader well knows, for the present proceeding, he had nevertheless literally lashed himself up into a rage. But he was for a moment somewhat staggered when the duchess — suddenly becoming calm, and acquiring a degree of firmness at which even she herself was astonished — advanced up to him, and said, “I can look you in the face, Hugh, without blushing. This is a matter which cannot and must not be disposed of amidst a torrent of passion. I court and demand the completest investigation. There has been no circumstance in my life to justify so foul a calumny; there has never even been the faintest levity on my part to give colour to such an accusation.”

“But this letter?” cried the duke, holding it up before her.

“A letter might be found addressed to yourself,” responded Lavinia, “and charging you with all conceivable iniquities, but it nevertheless would not prove your guilt.”

“I tell you there are other proofs,” vociferated Marchmont, and he rang the bell violently.

The duchess resumed her seat, and being now fortified with a calm dignity, as well as being upheld by the conscios-

ness of her own innocence, she serenely awaited the next phase, whatsoever it might be, in this extraordinary drama. Not but that the whole proceeding was intensely painful for her; still she felt certain that the issue must be in her favour, as she was very far from suspecting the dark villainy plotted by her own husband.

As it was the bell of her Grace's private sitting-room which had been rung, it had to be answered by one of her female dependents, and it was Amy Sutton who in a few moments made her appearance. The first glance which the lady's-maid flung upon her mistress and the duke showed her that the explosion had taken place, but she was nevertheless somewhat amazed to perceive the comparatively calm and dignified look which Lavinia wore, and which bespoke outraged innocence far more than conscious guilt.

"Ah! it is you?" said the duke, as Amy entered the room; "and it is fortunate, for you are the very person I at the moment wanted."

Now indeed the duchess gave a half-start of surprise and curiosity, and then her regards settled upon Amy's countenance, to gather thence if possible what part she was about to play in the present proceedings. Pure-minded and kind-hearted as the duchess herself was, she revolted against the idea which for an instant struck her that Amy could have been treacherously and wickedly calumniating her, but when she beheld a certain confusion almost amounting to distress in the young woman's look and manner, Lavinia was bewildered what to think.

"Amy Sutton," said the duke, who now thought fit to speak in a more solemn and subdued tone than he had hitherto adopted, "I am well aware that it is unpleasant, and indeed afflicting for you —"

"Amy," interrupted the duchess, advancing toward her maid, and looking her fixedly in the face, "if you have an accusation to make against me, it requires no preface. Speak out. Do you know aught to my disparagement? Have you ever —"

"I would much rather not have been called upon," said the young woman, who notwithstanding her constitutional coldness and indifference was really embarrassed, confused, and distressed, "to give utterance to a word —"

"Ah! then you do know what is going on," exclaimed the

duchess. "But speak. What have you to say? Hesitate not, fear not, but speak, I command you."

"Would it not be better," inquired Amy, turning her troubled looks from one to the other, "if your Grace were to throw yourself upon his lordship's mercy —"

"Amy, this is an insult," cried Lavinia, with all the dignity but distress of outraged innocence. "There is some horrible misconception. Proclaim it at once, that I may speedily refute it."

"Alas, madam," said the young woman, who was amazed at the confidence with which the duchess spoke, but yet could not do otherwise than attribute it to a bold hardihood, "appearances are indeed so much against your Grace —"

"And those appearances?" demanded Lavinia, with mingled imperiousness and vehemence, so that the usually mild, gentle, and soft-speaking duchess appeared quite another being in the eyes of her dependent.

"Speak out, Amy," cried the duke.

"If I must," resumed the lady's-maid, "it is my painful duty to declare that I saw your Grace issue from the chamber of Mr. Stanhope —"

"What?" cried the duchess, the burning blush of indignation and outraged modesty in a moment suffusing her countenance, and then her looks in the space of the next half-dozen seconds indicated all possible varieties and transitions of excited feeling, — astonishment and distress, anger and bewilderment, uncertainty and terror. "You dare say that, Amy? You to be guilty of such dreadful wickedness! It is false, — false as ever the vilest falsehood in this world could be."

"It is true," thundered the duke. "For I myself beheld you with mine own eyes, as Amy herself did."

"I repeat," cried the miserable duchess, now again completely overwhelmed by the astounding nature of the charge, — "I repeat, and I call Heaven to witness that it is false!"

"It is true — too true," vociferated the duke, stamping his foot violently upon the carpet.

"It is false," exclaimed another person, who at this moment threw open the door and appeared upon the scene.

It was Christian Ashton.

The guilty Duke of Marchmont was for an instant stag-

gered by the presence of his secretary, and by the bold denial which had issued from his lips. He was seized with perplexity and bewilderment, but quickly recovering his self-possession, he cast a rapid mental glance over whatsoever circumstances he thought there might be that could have induced the young man to proclaim himself the champion of Lavinia's innocence. What was there but the affair of the box? and how could Christian possibly know what that box had contained?

"Begone, sir," cried the duke, fire flashing from his eyes. "How dare you intrude upon our privacy?"

"Because I have a duty to perform," responded our young hero, as he advanced into the room, and Marchmont was now struck by the fact that he carried a large parcel tied up in brown paper.

The reader may conceive the increased amazement of Amy Sutton at the new turn which the matter appeared to be taking, and he may likewise imagine the mingled hope and suspense which Lavinia felt from the same cause. Christian's mien and bearing were quite different from what they were wont to be. The natural gentleness of his looks had altered into a decisiveness which was almost stern; the retiring nature of the mild and unobtrusive youth had given place to the manly firmness of one who had a special part to perform and who was resolved to accomplish it. The duke grew more and more apprehensive; a thousand vague fears racked him; the basis upon which his whole iniquitous proceeding was founded seemed to be crumbling away, while he was still utterly at a loss to conceive from what particular point the disruption was arising.

"I repeat," said Christian, quailing not for a single instant in the presence of his ducal employer, "the words I ere now uttered, that the accusation against the duchess is false, — yes, false as the heart of him who invented it."

"Oh, yes, it is false," cried Lavinia; "Heaven knows it is false. But accuse not my husband, Mr. Ashton. He himself must have been cruelly deceived by circumstances."

"I wish I was enabled to confirm your Grace's assurance," responded our young hero, "but it is not in my power to do so. My lord, everything is known, and shall be boldly proclaimed if you provoke such an exposure. Suffer me to whisper one word in your ear."

"This is too impudent," ejaculated the duke, goaded almost to frenzy, and not knowing how to act.

"Oh, Mr. Ashton, what have you said?" cried the duchess, all the sources of her affliction becoming turned into a new channel. "It is impossible his Grace could have done this wilfully. Oh, no! you wrong him; you wrong him, I can assure you."

"I see that it becomes necessary for me to speak out," said Christian, with the same firmness of look, tone, and manner as before. "My lord, Lettice Rodney has confessed everything, and here are proofs —"

"Enough," exclaimed the duke, bounding forward to seize upon the parcel whence our young hero had just torn off the wrapper.

"Good heavens!" cried the duchess. "My own dresses."

"Ah!" said Amy Sutton, astounded at what she also thus beheld.

"No," cried Christian, "they are not your Grace's dresses, but they are counterparts — duplicates — the use and purport of which his lordship can but too well explain."

Amy Sutton hurried from the room, forgetting to close the door behind her, and the duke, clutching Christian by the arm, whispered to him in a hoarse voice, "Not another word, I conjure you." Then he instantaneously added, aloud, "There is something extraordinary in all this, but it shall be investigated. Of course I at once admit —"

"What your Grace cannot deny, and never ought to have impugned," interrupted Christian boldly, "her Grace's innocence."

"For Heaven's sake," said the duchess, who had hastened to close the door, of which opportunity her husband had availed himself to whisper that urgent adjuration in Christian's ear, — "for Heaven's sake let this dreadful transaction be calmly and dispassionately explained!"

"Yes," cried Amy Sutton, who now burst back again into the room, with a degree of excitement she had never before in her life displayed, "your Grace's dresses are safe in your own toilet-chamber. But these — the very same, or at least the closest resemblance," and she hastily inspected the contents of the parcel which Christian had thrown upon the table.

"Now hear me," said the Duke of Marchmont, whose

countenance was deadly pale, and whose entire manner indicated the profoundest trouble of soul, notwithstanding the almost preterhuman efforts which he made to appear composed. "Solemnly in your presence, Christian Ashton, and in yours also, Amy Sutton, do I recognize and proclaim her Grace's innocence. Will this suffice? For a thousand reasons this affair must go no farther."

"It is for her Grace to decide," said our hero.

The unfortunate duchess could no longer blind her eyes to the fact that her own husband was at the bottom of a foul conspiracy of which she was to have been made the victim, but still she wished to spare him as much as possible, and she therefore unhesitatingly exclaimed, "Oh, no, let not the matter progress farther."

"But I also must be consulted in this," said Amy Sutton, with that firmness which was characteristic of her. "I am dependent on my character for my bread," she continued, fixing her eyes upon the duke, "and not for a moment must it be thought that I voluntarily or wilfully bore false evidence against her ladyship."

"I know enough of the circumstances," interposed Christian, "to be enabled to state that it is quite possible you have been grossly deceived, and that you fancied you beheld her Grace on particular occasions when it was in reality another. And now the uses to which these dresses have been put are perhaps fully understood —"

"Oh, enough! enough!" cried poor Lavinia, her looks recoiling from the haggard, ghastly, guilt-stricken countenance of her husband.

"Ah, I recollect," suddenly exclaimed Amy, as a thought struck her. "That veil which was worn over the head of her whom your Grace pointed out," and she addressed herself to the duke. "My lord, it was infamous of you."

"For my sake, let no exposure take place," murmured the duchess, with appealing looks directed alike toward Amy and our hero. "I thank you, Mr. Ashton, for your kindness; your noble conduct never can be forgotten by me. And you, Amy, oh, I do indeed acquit you of any evil intention. But I implore and beseech that nothing of all this shall be allowed to transpire. His Grace will treat me kindly in future. I forgive him, — from the bottom of my heart I forgive him. Tell me, Hugh, that henceforth —"

And drawing her husband aside, she concluded in a whisper her hurried prayer that his behaviour would change toward her, and in the future compensate for the best.

"It will indeed be better that this should go no farther," said Christian, availing himself of the opportunity thus to speak aside to Amy Sutton. "It is for the sake of the duchess that I recommend secrecy. You stand acquitted of all wilful complicity in the odious affair. If there be exposure, a separation becomes inevitable between the duke and his wife, and under such circumstances it is always unfortunate woman who suffers most."

"For my part," responded Amy, "I have no wish to bring about such exposure, now that my own character is cleared."

Scarcely had the young woman thus spoken, when Marchmont, accosting Christian, said, in an abrupt manner, "Come with me."

"Yes, go with his Grace," exclaimed the duchess, "but again accept my most heartfelt gratitude," and she proffered the youth her hand, which he respectfully took.

He then followed Marchmont from the room, Amy Sutton remaining with her mistress. The duke led the way to another apartment, and the moment they entered it, he said to Christian, "You will keep silence in respect to this transaction?"

"It was not even my intention to proclaim so much," answered our hero, "if your lordship had suffered me to breathe a few words in your ear, which would have convinced you that everything was discovered."

"And how was it discovered?" inquired the duke, quickly. "Did you go and seek Lettice Rodney? Did Madame Angelique betray anything when you called upon her to fetch the box?"

"My lord, it is useless thus to question me," answered Christian; "I am resolved to give no explanations. Suffice it for your Grace to have received unmistakable evidence that everything is completely known to me. And now —"

"But you must tell me," cried Marchmont, vehemently. "I cannot remain in this state of doubt and uncertainty; I must know where the treachery has been."

"Treachery, my lord," and Christian's tone expressed a

withering sarcasm. "But I repeat, it is useless for your Grace to question me; I will explain nothing."

"One word?" said the bewildered duke; "only one word, I beseech you? Was it Stanhope himself —"

"No, my lord. I will tell you this much, that the villain Mr. Stanhope went away in ignorance of all that was to take place. But beyond this I shall say nothing more. I am now about to take my departure, and I request from your Grace a certificate of good conduct."

But Marchmont heard not the youth's last words; he had begun to pace the apartment in an agitated manner. The mystery which enveloped Christian's proceedings troubled his guilty mind. From what source could the exposure of the plot have possibly come first of all? How was it that Lettice Rodney had been either persuaded or forced to surrender up the dresses? These were the questions which the duke asked himself, and the solution of which he burned to arrive at.

"My lord," said our hero, "under existing circumstances I cannot remain another hour in your Grace's employment. But inasmuch as I do not wish to stand the chance of your Grace subsequently speaking ill of me behind my back, I repeat my request for a certificate of good conduct."

"Ah, a certificate of good conduct?" and for a moment Marchmont was inclined to treat the demand with scornful contempt; but a second thought restrained him, for he felt that his character was so completely at the mercy of the young man, he dared not convert him into an open and avowed enemy.

Biting his lip, to keep down the feelings of rage and hate, and the threats of vengeance, which were seeking a vent, Marchmont placed himself at a table where there were writing materials, and penned a few lines favourable to the character and qualifications of Christian Ashton. It cost him a painful effort indeed to complete the task, brief though it were; and when he had finished it, he could not help tossing the paper across the table with an ungraciousness that was almost brutal. But Christian, with a becoming dignity, which on the part of the obscure and humble youth contrasted strongly with the mean, petty, and ill-concealed spite of the great and powerful nobleman, took up the document, read it, deliberately folded it, and placed it in his

pocket. Then, with a slight and distant bow, he was on the point of quitting the room, when Marchmont exclaimed, "Ah, by the bye, there is a trifle of salary due to you for the short time you have been with me —"

But as he spoke in a supercilious tone which he could not possibly control, so strong were his infuriate feelings against the young man, the latter waited to hear no more, but left the apartment. Ascending to his chamber, he speedily packed up his trunk, and then hastened to take leave of the steward, whom he found in his own room.

"What, you are going, Mr. Ashton?" said Purvis, seized with astonishment at the intelligence. "I hope nothing unpleasant has occurred?"

"You can judge for yourself, my good friend," responded Christian, "whether I am discharged through any misconduct of my own," and he displayed the certificate.

Purvis read it, and as he gave it back with a brightening look, he said, "Well, Mr. Ashton, though I am sorry you are going to leave us, yet, on the other hand, I am glad it is under no circumstances which may prejudice your future prospects. Farewell, my best wishes attend you. I had hoped that we should have enjoyed many a pleasant ramble and chat together, but it seems otherwise destined. Farewell."

The old man shook Christian's hand warmly again and again ere he suffered him to depart. Our young hero was issuing from the mansion, when he was accosted by Amy, who drew him aside and said, "Are you going to leave?"

"Yes, immediately," was the reply.

"Ah! her Grace thought that it would be so," resumed Amy. "But is it of your own accord?"

"Entirely," answered Christian. "After everything that has occurred, I could not possibly remain in the duke's service. It is very different for you, inasmuch as you are attached to her Grace."

"The duchess desired me to present you with this," said Amy, "hoping that you will not refuse to accept it as a token of her gratitude," and she placed a heavy purse in our hero's hand.

"Oh, no! no!" exclaimed Christian. "Such a service as I was enabled to render her Grace is sufficiently repaid by the grateful feeling it engenders, and is not to be remun-

erated by gold. Convey my sincerest thanks to her Grace, and God grant that she may be happy. Farewell, Amy."

Thus speaking, Christian hurried away from the mansion, one of the inferior male domestics carrying his box for him as far as the porter's lodge, where he left it with the intimation that he would send some one in the course of the day to fetch it.

CHAPTER IV

THE SCHOOLMASTER

CHRISTIAN proceeded straight to the lonely cottage where Mr. Redcliffe had taken up his temporary quarters, and where he found that gentleman awaiting his return. He communicated everything that had occurred at Oaklands, and Redcliffe listened with the deepest attention.

“You have acted precisely in accordance with my instructions,” observed Redcliffe, when Christian had brought his narrative to a conclusion, “and your own conduct in the matter deserves the utmost praise. You have lost your situation, and another must be procured for you. Cheerfully would I have you henceforth to live altogether with me, my young friend, but there are several reasons which compel me to deny myself that pleasure, and in respect to them will I deal frankly with you. In the first place, I could give you no employment, and idleness for a youth of your age, even with your excellent principles and with your naturally good disposition, would be very disadvantageous — I might almost say pernicious. Besides, you yourself, with such principles and with such a disposition, would, I am sure, infinitely prefer to eat the bread of your own honest industry than to subsist upon the resources of another. In the second place, I myself, Christian, am no companion for one of your age. I am a lonely and unhappy man, my habits are peculiar; there are times when I smart under the sense of such wrongs — But I will not inflict aught of all this upon you. Suffice it to say that I have certain aims to work out, which do not altogether leave me the master of my own time nor of my own actions. And then, too, solitude is the necessary portion of such a one as I am, and I dare not have it broken by the companionship of another. Therefore, my young friend,

we must part again, and you must go forth into the world to pursue your own career. That certificate of character which you have obtained, together with your manners, your appearance, and your qualifications, will enable you speedily to procure another post similar to that which you have this day resigned. You will return to London without delay; I know that you are anxious to see your sister. Take a respectable lodging until you obtain fresh employment. Here are ample funds for your immediate wants. But do not think, Christian, that in thus parting from you, I cease to be your friend or your well-wisher. No, I shall ever be anxious concerning you. You must visit me occasionally, and whenever you need the assistance or the counsel of friendship, be sure to come to me. My purse shall always be open to you, for I am well aware that you will never abuse the license I thus give you. And fail not to acquaint me with the place of your abode at all times, so that if you come not to me as often as I could wish, I may know whither to send an invitation."

Mr. Redcliffe placed a purse containing fifty guineas in Christian's hand, and the old man of the cottage, who had been sent to the porter's lodge to fetch the trunk, having by this time returned, our hero took a grateful leave of Mr. Redcliffe and departed. He proceeded to a neighbouring village, the old man following with the trunk; and there he was presently taken up by a stage-coach proceeding to London. On arriving in the metropolis, Christian left his luggage at the coach-office and hastened away to see his sister. The meeting between the twins was of characteristic warmth and affection, although they had only been a week separated. Christian acquainted his sister with all that had occurred at Oaklands, and the pure, artless mind of the young girl was shocked at the infamous conduct of the Duke of Marchmont. Her brother, however, enjoined her not to repeat a syllable of the tale to Lady Octavian Meredith, and after an agreeable hour or two spent together, he took his departure.

It was now late in the evening, and Christian determined to pass the night at a hotel and look out the next morning for a lodging, his purpose being to reside in such temporary quarters until he could obtain another situation through the medium of advertisements inserted in the daily newspapers. Accordingly, after breakfast in the morning, our

young hero issued forth, and after wandering some little while amongst the streets at the West End, he presently found himself threading that one in which dwelt Mr. Chubb, the parish clerk. Was it accident that brought Christian thither, or was it a scarcely comprehended and unacknowledged feeling of interest and of love on behalf of the young creature of ravishing beauty whom ten days back he had seen for a few minutes at that house? The reader's imagination can so easily solve the query which we have put, that it becomes unnecessary for us to explain it in set and formal terms. But on passing the house, and casting a look up at the windows, how sudden a thrill galvanized our hero when he perceived a card announcing apartments to let!

Christian stopped short, and looked at the card again. Yes, there were the words, in a bold, round, schoolmaster's hand, embellished with all manner of flourishes and calligraphic illustrations. Christian was more than half-inclined to knock at the door, but a sudden sensation of timidity restrained him, and he passed slowly along the street. But he did not leave the street; no, he turned, retraced his way toward the house, looked at the card again, and was again about to knock at the door, when the thought struck him that the apartments might be, if not exactly above his means, at least above the sum which he was justified in paying for a lodging, and that therefore if he did make an inquiry and then decline, it might be set down to impertinent curiosity or else as an excuse to obtain a glimpse of the lovely Miss Vincent. This latter reflection, as it swept through Christian's mind, sent all the blood up into his countenance, for he felt as bashful as the very young girl whose image was uppermost in his thoughts. So again he passed on, but this time to the other extremity of the street, and yet he could not tear himself away from it.

"After all," he thought, "there is no harm in making the inquiry," and he retraced his way.

At the same moment that his vision was once more turned upon the card in the ground floor window, it encountered the vixenish eyes of Mrs. Chubb, who was looking over it. He bowed; she did not seem to recognize him, nor to comprehend whether the salutation were really meant for herself or not. But now, with a sudden access of intrepidity,

Christian ascended the steps and knocked boldly at the front door. Mrs. Chubb's vixenish face disappeared from the window, and her lean, gawky form instantaneously appeared at the door. She was dressed in a faded and dirty cotton gown, with an old shawl thrown over her shoulders, and a rusty black crape cap, with dingy and crumpled red ribbons, upon her head. For a moment she surveyed our hero with the air of one who strives to bring forth a reminiscence from dimness and obscurity, and then suddenly recollecting him, she said, with a very sour look, "Oh, you are the young gentleman who brought my husband home t'other night when he was the wuss for liquor? I suppose you've come to call upon him, but he's engaged in school."

"No," responded Christian; "I took the liberty of knocking at your door in consequence of seeing that card in the window."

"Ah! that's different," said Mrs. Chubb, and her looks suddenly became different also. "If you're in want of decent and respectable lodgings, sir, you can have 'em here — leastways if we suit each other. It's on'y a small parlour and bedroom, which is fifteen shillings a week with attendance."

Christian had fifty pounds in his pocket, and he thought to himself that in a week, or a fortnight at the outside, he might obtain another situation, so that it would not be unreasonable on his part to take Mrs. Chubb's lodging. He walked in, and she showed him the parlour of which she had spoken, and which was indeed small enough, it being a third room on the ground floor, the one little window of which looked into the yard, commanding a view of the water-butt and the dust-hole, a pail and a mop, together with two specimens of animated nature, one being in the shape of a cat that was sitting blinking on the wall, and the other in the form of a slatternly servant-girl who was peeling potatoes, and whose wages might, at the first guess, be put down at eighteenpence a week. The bedchamber was above this little parlour, and of corresponding size. The rooms were however cleanly enough, and Christian speedily intimated his desire to become their occupant. He took out his purse to pay the rent in advance, but Mrs. Chubb, who was a woman that expressed her thoughts without the slightest circumlocution or disguise, declared "that she never took nobody without a reference; for though a lodger might be

able to pay money, it was not always a proof of respectability.

Thereupon our hero immediately mentioned the name of Mrs. Macaulay, upon hearing which Mrs. Chubb was reminded that Christian was a guest at that lady's house on the memorable night when he conducted her husband home, and this was a sufficient guarantee that he must be well known to Mrs. Macaulay aforesaid.

"Well," she observed, "the reference will do, sir; indeed, there is no call whatsoever to take it. You can pay the week in advance, and if you come this way, Mr. Chubb will give you a receipt."

Christian accordingly followed Mrs. Chubb across the yard, and she opened the door of the schoolroom, — the boys' entrance to which was in the next street. It was a small, ill-ventilated place, excessively dirty, and the atmosphere so close and unpleasantly hot that Christian stopped short on the threshold. There a most edifying sight burst upon his view. At a desk sat Mr. Chubb, in an old dressing-gown, the pattern of which, before it was faded and soiled, had been a blue ground with black stripes; his feet were thrust into slippers, down at the heels; and as he was in the middle of hearing a class, he held a swinging cane in his right hand. Suspended to a nail in the wall against which he sat, a huge birch had a most ominous appearance, — enough to provoke a tingling sensation on the part of the urchins who contemplated it. There might be altogether about forty scholars packed in this stifling place, and averaging from five to ten years of age.

When the door opened, Mr. Chubb looked slowly and solemnly toward it, for he always maintained a very grave and dignified bearing in the presence of his scholars, never giving way to any excitement except when he used the cane or applied the birch, and these he inflicted in the manner in which rowers are sometimes urged by the steersmen to "give way" — "namely with a will." Mr. Chubb, therefore, preserving his wonted solemnity, merely bestowed a bow upon Christian, and went on hearing the class. Mrs. Chubb did not immediately interrupt him, for she was doubtless anxious to impress our young hero with the wonderful discipline which prevailed in the school, the admirable educational qualifications possessed by her husband, and the

marvellous brilliancy of the intellects which were expanding under such luminous tuition.

"It's the third class he's a-hearin' of," whispered Mrs. Chubb to Christian, "and they're all little 'uns, you see."

Christian looked as if he thought the sight a very interesting one. Perhaps there was the dimly floating idea in his mind of conciliating Mrs. Chubb, so as to be invited into her own parlour, where he might expect to see the beautiful Miss Vincent.

"Now then, Bill Shadbolt," said Mr. Chubb, "how do you spell pig?"

"P — i — double g, please sir," was the response.

"Very good," said Mr. Chubb. "Now, how do you describe it?"

"A hanimal, please sir."

"Very good. Next boy, Ben Tidleywink — what's a pig, biped or quadrooped?"

"Biped, please, sir."

"No, he ain't," said Mr. Chubb, with an awful frown and a sterner clutching of the cane, which perhaps he would have used but for Christian's presence. "Guess again."

"Oh, quadrooped, sir."

"To be sure. Very good, boy. Quadrooped, 'cause why he walks on four legs and has got a tail. Cut off his tail and he loses his dignity. It's just the same as taking a cocked hat and laced cloak away from a beadle; he sinks down into the commonest humanity. Now then, third boy, George Snuffkin. What have you got to tell me about a pig?"

"Hamphiberous, please sir."

"Very good. And why is he amphiberous?"

"'Cause why, sir, he lives on solids and fluids."

"To be sure, meal and water makes his wash. But what else is he?"

"Graminivorous, please sir," was George Snuffkin's intelligent answer.

"And so he is. But explain."

"'Cause why, sir, he don't mind having green stuff and vegetables in his wash."

"Very good," said Mr. Chubb. "Now, take a lesson, boys, from the pig, and tutor your appetites to eat whatsoever comes in your way. That's the example I like to set the young idear when I teach it how to shoot."

Christian thought, as he recollected Mrs. Macaulay's party, that Mr. Chubb might have added, without the slightest exaggeration, that he could drink likewise anything that came in his way, but of course he gave not verbal utterance to the reflection.

"Now then, Joe Brinsky," continued Mr. Chubb, "how do you spell cat?"

"C — a — double t, please sir," was the boy's response.

"Of what genius is the cat?" inquired Mr. Chubb.

"The mouser genius, please sir."

"Very good. And what is there pecooliar about that beautiful domestic animal?"

"They can see in the dark, sir, — 'cause why, they are full of electricity, which runs up from the tip of the tail to the head and comes out at the eyes."

"Very good," said Mr. Chubb, complacently. "Third class may stand down."

And as the boys went back to their seats, the schoolmaster rose from his own, and, gravely shaking hands with Christian, said, "So you have come to give me a call and have a look at the school? You see, Mr. Ashton, I teach these young members of the rising generation nat'ral history along with their spellin'. It kills two birds with one stone, and gives 'em a power of concentrating their idears. It's a good system, and is making its way as fast as steam-ingins and electric tilligrafs."

"I dare say Mr. Ashton is very glad to have an opportunity of seeing the school," said Mrs. Chubb, "but he didn't come for that, all the same. He's took our lodgings; so you just write him out a receipt for the fust week, which he has paid in advance."

"Amen!" said Mr. Chubb; and reseating himself at the desk, he nibbed a pen, held it up to the light to assure himself that it was properly mended, and in a true schoolmaster fashion wrote the receipt in round hand, covering all the spare part of the slip of paper with the most extraordinary flourishes, and winding up the achievement with some curious illustration under his own name, which said illustration might either be taken for the feather end of a quill, or else as an ingenious representation of that very cat's tail along which the electricity had been described as passing. Having leaned back in his seat for a few moments, to admire

the general effect of the receipt, Mr. Chubb gravely dried it on his blotting-paper, and handed it to Christian.

"That's the way," he said, pointing with his pen to the writing, "that I teach the boys to make their up-strokes and their down-strokes. But you shall see." Then raising his voice, he exclaimed, "Now then, first class, with your copy-books!"

This command was followed by a bustling about on the part of some dozen of the scholars, and then ensued a rush of the same interesting youths, in corduroys and pinafores, up to the desk. Mr. Chubb examined the copy-books one after another, passing them as he did so to Christian, and looking very hard in his face to observe the effect produced by these elegant specimens of juvenile calligraphy. Of course Christian admired everything thus submitted to him, and expressed himself so well pleased with Mr. Chubb's scholars that he begged to be allowed to place five shillings in the schoolmaster's hands, to be expended on whatsoever refreshments the juveniles might fancy and which the nearest pastry-cook could supply. It must be again confessed that there was a little artifice in all this, though venial and natural enough; for, as we have before said, the youth was desirous to obtain Mrs. Chubb's good opinion, in the hope that it would facilitate the realization of his desire to see Miss Vincent. Nor was he disappointed, for Mrs. Chubb requested the pleasure of his company to tea in the evening.

He was speedily installed in his lodgings, and having drawn up an advertisement for the situation of private secretary to a nobleman, member of Parliament, or any other person requiring such a functionary, he sallied forth to take it to the office of the *Times*. Returning home again, he dined; and with some books whiled away the hours until six in the evening, when, having studied his toilet with an unusual degree of nicety, he repaired to Mrs. Chubb's parlour. As Christian opened the door, he could scarcely conceal the joy which thrilled through him on beholding the lovely creature who had inspired him with so deep an interest.

Isabella Vincent was, as we have previously said, sixteen years of age, and it was no wonder that her exquisite beauty should have made an impression upon the heart of Christian Ashton. She was tall and slender, with a sylphid symmetry of shape that was at once gracile and elegant; for hers was

that sweet age when, with perhaps a slight precocity, the delicate outlines of girlhood's form were softly rounding and gently developing into the more flowing ones of approaching womanhood. All these outlines indicated a justness of proportions which, while constituting her form the rarest model of expanding beauty, seemed to fulfil the idea which the sculptors of old sought to express and work out in their Parian effigies. Its willowy elasticity and youthful grace, its slenderness of waist and softly budding contours of bust, its sloping shoulders and gently arching neck, its rounded arms and its straightness of limbs, its exquisitely modelled hands and sculptured perfection of ankles and of feet, — all combined to render Isabella's form the very incarnation of those rules of art which swayed the chisel or the pencil of the greatest masters when seeking to portray woman, in her loveliest form, through the medium of the marble or of the canvas.

As for her countenance, to gaze thereon, it was not so much the perfect oval of that sweet face, nor the faultless regularity of the features, nor the deep blue eyes, so large and clear, with their thickly fringed lids, nor the classically pencilled brows, set upon the opals of the stainless forehead, nor the well-cut lips of coral redness, nor the teeth of Orient pearls which shone between, nor the transparency of the complexion, with the softest tint of the rose upon the cheeks, nor the rich abundance of glossy dark brown hair, showering in ringlets upon her shoulders, — it was not all this assemblage of charms which would most ravish and enchant the mind of the observer. For there was something in the sweet pensiveness, and the holy melancholy, so to speak, of Isabella's countenance which constituted the pure virginal charm that appealed to the sentiment and not to the sense, and which had to do with the soul as much as with the heart of the beholder, — a charm which no eye could fail to perceive, the influence of which no mind could help acknowledging, and yet which only the imagination could comprehend, inasmuch as no pen can describe it. Indeed, it was what the perfume is to the rose, an essence apart from the beauty which attracts the eye; it was what the halo is to the angel, a light distinct from the heavenly beauty of the form itself. It was the inexpressible charm which makes one think, while gazing on such a face, that the soul itself is un-

veiling its own loveliness and looking out in a soft, sweet pensiveness.

Christian Ashton, with his refined intelligence, and with his feelings of unwarped delicacy, was the very one to appreciate the beauty of such a being as Isabella Vincent. To mere physical charms he would perhaps have remained long insensible; but here was mental and moral beauty, the beauty of the soul, mingling with loveliness of form and features in a manner which he had never seen before, save in respect to his own sweet sister Christina. The love with which Isabella had already inspired him — though Heaven knows how unconsciously on her part and how as yet incompletely comprehended on his own — was not the mere everyday passion to which the name is so erroneously applied, or which of its own accord usurps the denomination, but it was that love which has something so æsthetic in its nature, so ethereal in its essence, so sublimated in its contexture, that it can be explained in no terms falling short of those which would depict it as the lost Elysium of the soul, the veritable paradise of feeling whose sense died out of the hearts of our first parents at the same time that the spell of their immortality was broken.

Christian could not understand the footing on which Miss Vincent was dwelling beneath the Chubbs' roof. She was treated with more or less respect, especially by Mr. Chubb, who invariably called her "Miss" when he spoke to her; and it was only when Mrs. Chubb was in an ill-humour about anything that she addressed herself in rather irritable terms to the young lady, — as indeed she was wont to do toward any one else who came in her way. Christian did not therefore think that Isabella was living there in the light of a dependent; the only conjecture he could form was that she paid for her board and lodging, though not to an amount which rendered the Chubbs so extremely anxious to keep her that their civility became downright servile. In her manner she was diffident and retiring, but not actually reserved, much less awkward or embarrassed. She spoke but little, yet when she did speak, it was with a mild and ladylike affability. Her voice was singularly sweet and melodious, with a tinge of plaintiveness in its tones; her language was well chosen, her remarks were characterized by intelligence. That she had been well educated was evi-

dent, as likewise that she was well bred and well brought up; and all the usages of good society were familiar to her. How came she, then, in her present position? Had she no relatives to take charge of her, no friends of a better order than those in whose care Christian found her? All these were mysteries which he could not penetrate, and concerning which he dared scarcely ask on the next occasion that he found himself alone with either Mr. or Mrs. Chubb.

Four or five days passed, and Christian occasionally met the beautiful Isabella upon the stairs. She always responded to his passing remarks with that mild affability which we have just noticed, but he found no opportunity to lead her into a protracted conversation. She never stirred out of the house except when accompanied by Mrs. Chubb. For the greater part of the day she kept her own chamber. Sometimes she sat in the front parlour down-stairs, and was then, for the most part, occupied in reading or working. Christian felt assured that she was not happy, though she might endeavour to resign herself to her lot. He was also convinced that there must be some strange mystery with regard to this beautiful creature, and he longed to fathom it, — not through any impertinent curiosity, but because he had become so deeply interested in her, so profoundly enamoured of her. She was a lovely myth, and often and often did Christian catch himself sighing; occasionally, too, did a tear trickle down his cheeks as he said to himself, "She is not happy, and it is not given to me to ensure her felicity. Oh, to obtain her confidence, and to be permitted to breathe the language of solace and sympathy in her ears!"

The week was passing away, and Christian had received no answer to his advertisement. He endeavoured to make himself believe that he was sorry for this delay in obtaining another situation, but it was not so easy to arrive with conscientiousness at that belief. Indeed, if the truth be told, we think it must be admitted that Christian was rather glad than otherwise at having an excuse for prolonging his residence beneath the same roof which sheltered the object of his growing love. When he saw his sister he spoke to her about Isabella Vincent, and he asked Christina if she would come and call upon the young lady, provided the latter would consent to receive the visit. Christina, as the reader

is aware, was always ready to do anything that lay in her power to serve her brother or to please him, and she cheerfully responded in the affirmative.

"Now," thought Christian to himself, "there will be an opportunity of cultivating a better acquaintance with the charming but mysterious Isabella."

Accordingly, in the afternoon of that very same day on which he had thus spoken to his sister, our young hero proceeded to the Chubbs' parlour at a moment when he knew that Miss Vincent was there alone. He knocked at the door; her sweet voice bade him enter, and it struck him that the soft tint of the rose deepened slightly upon her cheeks when her eyes encountered his own. The usual compliments were exchanged, and then Christian, mustering up all his courage, said to the young lady, "I hope you will not think I am taking a very great liberty — but — but — I have spoken of you to my sister, who lives with Lady Octavian Meredith, — Christina is a sweet, amiable girl, — and if you will grant your assent, it will afford me the utmost pleasure to introduce her to you."

The transitions of Isabella's beautiful countenance expressed a variety of feelings as our hero thus addressed her, and it was the fear of either giving offence, or of proposing something which was unwelcome, that made him hesitate as he had done. For an instant there was gratitude depicted in Isabella's look; then it changed into mournfulness; then she flung a quick glance toward the door, as if fearful that this conversation might be overheard; then she turned her eyes again on Christian with a saddening gaze; and then she bent them downward, and he thought that the faintest, gentlest sound of a subdued sigh was wafted to his ears.

"Christina," he said, hesitatingly and tremulously, "would be rejoiced to visit you and to form your acquaintance."

"I take it as very kindly meant, Mr. Ashton," answered Isabella, whose accents were likewise tremulous, notwithstanding her visible endeavours to speak firmly and to hide whatsoever emotions were struggling in her bosom. "Indeed, I feel grateful — but — but" — and here she again glanced toward the door — "I am not allowed to receive any visits, nor to form any friendships."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Christian, astonished and

indignant, "are you the victim of a tyranny so stern as this?"

"Hush! for Heaven's sake, hush!" said Isabella, glancing with renewed apprehension toward the door; and then, as if no longer able to restrain the emotions which were agitating within, she burst into tears.

"Good God, that I should have made you weep!" cried Christian; and in the excitement, the confusion, and the hurry of his own thoughts and feelings, he seized her small, fair hand.

It was, however, instantaneously withdrawn — but not in anger; for the beautiful Isabella flung upon him, through the dimness of her tears, a look which eloquently proclaimed that she comprehended all his generous sympathy and was grateful for it. Then hastily wiping away those tears, she hurried from the room. At the same moment there was a double knock at the door, and Christian retraced his way to his own room.

He was in the midst of painful and bewildering conjectures as to the nature of that mystery which enveloped the lovely Isabella, and which seemed to be associated with so much cruel coercion and unnatural tyranny, when the trull of a servant-girl knocked at his door, and throwing it open, said, "Here's a genelman which wants you, Mr. Ashton, and this is his card."

Our hero took the card, and found that it represented the aristocratic though perhaps not very euphonious name of the Chevalier Gumbinnen. The owner of this name had been left standing in the passage by the maid-of-all-work, and Christian, on hurrying forth, was horrified to perceive a mop on his visitor's right hand, and a pail of dirty water under his very nose. He flung a hasty reproach at the girl, and began confounding himself in excuses to the chevalier, who received them all with a sedate silence and a sort of inane mystification of look, — which indeed was by no means astonishing, when it comes to be considered that the Chevalier Gumbinnen understood not a syllable of English. Christian hastily led the way into his own sitting-room, handed the chevalier a chair, and awaited explanations, although he had no doubt in his own mind that the visit bore reference to the advertisement in the newspaper.

The Chevalier Gumbinnen was a little man, with a some-

what dirty look. He had very red hair, huge moustaches, and small eyes of pinkish blue. There certainly was nothing aristocratic in his appearance, whatever there might be in his name; neither was there any particular freshness in his costume. On the contrary, it seemed a little the worse for wear. It consisted of a blue dress coat with a stand-up collar; it was cut round in front, and thus sloped away into the tails; it had a great deal of black braiding about it, and was worn unbuttoned. The waistcoat was white, — or, rather, had been a week back when it first came home from the wash, but it was evident that this article, as well as the chevalier's shirt, had not been put on clean in the morning of that particular day. His pantaloons were black, with long stripes of braiding; his hat was of singular shape, and somewhat deficient in nap. He wore a profusion of jewelry, which looked very well at the first glance, but perhaps would not have borne the close inspection of a connoisseur in such articles. Indeed, we are very much afraid that if the Chevalier Gumbinnen had sought to raise a loan upon all the personal property which was included under this particular head, the pawnbroker would have pronounced the diamonds to be paste, and would have found that the gold chains passed not readily through the ordeal of the testing acid. In a word, this foreign gentleman's appearance was sufficient to mystify Christian considerably as to who or what he could possibly be.

Without speaking a word, the Chevalier Gumbinnen drew forth a somewhat soiled pocketbook, and producing thence a dirty scrap of paper, displayed it before Christian's eyes, at the same time fixing upon him a look of knowingness rather than of well-bred inquiry. It was our hero's own advertisement, cut out of the *Times*; he therefore hastened to declare that it was so, and that he was the "C. A." therein specified. Still the chevalier maintained a profound silence, so that Christian was at a loss whether to conclude that his visitor was altogether dumb, or that he was merely unable to comprehend the English language. Again, however, was the chevalier's hand plunged into the pocketbook, and now he drew forth a larger card than his own, and which he presented to our hero. It was not the cleanest in the world, but, nevertheless, whatsoever it had on it was perfectly visible. On the upper part there was a sovereign

crown, and under it there was the name of the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. The address in the right hand corner was Mivart's Hotel.

Here was grandeur! It was evidently a reigning duke who was sending for Christian, and doubtless the Chevalier Gumbinnen was some high dignitary attached to the person of his Royal Highness. Such was the conclusion to which our hero naturally came. He looked at the chevalier, and the chevalier looked at him. Did the chevalier mean to speak, — or, indeed, could he speak at all? Christian could not help thinking it was rather a strange proceeding to send this silent gentleman on such a business, and he began to feel somewhat awkward. The chevalier, however, condescended presently to relieve him from his embarrassment, for, taking out a somewhat cumbrous watch, — which would doubtless have been considered handsome in the time when pinchbecks were in fashion, — he displayed the dial before Christian's eyes, and pointing to the hour of four, gave a sort of significant grunt, and then stared for half a minute in the youth's countenance, to assure himself that the intimation was comprehended. Christian bowed; the chevalier made a very slight and condescendingly dignified inclination of the head, put on his napless hat, and took his departure.

The whole proceeding was singular enough, but Christian understood that he was to call at Mivart's Hotel to see his Royal Highness, the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, at four o'clock. It was now a little past three, and therefore our hero had only just time to dress himself in his best apparel and set off to Brook Street, Grosvenor Square. While proceeding thither, his thoughts were divided between Isabella Vincent and the business on which he was now bent. He of course imagined that the duke required an English secretary; and hence the application to himself, made through that very interesting, intelligent, and enlightening person, the Chevalier Gumbinnen. Christian could have wished to remain a week or two longer at Mrs. Chubb's ere entering upon another situation, but he had his bread to get, and must not throw away a chance. Besides, it suddenly occurred to him that as the duke was residing at a hotel, and was not likely to remain very long absent from his own dominions, it was perhaps only a temporary occupa-

tion about to be offered him, and one which would still enable him to occupy his lodgings beneath the same roof with the lovely Isabella.

While making these reflections, Christian arrived at Mivart's Hotel, at the door of which a waiter was lounging with a white napkin in his hand, looking up the street as if in contemplation of some beautiful prospect, although there was in reality nothing to be seen except what must have been familiar enough to the man's view. But no one ever did observe a hotel waiter standing at the street door who was not thus staring fixedly in one particular direction.

"I have been directed," said Christian to the waiter, "to attend at this hour upon the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha."

"Very good, sir," was the man's response, as he slowly desisted from gazing up the street. "Please to follow me, and I will take you to Baron Raggidbak."

Christian for a moment thought that the waiter was putting off upon him an insolent jest, but as the man spoke with an air of perfect seriousness, and at the same time began to lead the way up the staircase, our hero followed, though still marvelling at the extraordinary title of the nobleman to whom he was about to be presented. They ascended to the first landing, where the waiter, opening a door, ushered Christian into a sort of antechamber, in which a tall, thin, hungry-looking man, moustached and bearded, dressed very much in the style of the Chevalier Gumbinnen, and whose appearance combined an equal amount of tawdriness and shabbiness, was lounging in an armchair by the fire, reading a German newspaper, very dirty and very much crumpled.

"This is Baron Raggidbak, his Royal Highness's groom of the stole," said the waiter, in an undertone, to Christian, and then the man withdrew.

Our hero advanced with a respectful salutation toward the high functionary who was seated by the fire; and the high functionary, laying down the newspaper, surveyed Christian in a sort of supercilious manner, as if determined to see what he was made of ere introducing him to his ducal master. At length he condescended to speak, and in so doing displayed at least one advantage over the Chevalier Gumbinnen.

“ You sall be de yong mans what de lord chamberlain did come for to go after dis afternoon? ” was the question which Baron Raggidbak put to Christian.

Our hero bowed, and said, “ Yes, my lord. ”

“ Vare goot, ” said the baron, complacently caressing his bearded chin, and now looking far more favourably upon our hero, as if that respectful appellation of “ my lord ” had considerably sweetened the temper of the groom of the stole. “ You vare quick wid de pen? You vare clever wid de writin’ and de spellin’ in de Inglis langvidge, eh? ”

“ I have a testimonial to exhibit, my lord, ” answered Christian, “ which I think will be satisfactory. ”

“ Vare goot, ” said the baron, still caressing his chin with one hand, and playing with a copper-gilt watch-chain with the other; “ den you sall succeed wit his Royal Highness. Ah, dis is de Chevalier Kadger! De chevalier is de — how you call him? — de querry to his Royal Highness, and de chevalier sall go for to introduce you. ”

The Chevalier Kadger, who entered the anteroom at the moment, wore a sort of military uniform, of dark green cloth, tolerably threadbare, with tarnished gold lace, and red stripes down the pantaloons. He was a heavy, sleepy, vulgar-looking man, with dark wiry hair brushed straight off from his forehead, and a very fierce moustache. He said something in German to the Baron Raggidbak, at which they both chuckled in what Christian fancied to be a somewhat vulgar manner.

The Chevalier Kadger then planted himself close in front of our hero, contemplating him slowly from head to foot. Christian underwent this inspection with exemplary patience, inasmuch as he thought it one of the necessary preliminaries to the successful attainment of his object. But as he stood with his eyes modestly bent down, he became aware of a certain disagreeable odour floating around him, and which seemed to be compounded of stale tobacco-smoke, garlic, and rum. At first he fancied he must certainly be mistaken, as such an ignoble effluence could scarcely have its source in the person of so distinguished a character as the Chevalier Kadger, equerry-in-waiting to a reigning duke. But when there was no longer a possibility of resisting his own convictions, and when his olfactory organs proved beyond all mistake that it was veritably and truly the chevalier’s person which was

thus redolent of garlic, rum, and bad cigars (the last-mentioned being evidently full-flavoured Cubas), Christian was certainly astonished. However, he was now on the point of being conducted into the presence of the duke, and he thought to himself that he should find in this distinguished prince a very great contrast with the appearance of those personages of his suite whom he had as yet seen.

The Chevalier Kadger preceded Christian with his person, and likewise with the odour that hung about him. He paused for a moment in an adjacent room to speak to a dirty, seedy-looking, unkempt man, who was taking out plate from a box, and who, as our hero subsequently learned, was Baron Farthenless, the privy purse. They passed on to another room, where Christian beheld a tall personage, somewhat stout, under forty years of age, coarse-featured, and vulgar-looking, dressed in some strange sort of military uniform, with a star upon his breast. The uniform had evidently seen good service, and if it had pertained to an English nobleman, would long since have found its way into the hands of his valet, and thence to some old clothes' shop in Holywell Street. As for the star, it was certainly an ingenious combination of pieces of different coloured glass set in plated metal, looking very much like a "theatrical property," and its value might have been about three and sixpence. This personage was lounging near a window, in conversation with the Chevalier Gumbinnen and three or four other worthies, whose appearance was of corresponding seediness and tawdriness. The effect produced by this group was perhaps more novel than satisfactory; and Christian thought to himself that if this were the duke, he was a strange-looking man for a reigning sovereign, and had a strange-looking retinue. But there was certainly one thing in his favour, — that he evidently strove not to throw his adherents into the shade by any superexcellence on the score of his own outfit.

The Chevalier Kadger beckoned Christian to advance, and the Chevalier Gumbinnen, acting the part of lord chamberlain and master of the ceremonies, presented the youth to the high and mighty Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha; but though the chevalier spoke in German, it was nevertheless a sort of satisfaction to our hero's mind to discover that he had the faculty of speech at all. The youth bowed low

to his Royal Highness, who motioned him to draw still nearer, and then began to converse with him in tolerably good English.

"It is my purpose to remain about a month in this country," said the duke, "for which period I require the services of a young gentleman to write letters in English for me to those noble and illustrious personages with whom I may have to correspond. Does such a position suit you?"

Christian answered in the affirmative, and the duke continued speaking.

"I shall require your attendance every morning at ten o'clock, and you may consider the hours of occupation to be until five; because, in addition to the management of my English correspondence, you will have to make notes of certain statistical details which I am anxious to obtain, and the sources of which will be duly furnished to you. Have you testimonials?"

Christian produced the one which he had obtained from the Duke of Marchmont, and this of course proved eminently satisfactory. His Royal Highness inquired the amount of salary which Christian expected. This little matter was soon arranged, and he was informed that Baron Farthenless, the privy purse, would settle with him weekly. The audience now terminated, and Christian was conducted from the august presence by the Chevalier Kadger, the odour emanating from whose breath and garments had not appeared to affect the olfactory nerves of his ducal master in the slightest degree, although it was particularly strong, and in its combinations none of the most fragrant. But then, Christian thought to himself, the duke had perhaps grown accustomed to inhale the atmosphere which his equerry carried about with him, and the old adage says that "use is second nature."

On gaining the antechamber, where Baron Raggidbak was again found seated in the armchair near the fire, the Chevalier Kadger laid his hand upon Christian's shoulder, and said, "Me and de baron sall drink your one goot health in one bottle of wine — or two bottles, begar! — and you sall stop some minutes for de same."

"Vare goot," exclaimed Baron Raggidbak, caressing his beard with one hand while he gave the bell-pull a violent tug with the other.

Christian could not of course help tarrying in compliance with the wishes of his aristocratic friends; he accordingly sat down, and in a few moments the waiter made his appearance.

"Mine goot mans," said Baron Raggidbak, "you sall go for to bring up two bottles of de port and de sherry wines for de present gumpany."

"A bottle of each, my lord?" said the waiter, putting his hand up to his head with a half-hesitating, half-reflective air.

"Dat is it," responded the baron; but as the waiter still appeared undecided, and hung about the door as if wanting to say something but not exactly liking to do so, the groom of the stole placed his hand on Christian's shoulder, saying, with a certain emphasis, "Dis sall be de yong mans what sall pay for de treat for de present gumpany."

The waiter now suddenly became more cheerful in aspect, and quitted the room with a blithe alacrity. Christian could scarcely believe that he had heard aright. What, his lordship, Baron Raggidbak, groom of the stole to a reigning duke, and the scarcely less distinguished Chevalier Kadger, equerry to the same illustrious personage, condescending to drink at his expense, and, what was more, inviting themselves to do it! For the moment Christian felt as if he were in the midst of a dream, or else — what really did seem more probable — that he was in the midst of hungry adventurers. But he said not a word, and in a few moments the waiter reappeared with a decanter of port and another of sherry on a tray, which likewise bore the bill duly made out and receipted, the wine being charged six shillings a bottle.

"Now, my goot friend," said Baron Raggidbak, "out wid de monies. Dis am de German fashion of making — what you sall call it? — oh, de acquaintance."

Christian produced a sovereign, and on receiving the change from the waiter, he left half a crown lying on the tray for that individual's own fee, — a liberality which procured for him a very low bow. The Chevalier Kadger proceeded to fill the glasses, which himself and Baron Raggidbak showed themselves very good hands at emptying also. Christian drank but little, and his abstemiousness was highly complimented by his two aristocratic friends,

who had good reason to be rejoiced at it, inasmuch as there was all the more for themselves. The two decanters were emptied in an inconceivably short space of time, and Baron Raggidbak dropped a hint relative to a second supply; but Christian was anxious to run up to the Regent's Park and tell his sister that he had obtained another situation, so that he rose to take his departure, wondering infinitely not merely at the conduct of the groom of the stole and the equerry-in-waiting, but also at the entire appearance of the duke and his retinue.

As he was about to issue from the hotel, he was encountered by the same waiter who had brought up the wine, and who was now crossing the hall at the moment. The man paused, and looked at Christian as if he wished to speak to him, and as our young hero himself was anxious to hear something more relative to the personages amongst whom accident had thrown him, he paused likewise. The waiter thereupon said, "Just step into this room, sir."

Christian followed the man, who carefully closed the door, and then said, "I beg your pardon, sir, but as I see that you are a liberal young gentleman, I don't like you to stand the chance of being robbed."

"Robbed?" ejaculated our hero. "Why, is not that really a duke?"

"Oh, yes, sir, he is a duke fast enough: but such a duke!" exclaimed the waiter contemptuously. "I am sure my master would like to be well quit of him and all his beggarly crew of hungry Germans, with their hard names, their airs, their meanness, and their insolence. Perhaps you saw, sir, that I hesitated to bring up the wine when that fellow Raggidbak ordered it? The fact is the duke has given positive instructions that nothing is to be supplied except by command of Count Wronki, the lord steward."

"But this is most extraordinary!" cried young Ashton, lost in bewilderment.

"Oh, extraordinary indeed!" echoed the waiter. "I never saw such a wretched set of paupers in my life. They don't seem to have a farthing amongst them — I mean the duke's retinue; and between you and me, sir, I don't think the duke himself is overtroubled with cash. Of course you know that whenever he visits this country all his travelling expenses, both coming and going, are paid by the Eng-

lish government. These rooms too which they occupy are paid from a certain quarter."

"From whence?" inquired Christian.

"Why, from Buckingham Palace, to be sure," responded the waiter. "Ah, the people generally little think what a mean, beggarly horde these German fellows are, with all their titles of duke, count, baron, and chevalier. I tell you what, sir, there isn't as much linen amongst them all as any ordinary English gentleman possesses; and such linen as it is! Why, the washerwoman is afraid it will fall to pieces in the rubbing and wringing out. And then their clothes, too!" added the waiter, shrugging his shoulders with the supremest contempt. "But what I wanted to guard you against, sir, is this, that if you let those fellows get hold of you, they will sponge upon you, they will make you pay for wines, spirits, and cigars, they will pluck you like any pigeon. So pray take care; and don't say that I dropped you this hint, as it would only get me into trouble."

Christian reassured the man upon the point, thanked him for his well-meant information, and took his departure, wondering still more at the various details he had just received in respect to the German duke and his retainers.

Having paid a hasty visit to Christina, Christian returned to his lodgings at the parish clerk's house, and he sought in one of the books which he possessed some information relative to the duchy of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. He found that it was of the meanest territorial extent, with a population of a few thousands of souls, with a beggarly revenue, and with an army enumerated only by hundreds. He had previously no very exalted idea of the German principalities, but he had not suspected that any one of them was so poor and paltry as this. However, he thought to himself that his own salary would be tolerably safe, and that it would at least enhance his interest to be enabled at the close of his engagement to obtain a testimonial from a reigning duke.

CHAPTER V

A PLOT

WE must now once more direct the reader's attention to the interior of Madame Angelique's establishment; and if we peep into the splendidly furnished apartment whence there was the mirror-contrived communication with the tailor's house next door, we shall find Lettice with the German and French girls, sitting together. Lettice Rodney therefore — disregarding Mr. Redcliffe's advice — had returned to that abode of splendid infamy.

It was noon on the day following that on which Christian called at Mivart's Hotel, and thus Lettice had been back exactly one week. She had told Madame Angelique everything that had occurred, but vainly had she endeavoured to recollect who the individual could be who had extorted from her the revelation of the whole proceedings. It will be remembered that she fancied his voice was not unfamiliar to her, but that she had totally failed to obtain a glimpse of his countenance in the darkness of the night, so that the scene with him had ended by leaving her still in complete ignorance of who he was. Madame Angelique was much troubled, for she could not help thinking that the same individual who had thus behaved toward Lettice Rodney had spirited away Eveleen O'Brien. Not for an instant, however, did her suspicions rest on Mr. Redcliffe, for he had paid her bounteously at the time, and the girls had assured her that he had entered with spirit into the festivities of that particular evening. As for the Duke of Marchmont, Madame Angelique did not dread his anger on Lettice's account, for, under all the circumstances, she did not consider that any blame could attach itself to the young woman who, when menaced with the law, and finding the plot more or less

known to her mysterious midnight questioner, had naturally saved herself from ulterior consequences by adopting the course which is known to the reader. Indeed, Madame Angelique was herself somewhat irritated against the duke, that he should have so seriously compromised her own establishment in respect to the dresses, and likewise in respect to the purpose for which Lettice Rodney had been required in the neighbourhood of Oaklands. A hastily penned note from his Grace, written immediately after the explosion of the plot, had assured Madame Angelique that she had little to dread on the part of the duchess, as he (the duke) would guarantee this much; and though Madame Angelique might thenceforth lose the custom of the duchess, she should receive an ample indemnification from Marchmont's own purse.

Thus stood matters in respect to Madame Angelique and her establishment after the transaction at Oaklands; and now, having given these necessary explanations, we return to the luxuriously furnished apartment in which we find Lettice Rodney, Armantine, and Linda seated.

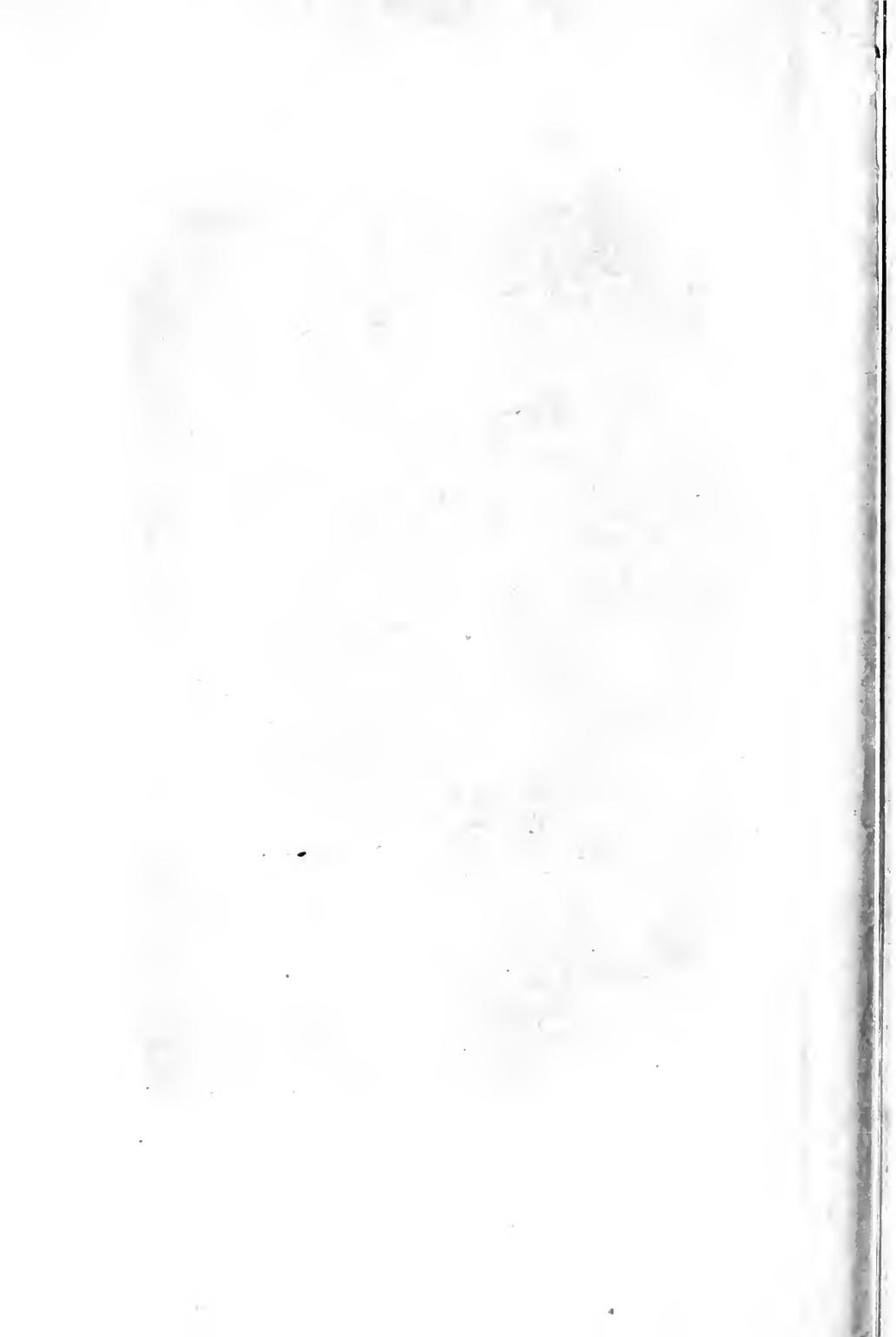
It was noon, and they were all three in a charming *dés-habillé*. Lettice was reclining in a chair, reading a new novel aloud to her companions, both of whom, as the reader will recollect, understood English to perfection. The fine form of Lettice Rodney was stretched out in a voluptuous abandonment, which, though at the moment unstudied, gave a more luxurious effect to the rich contours of her shape. Linda, the German girl, was seated upon the sofa; Armantine, the French one, occupied a chair opposite to Lettice, and both were all attention to some very pathetic love passage which Lettice was at the time reading to them. Presently the door opened somewhat abruptly, and Madame Angelique made her appearance.

"What do you think, my dear girls?" she exclaimed, in considerable excitement; "that treacherous wretch, Eveleen O'Brien, has gone back to her parents."

Lettice started in astonishment, but both Linda and Armantine sighed audibly, as they inwardly wished that they possessed homes to which they dared return.

"Yes, it is true," cried Madame Angelique, who was too much excited to observe the half-subdued evidences of compunction and regret, as well as of wistful longing, which





the two foreign girls had displayed. "And what is more, she has had the impudence to write to me."

"And what does she say?" asked Lettice, full of curiosity.

"She says that through the generous intervention of a friend whom Heaven sent her, she has been snatched away from a life of infamy. Only think of this. She, who — as well as you, my dears — revelled in every luxury, eat and drank of the best, and wore the handsomest clothes —"

"But does she threaten you?" inquired Lettice.

"No, and that is the only consolation in the matter," responded Madame Angelique, somewhat softened as she thought of it. "She says that her parents received her with open arms, and that as they at once assured her an everlasting veil should be drawn over her past, they pressed her for no explanations in respect to her career since she had left them."

"And of course she does not want to make a noise about it?" observed Lettice. "But why did she write to you?"

"To state that as she is disposed to practise the utmost forbearance, and never allude to me or my proceedings, she stipulates that on my part I will refrain from ever mentioning Eveleen O'Brien as having been an inmate of this house."

"Ah! I suppose she means to become respectable now," interjected Lettice, with a contemptuous smile.

"And perhaps she hopes to marry," exclaimed Madame Angelique. "But perchance things won't go on quite so pleasantly as she anticipates. Look here, my dear Lettice. It is of the utmost consequence we should discover who the man was that extorted those revelations from you the other day, down in the country. It is dangerous that there should be a person knowing so much about you as he evidently did, and therefore about this establishment, and we on the other hand not to have the slightest conjecture who he is."

"Perhaps he is the same kind friend," observed Lettice, sneeringly, "whom Heaven sent to restore Eveleen to her parents?"

"That's exactly what I think," exclaimed Madame Angelique, "because her flight and that affair down at Oaklands took place pretty nearly at the same time. Now, Eveleen knew certain things about the counterpart dresses, and she knew also that you were going off to the neighbourhood of Oaklands —"

"And therefore it is only reasonable to conclude," ex-

claimed Lettice, "that Eveleen, the traitress, gave that mysterious stranger certain information which put him on the watch and led him to intercept me."

"Should you like a trip to Ireland, my dear girl?" inquired Madame Angelique, patting Lettice caressingly on her bare shoulder.

"That I should," exclaimed the young woman.

"Then you shall go," responded Madame Angelique. "You can throw yourself in the way of Eveleen; you can affect to be very penitent, and to have left my establishment altogether —"

"Oh, leave me to manage it," cried Lettice, already exulting in the prospect of success. "I will worm myself into Eveleen's confidence — I will get everything out of her. When shall I depart?"

"To-day, if you will," rejoined Madame Angelique; "no time need be lost. And remember, if you can entice Eveleen back again, so much the better. She is much too beautiful to lose, and besides, it would be a glorious triumph for us to accomplish."

The preparations could not, however, be made for Lettice Rodney's departure on that same day, but at nine o'clock on the ensuing morning she took her place in a first-class carriage at Euston Square, her destination being Liverpool by way of Birmingham. There was only one other passenger in the same compartment, and this was a lady of nearly the same age as Lettice herself, as well as being by no means unlike her in personal appearance. She was almost of as tall a stature and of similarly well-developed contours of shape; she was decidedly handsome, too, though not of so remarkably striking a beauty as the other. She was well dressed; her appearance was genteel, and indicative of the well-bred lady. As the train started, Lettice surveyed her companion, and was surveyed by this companion in return. They were the only two occupants of the compartment, and being of the same sex, it was but natural that they should soon get into conversation. Lettice Rodney assumed, as a matter of course, as modest and retired an air as possible, in order to be consistent with the part of a respectable lady which she was playing, as well as to obviate any suspicion that might arise as to her true character, for there are thousands of people in this world — especially among the female sex —

who, though displaying a bold hardihood and brazen effrontery when in the midst of scenes of vicious dissipation, are nevertheless anxious enough to cloak their true characters when beyond the sphere of their irregularities. In the same way that the poor often struggle and strive to put on the appearance of ease and competency, so do the immoral endeavour to apparel themselves with the raiment of morality, and the immodest to assume the air and complexion of modesty.

During the first half-hour the discourse was limited to the mere exchange of those casual observations and indifferent remarks which, with persons meeting for the first time, are the necessary preliminaries to a more familiar and continuous strain of conversation. Lettice found her travelling companion to be a young lady of unassuming manners, somewhat simple-minded, and disposed to enter with an ingenuous frankness upon the objects of the journey on which she was bent. Lettice chose likewise to be communicative, — not, however, to reveal the real truth in respect to the motives of her own journey, but to chatter away in her own style for the sake of appearing important in the estimation of her travelling companion. She accordingly stated that she was on her way to Ireland to pass a few weeks with some friends in the neighbourhood of Dublin, dropping a hint that these friends were of aristocratic rank, and availing herself of the opportunity to lead her fellow traveller to infer that she belonged to a wealthy and influential family. The reader knows how much of all this was true; it was, however, believed by Lettice Rodney's travelling companion, who was inspired by such confidences to become all the more communicative on her own part.

It now transpired that this lady was named Rayner, and that she was a widow. Presently it further appeared that her Christian name was Louisa, an intimation which elicited from Lettice Rodney's lips a remark on the singularity of the coincidence that their names should have the same initials. In short, as the journey progressed, the two ladies became more and more intimate and familiar, and inasmuch as no other passenger was introduced to their compartment of the carriage at any of the stations where the train stopped, the flow of their conversation proceeded uninterruptedly. We may now record those details which Lettice Rodney re-

ceived from the lips of Mrs. Rayner, in respect to certain circumstances of her life, as well as the special motives which had led to the journey she was now undertaking.

It appeared that Louisa was left an orphan at the age of eleven, both her parents being carried off suddenly by some epidemic disease, and with only a short interval between their deaths. Louisa was then removed to the house of a certain Mr. Anthony Pollard, a lawyer at Liverpool, and who was left her guardian. He was no relation, but doubtless Louisa's father, when making his will, had his own good reasons for appointing this gentleman to act as trustee for whatsoever property he might leave his daughter. Mr. Pollard was an elderly man, a widower, of eccentric habits, loving money with a miserly devotion, and carrying his parsimony to almost every extreme which is usually associated with the greed of gain and the passion of mammon worship. Louisa remained but a few weeks at his house, and was then sent to a boarding-school at some town a considerable distance off. Here she was kept throughout the holidays, and though kindly treated by the mistress of the establishment, and adequately supplied with pocket-money, yet still she could not help feeling how bitter and poignant it was to know of no place in the wide world which she could look forward to visit or be enabled to speak of as her home. At this school she remained until she was seventeen, never once seeing Mr. Pollard, only occasionally hearing from him, when in a curtly written letter he remitted her money and expressed a hope that she was attentive and docile to her preceptress. But no hope that she was happy was ever hinted at in those letters. It appeared as if her guardian considered he was fulfilling the extent of his duty by acting as a mere man of business, and that he was by no means bound to demonstrate any of those kindnesses which her lost parents would have shown, or which she might have looked for on the part of relations, if she had possessed any.

The schoolmistress was occasionally visited by a nephew of her own, — a young gentleman of handsome person, agreeable manners, and pleasing address. He was four years older than Louisa, and consequently twenty-one at the period when she attained her seventeenth year. He had just inherited the little property bequeathed to him by his own parents, for he likewise was an orphan. To be brief,

a mutual affection sprang up on the part of the schoolgirl and the nephew of the schoolmistress; tender billets were exchanged, vows of eternal fidelity were pledged. The circumstance was discovered, and the young gentleman was ordered by his indignant aunt to absent himself altogether from the house so long as Louisa remained beneath the roof. The schoolmistress was a well-principled and conscientious woman; she communicated at once with Mr. Pollard at Liverpool, and this gentleman wrote to signify his intention of proceeding in the course of a day or two to fetch his ward away from the school. The romance had thus reached that point at which the various complications could not possibly lead to any other result than that which the reader doubtless anticipates. The nephew of the schoolmistress found means to communicate secretly with Louisa; she was almost broken-hearted at the thought of being eternally separated from her lover, and of being borne back again to her guardian's cheerless house at Liverpool, of which house her recollections of some six years back were by no means agreeable. She therefore yielded to the entreaties of her admirer; she fled with him, but he was an honourable young man, and the elopement was immediately crowned by marriage.

The newly wedded pair proceeded to France, whence Louisa — now Mrs. Rayner — wrote to Mr. Pollard, explaining to him that she had consulted her own happiness in the step which she had taken, and that if she had thereby proved undutiful and disobedient to the will of her guardian, she solicited his forgiveness. She did not, however, experience much, if any compunction at having thus flown, as it were, in Mr. Pollard's face, for his conduct toward her had never been calculated by any kindness to win her esteem. The letter he wrote back was pretty well that which might have been expected from the callous-minded man of business. It was to the effect, that as she had chosen to regulate her own destinies, and cater for her own happiness according to the dictates of her inclinations, he could acquit himself of any violation of the trust confided to him by her deceased parents; he informed her that she was entitled to three thousand pounds on attaining the age of twenty-one, and that in the meantime he would regularly remit her the interest. He offered no felicitations upon her marriage,

but on the other hand gave no direct expression to any displeasure on his own part. The letter contained not the remotest hint to the effect that he would be gratified to receive a visit from herself and her husband; it did not even so much as intimate that if circumstances should bring them near Liverpool, he hoped they would call upon him, but this formal and purely businesslike communication wound up by the announcement that when the young lady should reach the period of her majority, she must present herself to him in order to sign the necessary releases and receive the amount of her little fortune.

Happily enough passed away the two years of Louisa's wedded life, for to two years was it limited, and as is often the case in this world, the dream of felicity which is soonest to be dissipated is the brightest and most beautiful while it lasts. Mr. Rayner was drowned in a boating excursion, at some French seaport where they were staying at the time, and thus, with a cruel and terrible abruptness, the unfortunate Louisa found herself a widow. When the roseate atmosphere in which the soul has been for a period accustomed to exist is thus suddenly changed into a worse than Egyptian darkness, it appears to the sufferer as if this black obscurity would be eternal, and that the mind, paralyzed by dread consternation and crushed by overwhelming grief, could never by its own energies accomplish an issue thence. But there is no misfortune so terrible that the sense it produces will not gradually pass into a phase of resignation, and then from resignation there is a natural transition to that improved and healthier state of feeling in which the mind begins to discover that the world may yet have sources of happiness left for its experience.

Two years had elapsed since the death of Mr. Rayner, and Louisa had put off her widow's weeds about a fortnight before the date on which we find her travelling in the society of Lettice Rodney. By a somewhat singular coincidence, too, she attained her majority on the very day when the period of her mourning expired. The reader may now easily surmise for what purpose she was bound to Liverpool: it was to call upon her guardian Anthony Pollard, the miserly old lawyer, and receive from him the amount of her fortune. Such was the narrative which Lettice Rodney learned from Mrs. Rayner's lips, and the young woman could not help

secretly wishing that she herself was on her way to receive three thousand pounds, instead of to carry out the deeply devised plot in respect to Eveleen O'Brien.

"Your tale, Mrs. Rayner, has deeply interested me," said Lettice. "But do you not tremble at the thought of appearing in the presence of such a hard, stern man as your guardian Mr. Pollard seems to be?"

"I can assure you, Miss Rodney," replied the handsome widow, "that I experience no such trepidation. It is true that full ten years have now elapsed since I last beheld him, but my memory has faithfully retained the impression which Mr. Pollard made upon me at the time, during the few weeks I was beneath his roof. He is a man of the fewest possible words, and I am confident that he will not seek to engage me in any unnecessary discourse. He will not speak of the past more than is absolutely requisite to the settlement of the business which is to bring us in contact. I therefore entertain no apprehension that he will in any way revive the poignancy of my feelings on account of the cruel and irreparable loss which I have sustained. Indeed, so far as I can exercise my judgment on the subject, I have every reason to believe that our interview will prove a brief one, and that within an hour from the moment of our meeting the business will be settled."

"I am truly glad," observed Lettice, "to receive the assurance that you anticipate no manifestation of ill-feeling on Mr. Pollard's part. Although we have known each other but a few short hours, I feel an interest in all that concerns you."

"And this interest, Miss Rodney, is reciprocated," rejoined Mrs. Rayner.

The discourse continued awhile in a similar strain, but the reader will scarcely require to be informed that while Lettice expressed a feeling of interest more for the sake of saying something than because she really experienced it, and also for the purpose of making her companion believe that she was a very right-minded young lady, Mrs. Rayner's assurances of kindly sympathies were, on the other hand, perfectly genuine and sincere. As the discourse continued, Mrs. Rayner was naturally led on to minuter details in respect to the past incidents of her life, and as Lettice could not bear to be silent or unoccupied, and, moreover, inasmuch as she was

endowed with no small share of true feminine curiosity, — she, by her interjected observations, as well as by her questions, encouraged her companion to as much communicativeness as she chose to demonstrate. Thus did the hours pass away, while the train was pursuing its course of almost marvellous rapidity, and the two ladies mutually congratulated themselves that they should thus have been thrown together.

It was at some point — no matter precisely which — between Birmingham and Manchester, that the conversation was all in an instant cut short, as if a thunderbolt had come crashing through the roof of the carriage. As Lettice Rodney subsequently described the occurrence, she was for a moment — and only for that single moment — sensitive to an abrupt shock; it was quick as the eye can wink, and the next instant consciousness abandoned her. As she slowly came back to her senses, she became aware that she was lying on the slope of an embankment, and that some gentleman, of middle-age, was bending over her, and ministering restoratives. It appeared to her like a dream; she closed her eyes as if to shut out all external objects, the better to concentrate her mental vision inwardly, and thus arrive at some comprehending of what it was that she thought and felt. There was a dull heavy sounding in the brain, a sense of numbness over all the faculties, a blending of uncertainty and vague consternation in the mind. Again she opened her eyes, but only to receive additional confirmation of the awful suspicion which, hitherto dim, indefinite, and clouded, had hung in her brain. The gentleman spoke a few kind words of mingled encouragement and inquiry, and these still further served to stamp the horrible conviction in the soul of Lettice that what she had fancied and apprehended was no dream, but all a too hideous reality. In a word, an accident had happened to the train; several of the carriages, being thrown off the line, were literally dashed to atoms, and numerous deaths, as well as frightful injuries, mutilations, and contusions were the consequence.

The gentleman whom Lettice found bending over her was a surgeon who happened to be in the ill-fated train, and as he was unhurt, he had rendered all possible assistance to those passengers who, though escaping death, were otherwise less fortunate than himself. Lettice had been merely stunned

by the first shock of the accident; she was in all other respects completely uninjured, and in a few minutes after her return to consciousness, she was enabled to rise and move about. The scene which presented itself to her contemplation was a frightful and a sad one. The line was encumbered in one part with the overturned carriages, and in another strown with the fragments of the shattered ones. Boxes, trunks, and portmanteaux were heaped pell-mell together, some having been broken open by the fall, and the articles of apparel, both male and female, all cast out and mixed together. On the slope of the embankment several wounded persons lay here and there, and in another part there was a horrible array of mutilated and disfigured corpses. As the eyes of Lettice wandered over this fearful grouping of the dead, her heart sickened within her, and she felt her brain reel, on catching sight of the apparel of her travelling companion, the unfortunate Mrs. Rayner. Yes, but it was only by the raiment that the deceased could be thus recognized, for her countenance was so horribly disfigured that scarcely a lineament, much less a trace of its former beauty, remained. Lettice — though, as the reader is aware, far from possessing any extreme sensibility — was nevertheless shocked and horrified at this tragic occurrence which had thus cut off an amiable lady in the bloom of her youth as well as in the early summer of her beauty, and at the very time she was on her way to receive the inheritance bequeathed by her parents. Lettice staggered back as she averted her eyes from the shocking spectacle, and would have fallen if she had not been caught in the arms of the surgeon, who was still near her.

Those who have been unfortunate enough to witness a terrific railway accident are but too painfully aware of the dread confusion which is superadded to the horror of the scene, and those who have been happy enough to escape such a spectacle may nevertheless grasp with their imagination the full range of its supervening circumstances. The moant of the wounded sufferers mingling with the shrieks, the cries, and the lamentations of relatives who have survived the dead, the hurrying to and fro of half-dismayed officials, the process of disencumbering the line as speedily as possible, and the flocking of horrified persons to the spot, when the accident occurs in the close vicinage of a town, — these are

the salient characteristics of the scene following upon the appalling drama. And so it all was on the present occasion. But it does not suit the purpose of our tale to dwell at any greater length thereon; suffice it to say that the surgeon who had hitherto shown so much attention to Lettice Rodney now advised her to enter one of the vehicles which were by this time near the spot, and proceed to the town which was at no great distance. He assured her that she must not think of continuing her journey until the morrow, for that at least a good night's rest was requisite after the shock which she had experienced, and which, unless she was careful, might be followed by concussion of the brain. She did indeed feel like one bewildered and whose thoughts were all in confusion. The medical man was kind and attentive; he gave her his arm, and conducted her toward the piles of luggage that she might select her own boxes. Here again was a fresh source of bewilderment for Lettice Rodney, for she beheld some of her own dresses and other articles of apparel scattered about. The surgeon assisted her to separate them from the rest with which they were mixed up, and on learning from her what her name was, he took the trouble to search for everything which was marked with the initials L. R. In short, after much trouble, perplexity, and confusion, the good-natured surgeon succeeded in filling a couple of boxes, the lids of which were broken off, with those effects which Lettice had either been enabled to point out, or which he himself conceived to belong to her from the indications already mentioned; then, having seen her safe into a vehicle, together with her baggage, he took his leave, hastening to render his assistance to the next sufferer who required it.

Lettice Rodney was borne to the principal hotel in the town near to the spot where the accident occurred, and feeling exceedingly unwell, she at once retired to bed. It was not until the third day after the accident that the effects of the shock began to wear off. It had been followed, as the medical man more than half-predicted, by slight concussion, evidenced in a certain ringing in the ears and a continuous droning sound in the brain, as well as by heaviness of the head and confusion of the thoughts. During these three days, therefore, Lettice kept her bed, and was attended upon by a surgeon living in the town. When, however, she began to get better, she felt anxious to learn some particulars as

to the results of the accident, and a local newspaper was accordingly furnished her. The particulars of the tragic occurrence itself, as well as of the proceedings before the coroner, were given with the wonted minuteness of detail, and in perusing the sad narrative, Lettice observed that the names of all the killed were given with the exception of one lady, who was represented as being altogether unknown. It appeared, indeed, that she had no card-case with her, nor about her person was there discovered any letter or other document affording the slightest clue to the establishment of her identity. Now, as the name of Mrs. Rayner was altogether omitted from the list of killed, Lettice Rodney at once comprehended that it was this very name which ought to fill up the blank left in the sad catalogue, and that the unknown lady thus described was none other than her travelling companion.

Lettice was making up her mind to give this information to the landlord of the hotel, or to the surgeon who was attending upon her, with a view to have it conveyed to the proper quarter, when she began the inspection of her trunks for the first time since she became an inmate of that hotel. She now discovered that there was a variety of articles of linen which did not belong to her, mixed up with those effects which were really her own, but when she perceived that the former were all marked with the initials L. R., she beheld the solution of the mystery. She now recollected the manner in which her things had been looked out from amidst the scattered effects on the scene of the accident, and as she was still further examining the boxes, to ascertain to what extent she had thus become the unintentional self-appropriatrix of the property of the deceased lady, she discovered a small writing-desk, with the initials L. R. on a brass plate upon the lid. The desk was open, — the violence with which it had been thrown out at the time from the box that contained it having no doubt caused the lock to yield, and Lettice Rodney, being hampered with no over-nice scruple, unhesitatingly proceeded to the examination of the contents of the desk. She found several documents closely relating to the deceased Mrs. Rayner's affairs, — the certificate of her birth, as well as that of her marriage, a French passport, describing her personally with as much accuracy as such official papers are enabled, in a limited number of

details, to exhibit, and several letters from Mr. Pollard, the lawyer, written at different times and advising her of periodical remittances. There were likewise memoranda, evidently penned by the deceased lady herself, and indicating various Continental places which she had visited both previous and subsequent to her husband's death, — the whole affording a tolerably comprehensive clue to her movements since her elopement from the boarding-school. In a word, the several papers discovered in this desk, superadded to the oral explanations given by Mrs. Rayner in the railway carriage, served to render Lettice as intimately acquainted as it was possible for her to become, with the affairs of the deceased lady.

While Miss Rodney was thus engaged in the perusal of the contents of the desk, an idea gradually began to arise in her mind, — at first vague, indefinite, and impalpable, then acquiring shape and consistency, growing stronger, until at last it became an object perfectly fitted for serious and deliberate contemplation. Lettice sat down and pondered deeply thereon. She surveyed the matter from every distinct point of view, reckoned all the chances of success and the probabilities of failure, at the same time balancing the risk she might incur with the prize she might gain by playing the stroke boldly. Her mind was made up, and she now no longer considered it expedient to throw any light upon the name of the deceased lady who was represented as unknown in the catalogue of the killed.

CHAPTER VI

THE MISER

IN by no means one of the best streets of Liverpool was situated the dwelling of Mr. Anthony Pollard, attorney at law. He has already been described as a widower, and of grasping, miserly habits. Mrs. Rayner, when a child, — ten years previous to the time at which we have found her speaking on the subject to Lettice Rodney, — had observed his parsimonious character, and was disgusted by it, but during those ten years it had become still more inveterate in its greed for gold, — more intense in its eagerness for gain. He had thus acquired all the very worst attributes of the miser, sacrificing every personal comfort to the sole object which he had in view. And yet, not to his knowledge did he possess a single relation on the face of the earth; there was no one whom he loved for whose sake he hoarded up gold, no one whom he cared for, to inherit it. The thought troubled him not that when the cold hand of death should he laid heavily on his shoulder, sending through him that congealing chill which knows no thaw, his heaped-up riches would either devolve to the Crown, or be dissipated in the course of the law's disputes, or become the prey of any plunderers who might gather in his last moments at his bedside, as the ravens troop to where the corpse will anon be on the field destined for the battle. It was not the question of who should inherit all this wealth that occupied the mind of Anthony Pollard; it was sufficient for him that there was his golden image which he had set up for his own particular worship, no matter what worshipper might succeed him, nor whether the image itself might be shattered, at his death, by the hand of greedy litigants or of plunderers intent upon a division of the spoil. Most strange indeed is the money worship of the miser, whose

idolatry is purely egotistical, and who ministers not as a high priest to lead others in the track of the same devotion, as well as toward the same object, and to cherish the hope of possessing the same idol.

Mr. Pollard was a man well stricken in years, tall, lean, and lank, with shrivelled limbs, a cadaverous skin, a sinister expression of countenance, and an eye ever restless in the suspicious glances it was continuously flinging roundabout. Though so greedy of gain, Pollard was a just man after his own fashion: that is to say, he would scruple not, by means of all the engines of usury, to grind his victims down to the very dust, ay, or even reduce them to beggary, so long as he obtained his own profit, but on the other hand he would religiously fulfil whatsoever obligation he undertook, and whatsoever trust was confided to him. Thus was it that throughout all his dealings in respect to Mrs. Raynor, his conduct was marked by the strictest probity, and it is therefore to be presumed that her father, ere his death, had selected him as a trustee from a knowledge of the illimitable confidence that might be reposed in him. Of late years Mr. Pollard had grown so mistrustful of every one about him that he had almost completely given up his practice as a solicitor, so as to avoid the necessity of keeping clerks and of absenting himself for hours together from his home. Besides, he found money-lending a far more lucrative avocation, and one which he could manage entirely by himself. Thus, at the period when we now introduce him to the reader, he had no clerks in his employment, and his growing habits of parsimony had led him to diminish his domestic establishment, limiting it at length to a housekeeper and a drab of a servant-girl. The housekeeper who was now in his service had been with him barely three weeks, but on applying for the situation, she had produced such excellent testimonials, signed by ladies of rank with whom she represented herself to have lived, that Mr. Pollard had unhesitatingly engaged her. Besides, she came from London, and this was an additional recommendation in her favour, because the old man had found, or fancied that he had found the Liverpool servants so extravagant and dishonest, he had made a vow never to take another housekeeper from amongst them. Therefore, when Mrs. Webber — which was the name of the new superintendent of the miser's household — had presented

herself three weeks back as a candidate for the post that had fallen vacant, she was speedily accepted, and all the more readily, too, because she was so exceedingly moderate on the score of wages. We have spoken of a maid of all work who was kept in addition to Mrs. Webber, and it is requisite for the purposes of our tale that we should add that this girl did not sleep in the house, but came at an early hour in the morning and left at about eight or nine in the evening.

Mr. Pollard's house had never been handsomely furnished, and of late years the greater portion of it was shut up; it being entirely useless, as he never gave parties, never received guests, and his only visitors were those who came on business. He did not habitually sit in the only parlour that was kept for use, but there was a sort of storeroom at the back of the house, on the ground floor, where he principally sat. The reason can be explained in a few words: the apartment had certain defences which rendered it, so to speak, a stronghold of the miser's fortress. It had immense iron bars at its only window; it had a huge massive door that could not possibly be forced open without creating a considerable disturbance, and there was moreover an iron safe let into the thick wall, so that in every respect was this apartment the one best calculated for Mr. Pollard's use. Here, then, was he accustomed to sit during the day, proceeding only to the parlour to receive visitors on business; here, in this strong room likewise, did he keep his hoards in the iron safe, and here of late years had he thought fit to sleep at night. For the old miser had grown excessively deaf, and not for worlds would he have slept in any other part of the house, with the chance of an entry being effected by either window or door, and he too dull of hearing to catch the sounds. Every night, before seeking his bed, did he lock and barricade the massive door of the strong room, but it is even a question whether with such defences as were constituted by that wooden barrier and by the bars of the window, the miser slumbered in tranquillity.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening — a few days after the railway accident — that we shall find old Anthony Pollard taking his tea and supper (which two meals he, for economy's sake, blended in one) in the strong room just alluded to. A single tallow candle burned upon the table; the crockery was of the commonest description, and the

bone — for it was a mere bone — upon a cracked dish was only fit to become a dog's portion, and not to furnish a meal for a hungry man. Unfortunately Mr. Pollard could not overrule nature's cravings, though he was always endeavouring to persuade himself that he could not afford to gratify them, and that he should be ruined if he did. Thus, though the wretched man really longed for a good substantial meal, and could have devoured it too at any other person's expense, if favoured with an invitation to supper, he nevertheless tried to pick a last morsel from that mutton bone which really had nought left upon it.

Presently the huge door of the room slowly opened, and Mrs. Webber made her appearance.

"Well, is Alice gone?" demanded Mr. Pollard, thus alluding to the maid of all work.

"Yes, sir, she has gone," was the housekeeper's response, delivered in a loud, shrill tone on account of her master's deafness. "And what's more, the slut grumbled because she said I did not give her enough bread and cheese to take home for her supper."

"Ah! you are a good woman, Mrs. Webber," exclaimed Pollard, — "a very good woman, — thrifty and economical. You are the only housekeeper who has ever yet shown a regard to my interests."

"I always mean to do so, sir," rejoined the woman, with an air of great obsequiousness, notwithstanding that she had to cry out in that shrill manner. "I have let the parlour fire go out, sir," she continued, "as I don't suppose the lady you have been expecting for the last few days will make her appearance this evening?"

"Dear me, how provoking that she does not come," ejaculated Pollard. "She wrote and said she should be with me in a few days back, and here, every day since, have I been having a fire kept in the parlour, and little extras in the larder, because, you see, as I have already told you, Mrs. Webber, I must ask her to stay a day or two with me."

"Well, sir, of course you know best," responded the housekeeper, "but I can't help thinking that you are putting yourself to a very unnecessary expense on account of this Mrs. Rayner."

"Ah! but she can't very well help making me a little present," ejaculated the lawyer, "when I pay her over her

money and resign my guardianship. So this little extra civility, Mrs. Webber, will cost me nothing; or I should say, it is only a few shillings laid out at uncommon good interest," and the old miser rubbed his hands chuckingly as he thus spoke.

"And who knows, sir," inquired Mrs. Webber, "but what Mrs. Rayner was the lady who was killed the other day by the railway accident?"

"Not likely," answered the lawyer, "because Mrs. Rayner would have been sure to have papers about her to identify her; whereas it is very evident from the newspaper reports that the lady who was killed, and who was represented as unknown, had no such papers at all."

"And yet," remarked the housekeeper, "I saw in to-day's paper — which the pot-boy lent me when he brought the pint of beer for mine and Alice's dinner — that the lady has not been recognized or claimed by any one."

"Recognized indeed," echoed Pollard; "how can a person with her face smashed to pieces be possibly recognized? However, if Mrs. Rayner don't come in a day or two — and if I don't hear from her — I shall really begin to think you must be right, and that perhaps after all the unknown lady of the railway accident was my ward Louisa."

"And suppose she's dead, sir?" said the housekeeper, inquiringly.

"Ah! if she's dead," responded Pollard, "I must find out her deceased husband's relations, and hand them over the money, for she has got no relations of her own."

"Ah, sir, it's like your strict integrity," exclaimed Mrs. Webber. "I heard of your character in Liverpool the day I applied for the situation, and all that was told me made me indeed most anxious to get it."

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Webber," resumed Pollard, "the money shall be righteously dealt with. There it is," he added, glancing toward the safe; then, instantaneously perceiving that he had inadvertently let drop an admission which he was never in the habit of making to a soul, — and into which he could only have been thus led by his confidence in his new housekeeper, — he hastened to say, "I mean the money is forthcoming, — not here, of course, — at the banker's."

"Oh, to be sure, sir," replied Mrs. Webber; "I know you keep very little ready money in the house, and for my part I

tell Alice and the tradespeople that you never have any at all."

"Ah, that's right, my dear good Mrs. Webber," exclaimed the old miser, his eyes glistening with satisfaction at the assurance she had just given him. "And it's quite true, too. I don't think I've got five shillings in the place. No, I'm sure I have not," and thus speaking, Mr. Pollard drew forth from his pocket three halfpence, a fourpenny-piece, a shilling and a sixpence, — all of which coins he displayed on the palm of his hand, as if the production thereof were irrefragable evidence of the truth of his statement.

"You haven't seen this Mrs. Rayner for many years, have you, sir?" inquired the housekeeper.

"It must be ten good years since I last saw her," answered Pollard. "She was then a bit of a girl, but I have heard that she grew up into a very fine, handsome woman. I don't suppose I could possibly recognize her, and for this very reason she is sure to bring the proper papers with her to prove her identity. And now you understand why it is that I don't believe the lady who was killed can be Louisa, on account of the absence of all such corroborative documents about her person, or in any box or trunk that might have been supposed to belong to her."

Mrs. Webber now withdrew from her master's presence, but instead of retiring to the kitchen, or to her own chamber, she issued forth from the back door of the house, and entered the yard. This was surrounded by walls, and in the one at the extremity there was a gate communicating with a narrow alley. The instant Mrs. Webber appeared upon the threshold of this back gate, she was joined by a man who had evidently been lurking in the lane. Not a syllable was spoken until the fellow entered the yard, and then, the gate being closed, he began conversing in an undertone with Mrs. Webber.

"Well, what news?" he inquired, eagerly.

"Good, Barney," was the woman's response. "I have just succeeded in discovering that the old chap has got a mint of money in the iron safe."

"Ah! you're a clever 'un," said the Barker, in a tone of admiring satisfaction; "you all along declared as how you was convinced the old fogey had his blunt in that there wery identical place. Then I s'pose you mean the tidy little job to be done to-night?"

"Yes, to-night," answered Mrs. Webber.

"Is that lady come yet?"

"No, and that's why, after what I've learned, the business must be for to-night."

"Well, it's a reg'lar blessin'," interjected the Burker, "that you've made up your mind at last, arter all this here hesitating and dilly-dallying which has kept me and Bill Scott all on the tenting-'ooks of suspense."

"Why, you must understand, Barney," said the treacherous housekeeper, "that it was better to put off the business for a few days till I could obtain certain and positive information as to whether Pollard had got in the house the money he has to pay to Mrs. Rayner."

"Yes, and with the chance that Mrs. Rayner would suddenly turn up," growled the Burker, "receive her blunt, and walk off with it. It warn't good policy, marm; it warn't good policy."

"How absurdly you talk, Barney," said Mrs. Webber, angrily. "I tell you it was absolutely necessary to ascertain whether the old man really kept enough in his house to render it worth while —"

"Well, and now you've got at the rights of the matter," rejoined the delectable Mr. Barnes, "and the business is to be done right slick offhand, with no more humbugging delays. Well, that's your sort, marm, and so we won't have no more argyfication on the pint. I'm blest if this Liverpool business won't be the best dodge we was ever put up to. Wasn't it a lucky thing that Jack Smedley should have run down to Liverpool just arter that little bit of business with the lodger, and that he should have heerd tell of this old miser's wanting a housekeeper. I'm blowed if it isn't enough to make a cat or a helephant crack his precious tough sides to think how Pollard bit at them precious stiffikits which Jack drawd up hisself and put all them there fine names to."

"Well, well, Barney," interrupted Mrs. Webber, "don't stand wasting precious time here, but be off with you, and lay hold of Bill Scott, so as to be punctual."

"Bill's handy enow, and as ready to lend a hand as he is to swill his harf an' harf, or dewour his biled mutton for supper. And now tell us how it's all to be."

A few whispered arrangements were settled between the treacherous woman and her villainous accomplice, and then

they separated. But it struck Barney the Burker that as he emerged from the back gate, his ear caught a sound as of some one darting away, and he further conjectured that this some one was a female by the rustling of the garments. His keen eyes flung thin, piercing glances in the same direction, but the alley was involved in total darkness, and he could therefore distinguish nothing. He now rushed forward along the lane, but he overtook no one, and therefore endeavoured to persuade himself that he had either yielded to a false alarm, or else that it was some person belonging to an adjacent house speeding forth on a message, and that the incident had no particular significancy to warrant his transient apprehensions. Still there was a certain vague misgiving in the mind of Barney the Burker, and ere he returned to the public-house where his worthy acolyte and pupil Bill Scott was awaiting his presence, he lurked about in the lane and its vicinage for upwards of a quarter of an hour. No further circumstance, however, transpired to renew or confirm his suspicions, and as he at length moved slowly away toward the low public-house or boozing-ken where he had established his headquarters, he said to himself, "No, it's nuffin to be scared at. As for ghostesses, blow me if I'm the chap which is likely to be surreptitious — superstitious, I mean; and as for any von a-listenin' at the gate and then bowling off in such a manner as that, — no, it's all nonsense. 'Twas no doubt a servant-gal a-running for the beer, and some of them gals does flit along just for all the world as if they was wild."

While thus musing, Barney the Burker pursued his way toward the boozing-ken, and in the meantime we must see what had taken place within the dwelling of Mr. Anthony Pollard.

Scarcely had Mrs. Webber issued forth from the house into the back yard, when there was a knock at the front door, and Mr. Pollard, not hearing his housekeeper answer the summons, imagined that she must be otherwise engaged; he accordingly proceeded himself to ascertain who it might be. Taking the candle in his hand, he repaired to the door, and on opening it, perceived a lady of tall stature, well-developed form, and good apparel. He at once conceived that this must be Mrs. Rayner, but with his habitual caution, he waited for her to announce herself.

"Mr. Pollard," said Lettice Rodney, for she indeed the visitress was, "we meet again after a long interval."

"It is then you, Louisa," said the old miser, and he took Lettice's hand. "Walk in; I have been expecting you. How is it that you came not before? You must speak loud, for I am afflicted with deafness."

"I experienced an accident," answered Lettice, "which detained me for a few days."

"What! on the railway?" ejaculated Pollard.

"Yes; I was in the train which ran off the lines and upset, causing such dreadful injuries and loss of life."

"Indeed! It was suggested to me," continued Pollard, "that you might be a passenger by that ill-fated train, and I was not altogether without the apprehension that you yourself might have been the unfortunate lady who was not recognized. However, I am heartily glad that it is otherwise, and I give you such poor welcome as my house can afford. Step into the parlour;" then, as he led the way thither, he exclaimed, with an air of vexation, "Dear me, how provoking. That housekeeper of mine has let the fire go out," although he perfectly well knew that such was the case.

"Pray, my dear Mr. Pollard," said Lettice, assuming a tone and manner of the sweetest affability, "do not put yourself out of the way on my account. Indeed, I am well aware that it is an unseemly hour for me to call, but I considered it my duty to pay my respects the very first moment of my arrival in your town. I have only just stepped from the train —"

"And you will take refreshment?" said Mr. Pollard, advancing toward the bell-pull.

"No, I thank you," responded Lettice, "I am wearied, and still unwell from the effects of the recent accident. Now that I have paid my respects and satisfied myself that you are in good health, I will repair to some hotel, and tomorrow will wait upon you at any hour you may choose to appoint."

"I thought that perhaps you would make my house your home for a day or two," answered Pollard; "indeed, your bedchamber is in readiness. It is the very same you occupied ten years ago."

"You are exceedingly kind," answered Lettice, "and

it would be ungrateful indeed on my part not to do your bidding in all things. I have to thank you, Mr. Pollard, for the manner in which you have carried out the trust confided to you by my deceased father, the regularity with which you have made me my periodical remittances — ”

“ There is no need to thank me,” answered Pollard, “ and yet I am of course glad that you are satisfied with my guardianship. You will give me credit, Louisa, for having abstained from reproach when you took a certain step — ”

“ Do not allude to it, my dear sir,” interrupted Lettice, carrying her kerchief to her eyes; “ it reminds me but too painfully of my irreparable loss.”

“ Yes, yes, it must,” said the old miser. “ You will remain here, then, for a day or two? It will please me to have the society of one whom I knew as a child, but whom I have not seen until now since her girlhood. I learned that you had grown up into a fine, handsome woman, and I was not deceived. I should not have known you, — no. I should not have recognized you; you are different from what I expected you to be, and yet there is the same colour of the hair, — yes, and the eyes, too, but the profile has taken developments of which your girlhood gave but little promise.”

While thus speaking, Anthony Pollard contemplated Lettice Rodney with earnest attention, but yet without any suspicion in his looks or his manner. This was an ordeal that put all her powers of hypocrisy and dissimulation to the test; it was, however, one which she had naturally foreseen she would have to pass through, and for which she was consequently prepared. She bore that scrutiny well, affecting to smile and blush modestly at the compliment which was paid to her beauty; and that blush also served as a veil for any little trifling confusion which she could not altogether prevent. It was quite evident that the old man had not the remotest misgiving as to the identity of his visitress with Mrs. Rayner, and it was therefore only with a businesslike caution that he proceeded to give to the conversation that turn which it now took.

“ We were speaking a few minutes back of the railway accident,” he said, “ and I may now observe that my apprehension as to your having lost your life on the occasion was but a feeble one, inasmuch as the unrecognized lady ap-

peared not to have in her possession any papers calculated to show who she was."

"And of course you well knew," observed Lettice, with a smile, "that such would not be the case with me. I have in this packet," she continued, producing a small paper parcel, "a variety of documents, which perhaps you will look over at your leisure."

"And where have you left your luggage?" inquired the lawyer.

"At the railway station," answered Lettice. "It was my purpose to ask you to recommend me to a suitable hotel, but since you have been kind enough to insist that I shall take up my temporary abode beneath your roof, I will go and order my effects to be brought hither."

"I cannot think of allowing you to go out again at this late hour," said Mr. Pollard. "The very first thing in the morning I will procure some one to fetch your boxes from the terminus. If you are not cold in this room without a fire, we will sit and chat a little longer, and there will be no harm in my looking at these papers at once; it will save some trouble for the morrow, and then there will be nothing for you to do but sign the releases and receive your money."

Thus speaking, the old man proceeded to open the packet, and putting on his spectacles, he commenced the examination of the documents, musing audibly as he proceeded.

"The certificate of your birth, — ay, to be sure. I remember it well. The certificate of your marriage, and also this French paper containing the proof of your poor husband's death. I am glad you brought it, as it is to a certain extent necessary. Ah! these, I see, are several letters of mine to you, merely on business matters. And here is your French passport; hair brown, eyes blue, stature tall, the least thing stout, and so on. Very good. We will now put up these papers again, and you can keep them. If I have looked over them, it was as a mere matter of form, and nothing else."

"Of course, my dear sir," answered Lettice, infinitely relieved when this new ordeal was over, "you are bound to conduct the affair in a businesslike way. And now, with your permission, I will retire to rest, for I feel much fatigued."

Mr. Pollard rang the bell, and the summons was immediately answered by Mrs. Webber, who had not long reëntered

the house after her meeting with Barney the Burker. She was totally unaware that any one had been admitted during her temporary absence, and she was therefore smitten with astonishment on finding her master seated with a lady. As a matter of course she at once concluded that this must be Mrs. Rayner, and quickly recovering her self-possession, she assumed an air of placid benignity, as if pleased that the long-expected one should have come at last.

"This is Mrs. Rayner," said the old miser to his housekeeper, "and thus by her presence are all apprehensions for her safety set at rest. Have the goodness to conduct Mrs. Rayner to the chamber prepared for her reception. Good night, Louisa."

"Good night, my dear sir," answered Lettice, and she then followed Mrs. Webber from the room.

A few minutes afterward the housekeeper returned to the parlour, to make the usual inquiry as to whether her master needed anything more ere she retired for the night, and the response being in the negative, she withdrew.

CHAPTER VII

THE STRONG ROOM

It was now close upon ten o'clock, and the old miser proceeded to the strong room, which, as the reader will recollect, also served him as a bedchamber. He had to part on the following day with the sum of three thousand pounds, and though it was not his own money, yet there was something gratifying in the possession of it. He loved to feast his eyes on masses of shining gold, — that gold which was the idol of his egotistic worship. On the very first day that Mrs. Rayner attained her majority, he had drawn the sum of three thousand pounds from his banker, and had deposited it in his iron safe. A large portion was in the yellow specie; the remainder in bank-notes. The old man now sat down at the table to count over those notes and that gold from which he was to part on the morrow. He experienced a feeling very closely bordering upon affliction at the prospect of having to separate himself from so large a sum, but yet not for a moment did he entertain the thought of self-appropriating it, nor did he regret having honourably performed the duties of guardianship in respect to that money and its rightful owner, whom he now supposed to be beneath his roof. But he sat down to count it, not merely to convince himself, for the tenth time since he had it in his possession, that it was correct, but likewise to have the gratification of fingering and contemplating it for the last time but one. We say but one, because the old man naturally expected that on the morrow he would have to count the money again when handing it over to its claimant, and then indeed for the last time.

Meanwhile Mrs. Webber had ascended to her own chamber, making her footsteps sound with unusual heaviness

upon the stairs, and slamming the door of the room with a certain degree of violence, and all for the purpose of making the supposed Mrs. Rayner hear that she had thus sought her own apartment. There the treacherous housekeeper sat down for about a quarter of an hour, retaining in her hand an old-fashioned silver watch which she possessed, and keeping her eyes fixed upon the dial. If we were to follow the train of her musings we should find that she was exceedingly well acquainted with the habits of her master, although she had been so short a time in his service; but then she had entered this service for a special object, and she had failed not to watch all his proceedings and acquire as deep an insight as possible into his habits and customs.

"He will sit down in his room for a good half-hour," she said to herself, "to look over his books, enter the transactions of the day, and sum up his profits before he barricades himself in for the night. At a quarter past ten precisely I am to give admission to Barney and Bill Scott; there will then be a good quarter of an hour to do the work. Yes, and it shall be done, too, no matter this Mrs. Rayner's presence; it shall be done at any risk."

While thus musing, Mrs. Webber continued to regard the minute hand of her watch, and just as it marked twelve minutes past ten, she took off her shoes, opened the door very gently, and noiselessly crept down the staircase. Not a board creaked under her footsteps, and she was careful to prevent the rustling of her dress as she passed by Lettice Rodney's door. She carried no light in her hand, and thus, silent as a ghost, stealthy and mysterious as an evil spirit, in the deep darkness did she continue her way. She gained the ground floor, she peeped through the keyhole of the strong room, and thence she proceeded to the kitchen. Cautiously opening the back door, she put on her shoes again and issued into the yard. The back gate was speedily unfastened, and two persons who were lurking in readiness there passed into the premises. These were Barnes and his delectable acolyte Bill Scott. Mrs. Webber led them into the kitchen, and there she struck a light, placing her finger upon her lips the moment the glare of the lucifer flashed upon the previous darkness.

"Hush!" she said, in the lowest whisper, "we must be cautious; the lady is come."

"But has the old 'un paid her over the blunt?" inquired Barney, with a look of apprehension.

"No, I am certain he has not," responded Mrs. Webber; "there are deeds to sign first of all, or, rather, it was intended there should be," she added, with a glance of diabolical significancy.

"Ah! but they won't be, though," rejoined Barney the Burker, his own looks full of a still more hideous and terrible meaning. "I say, by the bye, when I think of it, did I understand you just now, marm, that you mean to cut away from the house directly the business is done?"

"To be sure," answered Mrs. Webber, "when the swag is properly divided. But of course we shall all three go different ways, and you may depend upon it that though an old woman I shall keep on the tramp the whole night, and then get up to London to-morrow in the best way that I can."

"But there'll be a terrible hue and cry," remarked the Burker, "and it won't do for you to think of laying concealed at Jack Smedley's house; you'll be sure to get nabbed."

"And I don't mean anything of the sort," answered the vile woman; "I shall get over to France, and never come back to England again. But we must not stand gossiping here; we must get to work."

"Here's the tools," said the Burker, with a grin, as he produced a long dagger from one pocket and a pistol from the other, while Bill Scott also displayed a couple of pistols. "But this is the thing that we must do the business with," added Barney, as he restored the pistol to his pocket, and felt the point of the dirk with his forefinger.

"Come," said Mrs. Webber, "and mind if Mrs. Rayner up-stairs happens to overhear a noise, if there is any struggling on the old man's part and she gets alarmed and comes down or cries out —"

"Then we must do her business also," interrupted the Burker, with a ferocious look.

Mrs. Webber nodded with approving significancy, and as a thought struck her, she said, "As I came down-stairs, I peeped through the keyhole and saw the old man sitting with his back to the door. If we should be lucky enough to find him in the same position now, the work will be easy

enough, for he is too deaf to hear the door opening or to catch the sound of your footsteps. But you had better both of you take off your shoes."

This counsel was at once followed by the Burker and Bill Scott, and Mrs. Webber, with the light in her hand, now led the way from the kitchen. On reaching the passage where the door of the strong room was, she deposited the candle upon a step of the staircase, and then peeped through the keyhole. As her countenance was again turned toward her two villainous accomplices, its expression of fiendish satisfaction made them aware that circumstances continued favourable to their murderous project.

Mrs. Webber now proceeded to raise the latch of the door as noiselessly as she possibly could, and as she gently opened it, Barney and Bill Scott beheld the old man seated with his back toward them. He had on his dressing-gown, and was placed in an armchair at the head of the table. A single candle lighted the scene within the room; its beams were reflected by the yellow glow which the miser was counting. A couple of bags were likewise in front of him, as well as an open account-book, which showed the precise state of Mrs. Rayner's affairs, calculated and balanced to the minutest fraction. So absorbed was Anthony Pollard in his task that even if he had been less deaf than he was, he would perhaps have still failed to hear the opening door or the tread of the murderer's steps — shoeless and stealthy — that were approaching from behind.

Barney the Burker advanced first, with his long, sharp dagger in his hand; Bill Scott was immediately behind him, grasping a pistol to be used in case of emergency. Mrs. Webber remained at the door, behind which she half-concealed herself, for though iniquitous enough to play her part in the cold-blooded deed, she nevertheless instinctively recoiled from its too near contemplation. Stealthily advanced the Burker toward the unsuspecting old miser, and when at the back of his chair, the villain's dagger was raised to deal the murderous blow. At that very instant Mrs. Webber gave a start, and the word "Hush!" being almost involuntarily uttered, sounded audibly from her lips. Bill Scott, instantaneously catching it, laid his hand upon the Burker's shoulder to make him aware that there was something wrong, at the same time that he glanced back

toward Mrs. Webber. But it was too late. The diabolic force was already in the Burker's arm, the weapon was descending with terrific power, deep down did it plunge between the shoulders of the old man, a groan burst from his lips, and he fell forward a corpse, with his head upon the table.

"It was nothing, after all," said Mrs. Webber, the instant the blow was dealt. "I thought I heard some one moving about up-stairs."

But here we must interrupt the thread of our narrative for a brief space, to return to Lettice Rodney. It will be remembered that when Mrs. Webber was summoned to the parlour in order to conduct Lettice to her chamber, she was seized with astonishment on finding that her master was not alone, and that the lady whom she took to be Mrs. Rayner had been admitted during her temporary absence from the house. That look had troubled Lettice; her guilty conscience instantaneously suggested a cause of apprehension. Perhaps this old housekeeper had been for years in Mr. Pollard's service, perhaps she had known the veritable Louisa, and perhaps she was now stricken with astonishment on beholding in the supposed Mrs. Rayner a person so different from what she had expected to see, and from what the little Louisa was likely to have grown up into? Such were the reflections which swept all in a moment through Lettice Rodney's mind, and a cold terror thrilled through her form. She had nevertheless a sufficiency of self-possession still remaining to avoid the betrayal of what she felt, and she followed Mrs. Webber to the bedroom prepared for her reception. Mrs. Webber was considerably disconcerted by the arrival of the supposed Mrs. Rayner, and was apprehensive lest the murderous plot could not now be carried out. A portion of what she felt was reflected in her looks, and Lettice, being herself keenly and poignantly on the watch, saw that there was something strange and peculiar in the way that the housekeeper surveyed her. Still interpreting matters according to her own alarms, her former suspicion seemed to be strengthened: namely, that Mrs. Webber had a misgiving in respect to her identity with Mrs. Rayner. She longed to lead the old woman into conversation, to ascertain if her fears were really well founded, but the words she would have spoken appeared to stick in her throat, and she could not give utterance to a single syllable.

"Is there anything you require, ma'am?" asked Mrs. Webber, with a certain constraint, in consequence of what was passing in her own mind.

"Nothing," replied Lettice, her tongue now unloosening, and then she muttered a faint "Good night," which Mrs. Webber did not catch, and therefore did not respond to, but quitted the room with the impression that the lady was a proud, haughty, and reserved being who did not choose to enter into any discourse with her.

That constraint with which the housekeeper had spoken, and which, as the reader has seen, in reality arose from the state of her own guilty feelings, was, under a similar influence, interpreted by Lettice into a studied coolness on the old woman's part, so that when Mrs. Webber had retired, Lettice flung herself upon a chair in an awful dismay, murmuring, "I am suspected, I shall be discovered, this woman is evidently more than half-convinced that I am an impostress. At all events she will give some hint to her master to put him upon his guard; he will question me more closely than he otherwise would have done, he will purposely speak to me of things concerning which I cannot possibly give an answer, I shall be detected, exposed, sent to prison, tried, transported, or perhaps hanged," for the young woman knew not very well which offences were capital or which were not, and her own terrors naturally made her see everything in the worst light.

She wrung her hands in despair; she bitterly repented of the course into which temptation had led her, and whereas until the last few minutes she had conceived her position to be entirely safe, she now felt astounded at what she looked upon as her egregious folly in having embarked in such an enterprise. She would have given worlds, had she possessed them, to be safe out of the house. A mortal terror was upon her; at one moment she shivered with a cold sensation, the next instant she felt as if her veins were on fire. But still recurred the question — what was she to do? To carry on the imposture now appeared hopelessness itself — utter madness. While she sat in these painful meditations, she heard Mrs. Webber come stamping up the stairs, and then loudly closing the door of her room. The reader knows very well for what purpose this noise was made, but Lettice interpreted it through the medium of her own fears.

"The woman has been down," she said to herself, with anguish at the heart, "to tell her master that he is deceived, and she cannot conceal her own rage at the idea that there is an impostress in the house. Hence this stamping of the feet, hence this slamming of her door. Oh, what will become of me?"

Again the miserable Lettice wrung her hands despairingly, — when all in a moment the thought struck her that she might escape out of the house. Yes, if this were practicable, she would accomplish it. But what if the street door were locked and the key taken out? Ah! then doubtless there would be some means of issue from the back part of the premises, or by the parlour-window — anything, so long as she could escape. And now how thankful she was that her effects had been left at the railway terminus, for perhaps there might be a very late train by which she could get off, or, at all events, there was sure to be a very early one in the morning, and she might be far away from Liverpool before her flight from the house should be discovered.

Having reflected upon all these things, Lettice Rodney determined to make her escape. She had not taken off her bonnet or shawl; she was therefore in readiness to depart without delay. But she thought to herself that it would be better to wait half an hour, and thus afford leisure to the other inmates of the dwelling (for she did not even know how many there might be, nor what number of servants the old miser kept) to sink into repose in their respective chambers.

She waited accordingly, and it was a half-hour of painful suspense for her, because she was not as yet certain that she would after all be enabled to find an issue from the dwelling. She did not hear Mrs. Webber descend the stairs, and as the house appeared to continue quiet, she at length resolved to put her project into execution. Opening the door of her chamber, she stole forth; but on reaching the head of the staircase she perceived a light glimmering below, and hastily retreating, closed the door again, more loudly than was consistent with caution. It was this sound which had reached Mrs. Webber's ears, and made her ejaculate "Hush!" just at the very instant that Barney the Burker was about to drive his dagger deep down between the shoulders of the victim. And it may be added that it was

the candle which Mrs. Webber had placed upon the stairs that had so terrified Lettice Rodney.

The murder was accomplished, as we have already described, and scarcely was the blow dealt when the vile old housekeeper intimated to the two assassins that she had been disturbed by a false alarm.

"What was it you thought as how you heerd?" inquired the Burker.

"A door shutting up-stairs," answered Mrs. Webber.

"Then what if that lady as you spoke of has been a-listening and heerd summut; and perhaps she don't dare come down, but will open her winder and speak to any one as goes by, so that in a few minutes the place'll be surrounded, the whole neighbourhood alarmed, and we have no more chance of getting clear off than a cat without claws in a partickler place."

Mrs. Webber's countenance grew full of dismay as she listened to this rapidly uttered speech on the Burker's part, and the tenor of which appeared indeed but too reasonable.

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Bill Scott.

"By jingo! we must do for her also," ejaculated Barney, with a look of fiercest resolve. "Come, lead the way, old dame, and we'll look to the swag arterwards. He won't run off with it," added the ruffian, with a look of horrible significance toward the old miser's corpse, which was bending with its face down upon the table.

Meanwhile Lettice Rodney was a prey to the most terrible apprehensions, her guilty conscience suggesting all kinds of alarms. She thought that the reason why there was a light still burning below was because the officers of justice had been sent for and were waiting to take her into custody. There was madness in her brain. She flew to the window of her room with the idea of opening it and precipitating herself into the street; but no, she could not die thus horribly, — or, if she survived, find herself frightfully mutilated. Ah! all in a moment an idea struck her. What if she were to hasten down-stairs, throw herself at the miser's feet, confess the trick, but beseech him to pardon her, and in return for his forgiveness she would give him such information as would enable him to keep the three thousand pounds for himself. She could tell him that his ward, Mrs Rayner, was no more, and that she had perished in a manner which would prevent

her heirs — if she had any by her own or her husband's side — from becoming acquainted with her death.

Swift as lightning did these ideas sweep through the brain of Lettice Rodney, but ere she descended to put her project into execution, she opened the door and listened. Ah! she heard voices talking below; they were indeed those of the wretches who were at the instant deciding upon the murder of herself, but she could not catch what they said, and she fancied that the officers of justice were perhaps already in the house. Oh, then she must beseech and implore a private interview with Mr. Pollard; it seemed to her the only method to save herself from destruction. Goaded well-nigh to madness, the wretched young woman rushed down the stairs, and as, on reaching the lower flight, she beheld Mrs. Webber accompanied by two ill-looking fellows, her very worst fears seemed to be confirmed, and in her eyes the Burker and Bill Scott instantaneously took the aspect of constables.

"Spare, oh, spare me!" she cried, frantically clasping her hands as she stopped short midway on the staircase. "I will confess everything. Oh, I know that I have been very guilty, but the temptation was so great. Let me see Mr. Pollard, and I will tell him something that shall induce him to forgive me."

The reader may imagine how great was the astonishment of Mrs. Webber and her iniquitous accomplices on hearing these passionately vehement ejaculations from Lettice Rodney's lips. While, on the one hand, utterly at a loss to comprehend her, they nevertheless, on the other hand, heard enough to make them aware that she was completely unsuspecting of the crime which they had committed, and that she believed Pollard to be still in the land of the living, inasmuch as she was beseeching an interview with him. The three wretches exchanged bewildered looks with each other, and Lettice fancied that they were uncertain whether to grant her own prayer or to carry her off to gaol at once.

"Spare me — for Heaven's sake spare me!" she exclaimed, descending the stairs, "and I will confess how I was led into this imposture."

"Ah!" ejaculated Mrs. Webber, to whom these words were a revelation, "then, who are you?"

"My name is Lettice Rodney," replied the young woman. "I met Mrs. Rayner —"

"And you are not Mrs. Rayner?" said the housekeeper, in hurried inquiry.

"No, and you all along knew that I was not. Oh, there is Mr. Pollard — Gracious heavens!" screamed Lettice, as her eyes were riveted upon the dagger which still remained between his shoulders; and smitten with the horrible, the overwhelming conviction that murder had been done, she fell down senseless at the foot of the staircase.

"There let her be. We'll divide the swag and bolt," said the Burker. "It isn't worth while to do her a mischief anyhow."

"Stop!" said Mrs. Webber, as an idea of devilish ingenuity flashed in unto her mind. "We may save ourselves from all danger, and I need not scamper out of the country over to France."

"What do you mean?" demanded the Burker and Bill Scott, as if both speaking in the same breath.

"Never do you mind," responded Mrs. Webber. "Leave it all to me — I know what I am about. Take charge of the swag, Barney — I know I can trust you for my share. You'll get up to London as quick as you can, and you'll give it to my daughter Bab — but not to Jack, mind! not to Jack."

"All right, marm," responded the Burker. "Come along, Bill, and let's be off."

The three wretches, satisfied that Lettice Rodney was in a profound swoon, from which she would not very readily awaken, returned into the strong room; and the two men took possession of all the gold and bank-notes, with the exception of fifty sovereigns which Mrs. Webber desired them to leave as a means of enabling her to carry out the objects which she had in view. Barney and Bill Scott then took their departure by the same way in which they had entered, Mrs. Webber carefully closing and securing the yard gate as well as the back door when they were gone. On reëntering the house, she found Lettice still lying insensible at the foot of the stairs. She approached the corpse of her master, took his purse from his pocket, put into that purse the fifty sovereigns which she had kept back, and then, while Lettice still continued in a state of unconsciousness, deposited the purse in the young woman's pocket.

This being done, Mrs. Webber opened the front door of the house and began screaming out, "Murder! help!" with all her might and main. The alarm spread like wild-fire along the street, several persons rushed in, and as Lettice Rodney was startled back to life by the woman's cries, she found herself the object of execration and abhorrence on the part of a dozen individuals surrounding her — she was accused of murder!

No pen can describe the confusion, the horror, and the dismay which now prevailed in the miser's house. The neighbours were flocking in, and the spectacle of the corpse, bent motionless over the table, with the weapon sticking in the back, produced a fearful sensation.

"Murder!" cried Lettice, flinging around her wild and almost frenzied looks, "I commit murder! No, no, that abominable woman," — pointing to Mrs. Webber — "and the two villains who were with her —"

"Wretch!" exclaimed the housekeeper, "you know that you killed the poor old gentleman because he found out that you were a cheat, and you fell into a fit when, alarmed by the noise, I came down and discovered the dreadful deed."

Lettice was overwhelmed with the accusation. She strove to speak, but she could not. A faintness came over her, and she would have again fallen, had she not been supported by the arms of two police constables who now took her into custody. In this piteous condition, bordering upon unconsciousness, she was borne away to the station-house, followed by a concourse of persons, all under the influence of dread horror at the deed which had been committed, as well as of amazement that one so young, so beautiful, and so genteel-looking should have committed such a stupendous crime.

On reaching the station-house, Mrs. Webber preferred the charge, but was continuously interrupted by the passionate, frenzied, and vehement ejaculations of Lettice Rodney. The latter was searched, and the purse, containing the fifty pounds, was found upon her. This was proclaimed to be the old miser's purse, not merely by Mrs. Webber, but by the butcher, the baker, the grocer, and other tradesmen, with whom the deceased had been accustomed to deal, and who were now present while the charge was being preferred. As a matter of course, no one believed the unfortunate Lettice

Rodney's vehement averment of innocence and counter-accusation in respect to Mrs. Webber. She was consigned to a cell, where she passed the remainder of the night in a condition of mind bordering upon utter distraction.

In the morning Lettice Rodney was placed before the magistrate, charged with the murder of Anthony Pollard. Meanwhile her boxes had been taken possession of at the railway station by the police, and some letters were therein found proving that her name was Lettice Rodney. On her own person not merely the murdered man's purse was discovered, but also the packet of papers belonging to Mrs. Rayner. The evidence given by Mrs. Webber before the magistrate was to the following effect:

"The late Mr. Pollard was guardian to a lady named Louisa Rayner, whom he had not, however, seen for many years. This lady recently attained her majority, and was expected by Mr. Pollard to pay him a visit and receive the funds that were due to her. Last evening the prisoner came to the house, announcing herself to be Mrs. Rayner, and she was at first believed to be what she thus represented herself. She had a long interview with my poor master, and at about ten o'clock I went up to bed, leaving them together in the room where Mr. Pollard habitually sat. I did not immediately retire to rest, having needlework to do. Upwards of half an hour elapsed, when I heard the sounds of voices speaking very loud. I opened my door and listened. My ears distinctly caught my master's voice bitterly upbraiding the prisoner as an impostress, and insisting upon knowing how she came to personate Mrs. Rayner, and how she got possession of her papers. There was a great deal of this language on my master's side, and much intercession on that of the prisoner. I heard Mr. Pollard threaten to give her into custody, and then the door of the room, which was previously open, was closed. I presumed it was for fear of alarming me, and I thought to myself that Mr. Pollard meant to forgive her if she would confess everything. Presently it struck me that I heard a cry — or, rather, a deep moan; then the door was opened again, and feeling a certain degree of uneasiness, I hastened down-stairs. The prisoner was in the passage. She looked dreadfully confused on beholding me, and as I glanced in at the door, I was filled with horror and dismay on beholding a dagger sticking in my master's back. I seized

upon the prisoner, calling her a murderess, and she fainted. The dagger belonged to my master; he was afraid of thieves and kept it for his defence. When sitting in that room at night-time, he generally laid it on the table near him, so that I have no doubt the prisoner snatched it up and used it suddenly.”

While Mrs. Webber was making this deposition, Lettice Rodney passed through all the extremes of feeling of which the human heart is susceptible, — at one time crushed down by the weight of fearful consternation, at another giving vent to the most passionate declarations of innocence, as well as of accusations against Mrs. Webber herself; now imploring Heaven to interfere in her behalf, then appealing to the justice of man; now confessing herself to be guilty of the intended cheat, but repudiating with abhorrence the graver and blacker charge; then bursting forth into a paroxysm of the wildest anguish, and then sinking down into a numbed stupor, until suddenly starting up again in a fresh frenzy of words, looks, and gesticulations.

When asked, with the usual caution, whether Lettice had anything to say in her defence, she spoke with so much incoherence that it was scarcely possible to unravel her words and obtain therefrom a continuous narrative. The magistrate was, however, patient, and after much trouble her story was elicited. She told how she had fallen in with Mrs. Rayner, and explained the circumstances under which she was led to undertake the imposture. She told likewise how she had discovered the murder, and seen Mrs. Webber with the two men, but no one believed this portion of her tale. The purse had been found upon her, and then, too, she had her bonnet and shawl on when captured, which seemed to corroborate Mrs. Webber's account of a protracted interview with the old man; while the unfortunate young woman's own explanation of an intended flight from the house was regarded merely as an excuse to account for the circumstance of her being thus dressed in all the apparel in which she had first arrived at the dwelling.

The magistrate had but one duty to perform, one course to pursue, and this was to commit Lettice Rodney for trial at the next assizes, on the charge of murdering Anthony Pollard.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DUCAL SECRETARY

CHRISTIAN ASHTON entered upon his duties as private English secretary to the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, and a week passed, during which he gave his Royal Highness the utmost satisfaction. In the meantime he had become acquainted with all the noblemen and gentlemen forming the suite of that most illustrious prince, and perhaps the reader may wish to know a little more of these same German worthies.

They were eight in number, delighting in names as euphonious to pronounce as they were easy to spell, and these shall be enumerated. Firstly, there was Count Wronki, who filled the office of lord steward, and whose chief avocation appeared to be in giving as few orders as possible and keeping down the hotel expenses to the utmost of his ability. The reader is already aware that the taciturn Chevalier Gumbinnen occupied the high post of lord chamberlain, with which was combined that of principal lord of the bedchamber; but if this latter office included the care of the duke's wardrobe, it was very nearly a sinecure, for a single portmanteau of small dimensions could without difficulty contain all the coats, waistcoats, and trousers which his Royal Highness possessed, and as for the linen, when there were half a dozen shirts in use and half a dozen more at the washerwoman's, — applying the same estimate also to false collars, handkerchiefs, and stockings, — the amount of this great prince's undergarments was not of an extent to require a great deal of supervision. Baron Raggidbak was the groom of the stole, the precise duties of which office Christian Ashton was at a loss to comprehend, unless indeed they consisted in the eating and drinking of all that his lordship could by any means get hold of, lounging

away his time, reading newspapers, or quarrelling with a comrade over a game of piquet for sixpenny stakes. The Chevalier Kadger was the equerry, and he was in almost constant attendance upon his Royal Highness; but his leisure time was expended in smoking full-flavoured Cubas, and in renewing the odour of garlic and rum which he seemed to make it a rule to carry about with him. Then there was General Himmelspinken, who filled the office of master of the horse; but this — at least in England, whatever it might have been in Germany — was an unmistakable sinecure, for the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had not brought over with him so much as a donkey, much less a horse, and one of the queen's carriages was every day sent from Buckingham Palace to convey his Royal Highness to court, or out for an airing, or to visit the public buildings, and so forth. Baron Farthenless held the office of privy purse, and Christian could not help thinking that the name of this functionary was most unfortunately ominous in respect to the state of the ducal exchequer. One thing he noticed, which was that Baron Farthenless took immense care of the duke's plate, only giving it out when his Royal Highness dined at the hotel, but never opening the chest for its display on the dinner-table of the ducal suite when his Royal Highness banqueted at the palace or elsewhere. Another high official was Herr Humbogh, — whose name was pronounced just like that word which Englishmen are accustomed to ejaculate when expressing a derisive incredulity of anything which they hear, or when denouncing an imposture, a quackery, or a cheat. This gentleman was denominated the privy seal. His duties were light and pleasant, as well as easily performed, and with but little responsibility, — being limited indeed to the careful keeping of an old brass seal on which the ducal arms were emblazoned, and the value of which as a piece of metal might be about three halfpence. The mention of Count Frumpenhansen will complete this aristocratic category, his lordship hearing the title of Gold Stick, and his duty being to carry a brass-headed cane on those occasions when his ducal master was graciously pleased to grant an audience to English noblemen and gentlemen who called to pay their respects to the reigning sovereign of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha.

But though any one of such English noblemen and gen-

tlemen could, without much inconvenience to his own finances, have drawn a cheque upon his banker for an amount that would have purchased all the personal property possessed by the duke and his entire suite, yet such is the servile, grovelling, lickspittle character of the higher and middle orders of the English, that the profoundest respect was paid by all visitors to this trumpery duke and the beggarly, half-starved horde of rapacious Germans that he had brought over with him. It was, however, sufficient that he was nearly related to Prince Albert, that he bore a ducal title, and that he was an independent sovereign (in the pay of Russia and Austria), — it was sufficient, we say, that he was all this to ensure for him the reverential devotion of those scions of the British aristocracy and gentry who flocked to Mivart's to pay their court.

When the week had expired, and Christian was about to take his departure at five o'clock, — his usual hour, — he looked about for Baron Farthenless, to whom he was directed to apply for his salary. He could not, however, find the privy purse in any one of the suite of rooms occupied by his Royal Highness and his retinue, but in the antechamber he found all the other noblemen and gentlemen of the ducal household assembled together. It immediately struck Christian that these also were waiting for the privy purse, in order to receive such moneys as might be due to them; and yet, on a second thought, he repudiated the idea as something too preposterous, that such high and mighty functionaries could possibly receive weekly salaries. He did not want his own money, as he had plenty of funds at his disposal, but the warning given him by the friendly disposed waiter had rendered him determined to look after that which was his due; for he thought it by no means improbable that Baron Farthenless might endeavour to cheat him out of it, — an opinion to which he was more or less justified in arriving inasmuch as during the week he had seen too many instances of the dirty meanness and paltry expedients to which the members of the ducal retinue had recourse for obtaining wines, cigars, spirits, and other things beyond the limit of their actual allowances.

“What for you sall be waiting, yong mans?” inquired Baron Raggidbak, taking our hero aside and speaking to him in a confidential whisper.

"I am waiting to see Baron Farthenless," answered Christian. "Does your lordship shortly expect him?"

"Yes, I suspects him in one — two — tree minute. He am gone for to go to de palace to see de prince, and he come back vare soon wid de moneys."

"Gone to the palace to get money of the prince?" ejaculated Christian, thus giving involuntary utterance to his amazement.

"Yes, begar!" responded Raggidbak. "De vare goot Prince Albert sall act as — how you call it? — oh, de banker of de duke all de times we sall be in England. I waiting too for de moneys. I vare rich man in mine own country — vare rich, but me forgot to bring over wid me de tousand pounds which I was meant for to do. Have you got such a ting, yong mans, as six shilling in your pocket? and we sall drink one bottle of de wine till de baron sall come back."

Christian was determined not to be mulcted a second time by Baron Raggidbak, and so he gave an evasive response, whereat his lordship looked deeply indignant and turned haughtily away, playing with his gilt brass watch-chain.

Almost immediately afterward Baron Farthenless made his appearance, and then Christian was surprised to see how the noblemen and gentlemen of the ducal retinue crowded around the privy purse, surveying him with looks of eager inquiry, and ready to stretch forth their dirty hands with hungry avidity to clutch whatsoever spoil he had to place at their disposal. And spoil it really was, — spoil wrung from the overtaxed industry of the working classes, and which, though by Act of Parliament passing through the hands of a naturalized foreign prince, was thus destined to find its way into the pockets of these German cormorants whom the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had brought over with him. Christian was infinitely disgusted, and as soon as he had received his own salary, he took his departure.

We must now observe that during the week which had thus elapsed since he entered into the service of the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, he had every day seen the beautiful Isabella Vincent, but only for a few minutes at a time, and on no occasion to enter into discourse with her save in the presence of Mr. or Mrs. Chubb. His interest in the charming

girl could scarcely be said to have increased, for it had already reached the point at which it had become the purest and sincerest love. But he saw that some mystery enveloped her, and he was curious to fathom it.

On returning to his lodging, between five and six o'clock in the evening, after receiving his salary from Baron Farthenless, he found a well-dressed but by no means agreeable-looking man knocking at the door of Mr. Chubb's house. The summons was not immediately answered, and Christian accordingly waited on the steps with this individual, who surveyed him, as he thought, in a rather suspicious manner. He was a person of about forty years of age, by no means good-looking, clothed in black, and exhibiting great neatness and carefulness of toilet. Presently the door opened, and the servant-girl, evidently recognizing the visitor, conducted him into the parlour, while Christian repaired to his own room.

About half an hour afterward, Mrs. Chubb made her appearance before her youthful lodger, and he at once saw by her countenance that something had troubled her. This countenance of hers was never the sweetest in its expression, and therefore when anything did transpire to put her out it was vixenish and disagreeable to a degree.

"I am come, Mr. Ashton," she said, "to beg that you will suit yourself with other apartments as soon as possible — this very evening, if so be you can; and in course, if you insist upon it, I sha'n't claim the week's rent which is due, because I am not giving you a week's notice."

"But what is the meaning of this?" inquired Christian, perfectly astonished as well as hurt by the suddenness of the proceeding.

"Never mind, sir. I have got no explanations to give — leastways there is no call to have any words about it; but as a gentleman I trust you will do me this favour at once."

"Mrs. Chubb," answered Christian, half-indignant and half-remonstrating, "it is impossible you can treat me in such a manner without explaining your conduct. If my own behaviour has been improper or discourteous to yourself or any one beneath your roof —"

"Well, sir," interrupted Mrs. Chubb, softening somewhat, "there's no fault to find with your conduct: you're a gentleman, and you behaved as sich. But I do beg this favour

at your hands; and, in course, if in taking another lodging you refer to me I shall say all that's good and proper. Pray don't press me any further, there's a dear young gentleman, but see about moving at once."

"It is totally impossible that I can find another lodging this evening," answered Christian, cruelly annoyed and perplexed, "but, after the way in which you have just spoken to me, I certainly feel myself bound to leave to-morrow."

"Well, sir, I must make that do," responded Mrs. Chubb, "and thank'ee kindly."

Thereupon she quitted the room, and Christian was left to deliberate upon all that had occurred. Was it on Isabella's account that he had received this notice? Was that man whom he had encountered at the street door in any way connected with her? He hoped not, for there was something in the look of that individual which he by no means liked, — a certain sinister expression which appeared to indicate hypocrisy, cunning, and other debasing sentiments. He now longed to obtain a few minutes' private discourse with Isabella. The thought of separating from her had led him to the sudden comprehension of the feeling which he entertained on her behalf. He saw that it was not a mere friendly interest; a secret voice, whispering in his soul, told him that it was love. But how obtain a private interview with Isabella? And even if he succeeded, what did he purpose to say? He knew not, and yet he felt how impossible it was for him to go elsewhere without exchanging another syllable with that beauteous creature. He sat with his door ajar, in the hope that he might hear her issue forth from the front parlour, in which case he would go and meet her in the passage at any risk. But no, the opportunity served not, the time passed, and at ten o'clock he heard Miss Vincent ascending to her own chamber, Mrs. Chubb closely following.

Christian passed an almost sleepless night. He rose early in the morning, and at nine o'clock was compelled to sally forth and search for another lodging before he proceeded to Mivart's Hotel to enter upon his day's duties. He was not long in finding suitable apartments; he gave a reference to Mrs. Chubb, and intimated that he should take possession of the rooms in the evening. Then, with a heavy heart, he repaired to the hotel; but during the hours that he was

engaged in his avocations he was abstracted, and performed them only in a sort of mechanical manner.

At five he retraced his way to Mr. Chubb's, wondering whether he should be enabled to obtain a few minutes' interview with Isabella, in which case he was more than half-resolved to throw himself at her feet and avow his love; for it had now assumed all the pure passion and chaste fervour of romance. But as he entered the street, he beheld a carriage, with livery servants in attendance, standing at the door of the parish clerk's house. A man came out, leading Isabella by the hand, and that man was the same with the sinister countenance whom Christian had seen on the preceding day. He assisted Isabella to enter the carriage, he himself immediately afterward ascending to the box, and taking his seat as a menial or dependent by the side of the fat, gorgeously liveried, powdered coachman. The equipage drove away in the contrary direction from that whence Christian was advancing, and he stopped short, smitten with grief as well as with a bewilderment amounting almost to dismay. Isabella was gone; she had not observed him, or if she did notice his presence in the street, she had not dared bestow even a parting look upon him. She was gone, and she was borne away under circumstances which only added to the mystery already enveloping her. She had taken her departure in a splendid equipage, and the man who had come to fetch her was evidently a menial. If Christian's soul were susceptible of any consolation under this infliction, it was to be found in the fact that his mind was relieved from the apprehension that the sinister-looking individual was in any way connected by the bonds of kinship with the beautiful Isabella.

For nearly a minute did the youth stand in the street, a dozen yards distant from the spot where the carriage had just driven off. He felt as if a dreadful calamity had suddenly overtaken him, as if a gulf had abruptly opened, separating him from the object of his love. At length he moved slowly onward to the parish clerk's house. Mrs. Chubb herself answered his summons at the front door, and begged him to step into the parlour.

"Well, Mr. Ashton," she exclaimed, "here's a pretty business! I've lost the young lady and the guinea a week that was paid for her board and lodging, and all through you."

"Through me?" ejaculated our young hero; but his cheeks became the colour of scarlet, for he felt as if the keen eyes of the landlady were penetrating to the inmost recesses of his heart.

"Yes, to be sure, through you, Mr. Ashton," she repeated, — "leastways, on your account. I hadn't ought to have took you unbeknown to that there Mr. Gibson."

"And who is Mr. Gibson?" inquired Christian, who now thought he might possibly hear something in respect to the mystery which had appeared to envelope the object of his love.

"Why, Mr. Gibson is the person who put Miss Vincent with me and paid for her board and lodging."

"And how long had Miss Vincent been with you?"

"Not more than three months or so," rejoined Mrs. Chubb; "and it is very wexing that she should have gone like this. But who on earth she can be I haven't no more idea than the man in the moon."

"But it surely was not this Mr. Gibson's own carriage?"

"In course not, — or else he wouldn't have got upon the box. To think that Miss Vincent, who lived here for a guinea a week, should have had a carriage sent to fetch her away —"

"And where is she going to?" interrupted Christian, his heart palpitating with suspense as he awaited the reply.

"Ah! that's quite unbeknown to me," responded Mrs. Chubb. "Mr. Gibson was always precious close, and Miss Vincent herself never said a word about any relations or friends that she might have. But I always thought that there was some little mystery about the young lady. She lived for a long time with Mr. Hickman, our clergyman that was; and when he died it was through his widow's recommendation that Mr. Gibson put Miss Vincent with us — Chubb, you see, being parish clerk."

"And how long did Miss Vincent live in the clergyman's family?" asked Christian.

"Very nigh two year," rejoined Mrs. Chubb. "She was fourteen years old when she was fust put in Mr. Hickman's family. She was in deep mourning, for her mother had just died; and I did hear it whispered that she was a lady of title, but I don't know how true it may be, for Miss Vincent never spoke to me about her family. And to tell you the

truth, when Mr. Gibson put her here, he hinted that she was somewhat peculiarly situated, and that me and Chubb was never to bother her with no questions."

"Then it would appear that this Mr. Gibson was only the agent for some one else?" remarked Christian, "and this some one else is evidently the person, whether gentleman or lady, to whom the carriage itself belongs. But what did you mean," he hesitatingly inquired, "by saying that it was through me you have lost her?" and as Christian put the question, he felt a sad, sad tightening at the heart.

"Why, when Mr. Gibson came yesterday and saw you walk into the house, he asked me who you was, and I was obleeged to tell him that you was a lodger. He looked uncommon glum, and said that he thought as how he had put Miss Vincent into a house where there was no single men to talk nonsense to her, and so on. So I told him that you was a very respectable and well-behaved young gentleman, that you was out nearly the whole day, and never saw Miss Vincent unless it was when happening to pass her in the passage or on the stairs. But still he wasn't satisfied; so then I said as how I know'd you was an obleeging young gentleman, and would leave at the shortest possible notice. Mr. Gibson looked better pleased, and went away, and then I thought it was all right. But, lo and behold! just as the clock strikes five this evening, up dashes the carriage to the door, in comes Mr. Gibson, and says that Miss Vincent is to go away with him directly. Her things was soon packed up, and off she went, only just a minute or two before you knocked at the door. So you see that Miss Vincent has got some good friends, or else she has had a sudden windfall and turned out to be a fine lady, after all."

"And did she seem pleased," inquired Christian, "with the idea of going away?"

"Not a bit of it," ejaculated Mrs. Chubb. "When Mr. Gibson had her fetched down, — for she was up in her own room when he came, — and told her she was to go away with him at once, she seemed struck all of a heap."

"Ah! she seemed vexed?" ejaculated Christian, eagerly.

"That she did," exclaimed Mrs. Chubb, not observing his excitement. "And I know what it was: she was sad at the thought of parting from me. You see, I was always very kind and good to her, though it was but a guinea a week as

was paid for her keep. And now, Mr. Ashton, there's no longer any call for you to shift your lodgings; and as it's through you I've lost Miss Vincent, I hope you won't think of leaving me."

But Christian made her no answer, — for the simple reason that he was not listening to the latter portion of her speech. His heart at the moment was a strange compound of joy and sorrow, — sorrow at the departure of the beautiful Isabella, and joy at the intelligence that she was sad when she left; for he knew full well that it could not be on account of separating from the parish clerk's wife, and a secret voice whispered in his soul that this sadness on Isabella's part was on account of himself. Youthful love is full of hope, and in imagination it triumphs over all obstacles; its fancy is so expansive that it even achieves impossibilities, levels the loftiest barriers and bridges the widest gulfs, until it beholds itself crowned with success. Such now was the case with Christian Ashton; and, feeling assured that he was not altogether indifferent to the lovely Isabella, he clung to the hope that the progress of time and the flow of circumstances might lead them together to the altar.

"Why, what are you thinking about, Mr. Ashton?" exclaimed Mrs. Chubb.

"Thinking about?" ejaculated our hero, thus rudely startled up from a dreamy reverie. "Oh, I was thinking of all you have been telling me about Miss Vincent."

Mrs. Chubb repeated her request with regard to the lodgings, and Christian readily promised to grant it on condition that she would go and make some befitting excuse for his not completing the bargain which he had half-settled in the morning with the other lodging-house keeper. This little matter was speedily arranged, and our young hero accordingly kept his quarters at the parish clerk's house. But why did he do this after the unceremonious way in which he had been treated when it was thought expedient to get rid of him? Simply because he wished to remain at the place where Isabella had lived, and where it was possible, he thought, she might happen to call. But which of our readers, whether gentleman or lady, who knows what love is, can fail to penetrate our young hero's motives for tarrying at his present lodgings?

Another week passed away; and Christian, on proceeding,

as usual, one morning at ten o'clock to Mivart's Hotel, found the utmost excitement prevailing amongst the ducal retinue. There was to be a grand review in Hyde Park that day, at which his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha was to be present, and in honour of whom the military display was to take place. It was necessary that the duke should be accompanied by his entire retinue, and therefore great preparations were in progress for the occasion. In the various rooms the high functionaries were issuing orders to the servants of the hotel; some of them were inspecting their best apparel (and Heaven knows that bad was the best!), while others were burnishing up their trumpery jewelry with pieces of washleather. Christian passed on to the little room in which he was accustomed to sit, but on opening the door he stopped short in sudden dismay at the astounding spectacle which met his eyes. For there sat Baron Raggidbak, the groom of the stole, in his coat, waistcoat, boots, and shirt — but without his breeches; for his lordship was busily engaged in the more notable than dignified task of mending a rent in the seat of those very pantaloons of which he had divested himself!

No wonder that Christian stopped short; but the baron started up, in a towering rage, exclaiming "Der deyvil! why for, yong mans, you go for to come in widout knocking at de door?"

Christian's only reply was a peal of laughter at the ludicrous figure presented to his view by his lordship Baron Raggidbak, groom of the stole to the high and mighty reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. His lordship gnashed his teeth with rage, and endeavoured to slip on his pantaloons with all possible despatch, but in his confusion and haste he thrust his right boot through the half-mended rent, and losing his balance, sprawled upon the floor. Christian now felt concerned on the poor devil's behalf, and not wishing to add to his embarrassment, precipitately retreated, closing the door. He thought of repairing to the antechamber and waiting there until Baron Raggidbak should leave the secretary's room free for his use. Again he passed through the midst of the greater portion of the ducal retinue, and on entering the antechamber somewhat hastily, he surprised the Chevalier Kadger in the act of putting on his military frock coat, when, to his renewed amazement, Christian discovered

that this high official, the principal equerry to the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, wore no shirt! He had on a flannel jacket, which had certainly seen a couple of months' wear without being changed; and it was therefore pretty evident that either the Chevalier Kadger's wardrobe was singularly deficient, or else that he had entirely lost the confidence of his washerwoman.

The equerry, turning his back toward Christian, made all possible haste to hook his frogged and braided coat, which, as it fastened close up to the chin, effectually concealed that little trifling deficiency in the linen department which had betrayed itself to our young hero's knowledge. At this moment the Chevalier Gumbinnen, lord chamberlain and principal lord of the bedchamber, came rushing into the anteroom, where he pulled the bell violently. This exalted official in the service of an illustrious master seemed to be in as towering a rage as Baron Raggidbak was a few minutes before, when surprised in his airy condition and thrifty occupation; indeed, so much was the Chevalier Gumbinnen excited that he did not notice Christian's presence. The furious summons of the bell was almost instantaneously answered by a waiter, and the chevalier, grasping him by the arm, said, "De breeshes!"

The waiter shook his head in evident inability to comprehend the chevalier's meaning.

"De breeshes!" repeated this functionary, in the highest state of excitement; and no wonder, for he had just used all the English that he knew, and was totally unable to express himself by another syllable of our vernacular.

The Chevalier Kadger, who had by this time finished buttoning up his coat, came to his friend's assistance. A few words were rapidly exchanged in German, and then the Chevalier Kadger, addressing himself to the waiter, said, "Mine goot mans, de lord chamberlain sall come for to ask for de breeshes of his Royal Highness."

Then, as the waiter stared in astonishment, the Chevalier Kadger proceeded to explain, in the best English he could possibly muster to his aid, that the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha's best pantaloons had been sent on the previous day to the tailor to have stripes of gold-lace sewn upon the legs, that the pantaloons aforesaid had not come home, and that his Royal Highness was kept waiting in the cold, in his shirt,

for these identical breeches, without which it would be exceedingly inconvenient, not to say impossible, for the illustrious sovereign to appear at the review. Such was the explanation of his Royal Highness's dilemma, and the waiter promised to send round at once to the tailor's for the missing pantaloons; but Christian observed that the man could scarcely repress a smile, while our hero himself had still more difficulty in keeping down an outburst of laughter.

Thinking that by this time Baron Raggidbak might have finished mending his own breeches, and that the secretary's room would be now disengaged, Christian was proceeding thither, when his attention was drawn to the explosion of a sudden altercation between General Himmelspinken and Count Frumpenhausen. The latter nobleman — who, be it remembered, was Gold Stick in Waiting — had fashioned for himself a very fine plumage with the feathers of a cock pheasant's tail; and he was just on the point of fastening his plume to the side of his hat with a brass brooch such as can be purchased in the Lowther Arcade for eighteenpence, when General Himmelspinken snatched the plume away. Doubtless, as a military officer of high rank, and holding the eminent position of master of the horse, his Excellency the General conceived that he himself was the most fitting and proper person to wear the plume. Count Frumpenhausen however thought otherwise, and a violent dispute arose. The general, with the characteristic bravery of a true warrior, proceeded to protect his plunder by force of arms, — or rather of fists, — and he made a desperate onslaught on Count Frumpenhausen. The combat raged between the two, and while they were thus fighting, Herr Humbogh, the privy seal, walked quietly off with the plume, and seating himself at the farther end of the apartment, began attaching it to his own beaver, in the very place where the said beaver (which was a shocking bad one) was most battered. Count Wronki's interference put an end to the quarrel between the valorous general and the titled Frumpenhausen, but nothing could induce Herr Humbogh to deliver up the plume; and sticking his hat, thus decorated, on the side of his head, he strutted to and fro with such an air of defiance that neither of the two discomfited disputants dared approach him in a menacing manner.

With mingled feelings of disgust and amazement, yet

entertwined with an almost irresistible sense of whatsoever was ludicrous in these proceedings, Christian repaired to the secretary's room; but he found the door locked, and therefore naturally concluded that his lordship Baron Raggidbak had thus shut himself in to finish his task in peace and quietness. Our young hero accordingly returned to the antechamber, which he reached just at the moment the waiter was reappearing to report progress to the two chevaliers in respect to the ducal inexpressibles. Christian therefore overheard the explanation. Gold-lace, it was represented, was exceedingly dear; and as the broadest stripes had been placed on his Royal Highness's pantaloons, besides the said pantaloons being resealed, the cost thereof amounted to three guineas, which the tailor, without meaning any disrespect toward the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, would rather see paid before he delivered up the unmentionables. Christian could not help thinking that this was a pretty pickle for a reigning duke to be placed in, and doubtless the two chevaliers thought so likewise. They hastily conferred together in German for a few moments; then the Chevalier Gumbinnen, putting his hand into his pocket, drew forth eighteenpence, while the Chevalier Kadger, imitating his example, displayed threepence three farthings; but as these united sums were very far from making up the requisite amount, the faces of the two chevaliers became exceedingly blank, and their manner singularly bewildered. At this crisis Baron Farthenless, the privy purse, appeared upon the scene, and Christian thought that no advent could possibly be more propitious than that of the high functionary who had charge of the ducal exchequer. But, alas! the baron's name proved to be typical of his condition — namely, farthingless; and no money was therefore forthcoming. Christian — in spite of his resolves not to be fleeced by his German friends — now stepped forward, and addressing himself to the Chevalier Kadger, said, in the most delicate manner, "I have some change at your disposal."

The amount was accordingly produced; the waiter sped off to procure the royal pantaloons, which now quickly made their appearance, after the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had been kept precisely half an hour shivering in the cold for the want of them. Things progressed somewhat more comfortably now; the various toilets were completed,

and as noon approached, a sufficient number of horses arrived from Buckingham Palace for the accommodation of the duke and his suite. A crowd was collected in the street to feast their eyes with the grandeur of the imposing procession, and his Royal Highness marched forth in all the glory of the inexpressibles which Christian Ashton's money had redeemed from pawn at the hands of the mistrustful tailor. Herr Humbogh looked splendid indeed with the plume of pheasant's feathers, and Baron Raggidbak's breeches held firmly together as his lordship mounted the steed allotted to his use. The other nobles and gentlemen of the suite were equally well pleased with their own toilets; and as the sun was shining, its beams made all their worthless jewelry glitter like real gold. The ducal cortège passed away amidst the cheers of the multitudes, who little suspected what sort of persons they were on whom they thus bestowed their applause. And here we may add that the mistrustful tailor, who would not give the German sovereign credit for three guineas, forthwith ordered the arms of that selfsame sovereign to be fixed above his shop door; and on the strength of the three guineas' worth of work which he had done, he wrote himself up, "Tailor, by Appointment, to his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha."

Before concluding this chapter, we will take the liberty of drawing one moral from the incidents we have related, which is, that gathered crowds, instead of thoughtlessly and giddily bestowing their cheers upon royal and aristocratic personages simply because they bear royal and aristocratic titles, should pause to ask themselves whether these personages, by their own merits, deserve the homage thus shown them and the plaudits thus showered upon their heads.

CHAPTER IX

THE REVIEW

THE Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha had signified to Christian through Count Wronki, who signified the same through the Chevalier Gumbinnen, who delivered the message through the Chevalier Kadger, that he might take a holiday on this grand occasion. Our hero accordingly resolved to see the review, and he bent his way toward Hyde Park for the purpose.

It is not our intention to enter into descriptive details with regard to the spectacle. Suffice it to say that the large enclosure of the Park was occupied by the troops as well as by a large crowd of spectators. Immense numbers of carriages thronged in the drive, some containing elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen, but most of them being empty, their owners preferring to enter the enclosure upon foot, in order to obtain a nearer view of the military proceedings. Prince Albert and several English generals, attended by "a brilliant staff," — to use the invariable newspaper phrase, — were present; but, as a matter of course, the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha was the lion of the occasion, and the public journals of the following day spoke of this illustrious prince as being attended by "a splendid retinue of all the great dignitaries of his household." It was, however, somewhat difficult to conceive by what possible means the reporters could have become so enamoured of Herr Humbogh's plume, Baron Raggidbak's pantaloons, or, in short, of any portion of the toilet of the ducal suite. But perhaps, like theatrical properties, it all looked very well at a distance; and we know that the gentlemen of the daily press do not choose to be hypercritical in any matter where royalty or royalty's adherents are concerned.

Christian mingled with the crowd, and looked about to see whether his sister, with Lady Octavian Meredith, was present. He however saw nothing of them, and at length getting wearied of the scene, began to think of departure. He had gained the outskirts of the crowd, when he beheld the Honourable Mr. Stanhope lounging along upon foot; and it was tolerably evident that this gentleman must have lunched well, for it was clear that he was labouring under the effect of copious potations. Not that he was so far intoxicated as to stagger about, but he was much excited, and with an impudent leer was regarding all the good-looking females who happened to come in his way. Christian felt an insuperable disgust for this man, with the villainy of whose character he was so well acquainted; and as he beheld him rivet his insolent libertine looks upon several females who did not happen to have any male companions, he could scarcely restrain his indignation. All of a sudden he perceived an elegantly dressed young lady hastening along, and looking with a sort of wildness all about, as if she had by accident been separated from the friends who brought her thither, or else as if she were in search of some particular equipage amongst the countless vehicles which were drawn up three deep in the road against the wooden barriers. But now, as she drew nigh and Christian caught a glimpse of her countenance, how great was his surprise and joy on recognizing the beautiful Isabella Vincent!

He was springing forward to greet her, and to ascertain wherefore she was thus looking confused and dismayed, when he beheld Wilson Stanhope accost her, and he evidently said something impudent, for Isabella flung upon him a look of dignified indignation, though at the same instant her countenance became crimson. This was sufficient, ay, and far more than sufficient, to excite Christian to the extreme of irritation against that treacherous accomplice in the Duke of Marchmont's foul iniquity. With one bound Christian was upon the spot, and quick as thought Stanhope was levelled with the earth, our young hero's hand dealing the blow which thus prostrated him.

"Heavens, Miss Vincent!" he ejaculated, instantaneously turning toward the young lady; "that ruffian dared insult you, as he once insulted my sister."

But Isabella could not speak a word, she was so over-

whelmed with confusion and affright. A crowd was gathering around the spot, and numerous voices ejaculated an approval of what our hero had done, for he was not the only one who had been observing Stanhope's insolent behaviour. As for this individual himself, he sprang to his feet and was about to give vent to bitter imprecations against the gallant one who had stricken him down, but recognizing our young hero, he became speechless, was cowed and dismayed, for he had heard from Marchmont the dénouement of the plot at Oaklands, and how it had been so completely frustrated and exposed through Christian's instrumentality. A policeman quickly made his way through the crowd, and while Christian led Miss Vincent off, the bystanders acquainted the constable with Mr. Stanhope's insolent conduct, and how deservedly it had been chastised. It was evident, too, that Stanhope had been drinking, and the police officer summarily ejected him from the park, threatening to take him into custody if he dared offer the slightest resistance.

Meanwhile Christian, as already said, had hurried Isabella away, and the beautiful girl of sixteen clung to his arm as to that of a protector, or as a sister might to that of a brother. She was still so much under the influence of her agitated feelings as to be for the first few moments totally unable to give utterance to a word, or to express her gratitude to Christian otherwise than by a look; and in this there was a certain tenderness which, though quite consistent with virginal modesty and maiden bashfulness, nevertheless seemed to confirm the youth's hope that he was not altogether indifferent to her. Nor did he immediately speak again when thus leading her away from the crowd that had gathered on the spot where he so chivalrously vindicated her insulted innocence. There was a paradise of feeling in the youth's soul, — a pure and holy ecstasy of the heart which those who have loved well and fondly cannot fail to comprehend, and which was too deep for utterance. At length he said, in that low voice which invariably belongs to emotions so profound, so ineffably blissful, "Were you separated from your friends, Miss Vincent? Were you looking for any one?"

"Yes, Mr. Ashton," she answered. "But permit me to express all the gratitude — Ah, here he is!" she abruptly ejaculated.

At the same moment a tall, handsome, elegantly dressed young gentleman came hurrying toward them, and at the very first glimpse of that countenance of perfect manly beauty, Christian could not help experiencing a sudden pang which was very much like that of jealousy, — if not jealousy, at all events a feeling of annoyance that another should have a right to claim the privilege of escorting the lovely Isabella.

“Why, how was it that we missed you?” exclaimed the handsome individual, gazing with astonishment when he thus perceived Miss Vincent leaning upon the arm of our hero, who was younger than himself, and in every degree as handsome.

“It was that sudden movement of the crowd,” answered Isabella, “which caused such confusion where we were standing. And, oh, I have been so insulted, — and this gentleman,” she continued, looking gratefully toward Christian, “conducted himself with so much generosity —”

“I most sincerely thank you,” said the handsome personage, taking Christian’s hand and pressing it warmly. “Pardon me if I be somewhat abrupt, but there are others close by who are uneasy on Miss Vincent’s behalf —”

Thus speaking, he proffered his arm to Isabella, by his manner and his unfinished speech showing that he was anxious to hurry her away. She shook hands with Christian, and with another look expressed her gratitude, — expressed it, too, with a slight tinge of tenderness, as much as a delicate-minded young lady could possibly display. Her companion bowed courteously; they hurried on in the direction of a carriage in which a gentleman and lady were seated, but whose faces Christian could not obtain a glimpse of. Isabella and her companion at once entered this carriage, which immediately dashed away, and our hero saw that it was the same which had been sent a week back to convey Miss Vincent from Mrs. Chubb’s house. He was half-inclined to inquire of one of the lackeys belonging to the other carriages whose equipage that particular one was, but they were all busy in leaping up to their places, for the throng of vehicles was being set in motion to take up their owners wheresoever they might be found, as the review was now over and the crowds were pouring out of the enclosure. Therefore Christian walked slowly away without putting the question, and in his heart there was a strange

commingling of pleasurable and disagreeable sensations. The look of virginal tenderness which Isabella had thrown upon him produced the former feeling; but, on the other hand, he could not think with any degree of satisfaction of the companionship in which he had left her, — the companionship of that young, handsome, elegantly dressed, and aristocratic-looking personage. Besides, it was but too evident that she had found either wealthy relatives or friends; and though in one sense he rejoiced that her position should be so suddenly improved, yet on the other hand he could not help thinking that this very improvement in her circumstances had opened an immense gulf between herself and him. Yet again did hope steal into his soul with a soothing and solacing effect, — that youthful hope which in the flight of fancy surmounts all barriers and overleaps all chasms, however high the former and however profound the latter.

Retracing his way slowly from Hyde Park, Christian wandered through the streets, reflecting on all that had occurred, until he approached the tavern where he was accustomed to dine since he had lodged at Mrs. Chubb's, and for which an hour in the afternoon was allowed by his ducal employer. He entered the coffee-room of the tavern, seated himself at the table, and gave his orders to the waiter. The place was unusually crowded, and in the course of a few minutes another gentleman came and took a seat at the same table. He was a foreigner, bearded and moustached, well dressed, and of good manners. Making Christian a bow with true Continental politeness, he expressed a hope that he should not be inconveniencing him by sitting down at the same table. He spoke English with considerable fluency, though with a German accent. Christian at once set him at his ease in respect to the object of apology, and they soon got into a conversation together. After a few indifferent remarks, the German gentleman began to speak of the grand military spectacle in Hyde Park, and which it appeared he had witnessed.

“And I also saw it,” responded our hero. “It was given in honour of one of your native princes, who was present with his retinue.”

“Ah, his retinue,” said the German, with a short, dry cough; and then he drank his wine, but with a peculiar look, as if he could say something if he chose.

Christian perceived what was passing in his mind, and being curious to glean all he could in respect to his German friends, he thought it more prudent to abstain from intimating that he himself held a temporary post in his Royal Highness's service.

"If it be not impertinent," he said, "do you come from that part of Germany in which the duke's dominions are situated?"

"Ah bah! his dominions!" ejaculated the German, evidently no longer able to restrain himself. "Pretty dominions indeed, a few hundred acres! Why, you have plenty of noblemen and gentlemen in your country possessing estates any one of which is as large as the whole duchy of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha."

"Do you disparage your own native institutions?" asked Christian, with a smile.

"I hate and detest the institutions," responded the foreigner, with strong emphasis, "which have parcelled out that fine country into all these wretched trumpery principalities, miserable in extent and of the meanest poverty. I am for German nationality, — Germany to be one and indivisible; and therefore you may readily conceive that I am no friend to its present partition. It is nothing but a nest of execrable despotisms — all the more execrable, too, because so thoroughly paltry and insignificant. A traveller may contemplate with a certain reverential awe, even if not with love, a mighty chain of mountains that bars his way, but if he find himself stopped by a wretched anthill, he would be overwhelmed with shame and disgust, he would be shocked at his own miserable self-abasement at not being able to clear such a barrier. In the same way would he contemplate with awe the spectacle of a broad and ample river impeding his course, but what would be his feelings if he found himself compelled to stop short on the edge of a dirty and insignificant puddle! Thus is it with these paltry German despotisms, in comparison with the huge ones of other nations that I might name, and yet they all alike serve as barriers to human progress."

"It is true," said Christian, at once appreciating the truth of his companion's reasoning.

"And you will be all the more struck by what I have said," continued the latter, "when I inform you that I

myself am a native of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, and consequently a subject — bah, a subject!” he repeated, with indescribable disgust, “of this very duke in whose honour the grand review has to-day been held.”

“Indeed!” ejaculated Christian, whose curiosity was all the more vividly excited because he saw that his German acquaintance had something yet to reveal. “Your conversation interests me much —”

“And I could, if I chose, astonish you more than I have interested you,” interrupted the German. Then, after a pause, he went on to say, in a confidential manner and in a whispering tone, “I saw this precious retinue to which you just now alluded, and I recognized all the knaves composing it as well as I should recognize my own brother if he came into the room at this moment. Ay, and my blood boils with shame and indignation at the bare idea of the astounding cheat which is being practised upon the English people. All Germany is degraded, humiliated, and dishonoured by this fellow of a duke who dresses up his lackeys and bestows upon them titles of nobility which they only bear while in England, and which they will have to put off when they get back to Germany and return to the pantry, the stable, and the kitchen.”

“Surely you are using some hyperbolic figure of speech?” exclaimed Christian, perfectly astounded at what he had just heard.

“No figure of speech at all,” responded the German, who spoke with the concentrated bitterness of supreme disgust, but with an air of the most genuine sincerity. “If you have patience to hear me run through the catalogue of names, with the real and the fictitious avocations of the individuals themselves, I will tell you something that cannot fail to strike you with amazement.”

Christian leaned over the table with a look of profoundest interest, and the German gentleman proceeded as follows:

“In the first place, there is the fellow Wronki, who is in reality the duke’s butler, but he is dubbed a count for the nonce and elevated to the dignity of lord steward. Then there is Gumbinnen, who when at home in Germany is the duke’s valet, but in England he is a chevalier and lord chamberlain. Thirdly, there is the half-starved scamp Raggidbak, the duke’s stable groom, but who is now called groom

of the stole and dubbed a baron. When he gets back to Germany he will have to shovel up the dung again. Then comes Himmelspinken; he is another groom, but here called a general and master of the horse. Master of the horse indeed! he has rubbed one down pretty often, I can tell you! Next comes Herr Humbogh — and a veritable humbug, too, as you would call him in your language. Here he is figuring away as the privy seal, whereas in Germany he is messenger at the duke's gate. The fellow Kadger is in reality a footman, but now a chevalier and equerry. Frumpenhausein, rejoicing in the title of count, and acting as Gold Stick, is a lackey who attends on the duke's carriage, and in that capacity carries the brass-headed cane which here is dignified as a gold stick. Ah! there is one more whom I had almost forgotten, and this is the man Farthenless, who must be very much astonished to find himself a baron, but perhaps still more so at being privy purse, seeing that the ducal purse is not so capacious as to render a custodian necessary. But now, what do you think Farthenless is? A pawnbroker's man!"

Christian could not speak for astonishment.

"Yes, such, I can assure you, is the fact," proceeded the German, "and I will tell you how it happens. You must know that all the duke's plate was unfortunately in pledge when he received the invitation to pay his present visit to England. What was to be done? He could not redeem it; the pawnbroker would not part with it out of his own keeping; and a reigning sovereign could not come to England to stay at a hotel without his own plate. The dilemma was serious, but a compromise was hit upon. It was agreed that the pawnbroker's assistant should bring over the plate, travelling in the ducal retinue, and with special injunctions to keep a sharp eye upon the property; for the duke is quite as capable of laying hands upon it as any of the starvelings that surround him. So I suppose it was deemed prudent to give the fellow Farthenless an official department; hence the dignity of baron and the post of privy purse, both of which he will have to renounce the instant he gets back to Germany."

Christian was amazed almost to stupefaction by what he had heard, and the especial care which he had seen Baron Farthenless bestow upon the ducal plate was now fully

accounted for. He remained a little longer in conversation with the intelligent German, and then took his departure from the tavern, more than half-inclined to send in his resignation to his Royal Highness. But when he reflected that the term for which he was engaged would elapse in another fortnight, he considered that it would be as well to remain for so short a space, and to this decision he accordingly came. We need hardly inform the reader that the principal subject which continued to occupy his mind — and to which all that related to the pauper duke and his frowzy horde was but of second-rate importance — was the new and indeed brilliant position in which he found Isabella placed; nor less did he ponder with some degree of uneasiness on her companionship with that handsome and elegant-looking young man. Still Christian flattered himself that he was not altogether indifferent to the young lady; and he entertained so high an opinion of her that he could not believe she would prove faithless to any such tender feeling entertained on his behalf — if it were really experienced. But, on the other hand, a fear would steal into his mind that the influence of the new friends, or of the relatives — whichever they were — whom Isabella had found, might possibly lead her to yield to their views, and form some brilliant alliance which it was natural enough they should seek for her. Still, as we have said on former occasions, there was hope in the youth's heart; and in juxtaposition with his apprehensions did imagination conjure up a proportionate amount of cheering dreams.

Thus the fortnight passed away, during which Christian saw nothing more of the beautiful Isabella, and experienced no further adventure in respect to the Germans at all deserving of notice. At the end of that period he received his dismissal, together with a certificate of good conduct from his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, and he was once more out of employment. Again he inserted an advertisement in the newspapers and in the course of a few days he received a note from the Earl of Lascelles, desiring him to call at his mansion at Kensington.

It was a fine day in the month of March, and about the hour of noon, that Christian Ashton proceeded to Kensington, and was introduced into a large and handsomely furnished library, where he was desired to wait a few minutes and his

lordship would be with him. Christian examined the bookshelves, and found that they were crowded with splendidly bound volumes, belonging, as a matter of course, to all classes of literature, but it occurred to him that very few appeared to have been at all used. Indeed, the impression produced upon his mind was that the library was what it too often is in the mansions of the great, — intended more for show than for service. He wondered to himself what sort of a nobleman the Earl of Lascelles would prove to be, and in imagination he was depicting a tall, aristocratic-looking individual, when the door opened, and an old gentleman of sixty, of most ungainly figure, apparelled with a ludicrous admixture of old beau dandyism and of slovenliness, with large, prominent features, the expression of which almost provoked an inclination to laughter, made his appearance. Christian was marvelling who this could be, — whether the majordomo, the butler, the valet, or any other functionary of the nobleman's household, when the odd-looking individual, advancing straight up to him, said, with a patronizing smile, "So you are the young gentleman who advertised for the post of private secretary? Well, upon my word, your appearance is prepossessing enough. You say your testimonials are good, but I am terribly difficult to please, and I must examine you critically."

Christian had now no longer any doubt as to whose presence it was in which he stood, but he could not help thinking that his lordship was more fitted by nature to play the part of buffoon upon the stage than to enact that of an hereditary legislator.

"Sit down, Mr. Ashton, and let us converse," resumed the Earl of Lascelles. "First of all, with regard to the testimonials?"

Christian produced them, and as the earl took the papers, he said, "You see I can read perfectly well without spectacles, and yet nowadays it seems to be the fashion for gentlemen to take to glasses at my age, which is five and forty."

Christian could scarcely help starting, for he would have wagered his existence that the earl was sixty, if he was a single day.

"Ah, an excellent testimonial from the Duke of Marchmont! I know his Grace well. Between you and me,"

continued the earl, "they say that his Grace and myself are the two stars of the House, — in respect to personal appearance, I mean."

Again Christian felt astonished, as well indeed he might, for the Duke of Marchmont was a tall, well-made personage, and he had once been handsome enough until dissipation and evil passions had begun to mar his good looks; whereas the Earl of Lascelles had never the slightest pretensions to any such good looks at all, and was now a living counterfeit, an animate artificiality, a peripatetic cheat, a breathing lie, made up of padded garments, false hair and false teeth, and even a false complexion.

"Yes, we are called the stars of the House," continued his lordship, with an air of bland and condescending communicativeness, at the same time grinning like an antiquated goat; "but as for eloquence, I don't say I flatter myself — I only repeat what the public press says — when I add that his Grace cannot hold a candle to me. You shall come some evening to the House when I am going to make one of my grand displays of three or four hours. You will be astonished at the effect. Some of the noble lords rush out from the House the moment I rise, and never come back till I have done; they can't stand the excitement of such thrilling oratory. Others will listen all the time with their eyes shut, so that they may concentrate their attention inwardly, and not lose a single word of what falls from my lips. I am not vain, Mr. Ashton, — though vanity is, after all, the foible of young men like you and me; but I may say that those are the effects of a very peculiar power of oratory."

"Doubtless, my lord," answered Christian, and perhaps his response was susceptible of a double interpretation.

"Ah! this testimonial is from his Royal Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. I knew his father well. I had a grand battle with him once."

"In the war-time, my lord?" asked Christian, fancying that he ought to say something.

"No, at the dinner-table," responded the earl. "The duke prided himself upon being a very great eater, and was honoured accordingly in his own capital and by all the German sovereigns. Well, during my travels, I arrived in the city of Quotha, and hearing of the duke's fame, was determined to put it to the test. I must tell you that his

Serene Highness — for the German princes were only serene in those days, and not royal — his Serene Highness, as I was saying, was fond of challenges of that sort, and prided himself on having eaten three Englishmen into an apoplexy and four Scotchmen into an indigestion which turned to chronic dyspepsia; so that when I respectfully provoked him to a contest, he made sure of achieving an additional triumph. I laid his Serene Highness five thousand guineas against the Order of the Cormorant, instituted by his Serene Highness himself. Well, we sat down to table, surrounded by the whole court. His Serene Highness led the way with a dish of sourcrout, but I declared that I could not do things in such a peddling, trifling manner, and I requested to have a barrel brought in. You would scarcely believe it, Mr. Ashton, but I had got into the middle of the barrel before his Serene Highness had got half-way through his dish. Then he took the roast meat and poultry, but there I beat him by half a fowl and a pigeon. He insisted upon tackling a dish of hard eggs, thinking that they would stick in my throat, and so they did, too, with a vengeance, but I nevertheless beat him by a yelk. He was ill for six weeks afterward, and I was the hero of the entire court during my residence there.”

Christian Ashton could not help thinking that his lordship had become a hero on very singular terms, and the earl proceeded to read the second certificate.

“ Well, these are unexceptionable,” he said, “ and I think you will do.”

Christian ventured to inquire what the nature of his duties would be, and the nobleman went on to explain them.

“ The fact is, I have travelled a great deal, I have seen many strange things, I have been involved in some extraordinary adventures. I think of publishing my memoirs. I have already made many notes and memoranda, and there will be little trouble in arranging them properly. When I take a thing in hand, I am terribly energetic in carrying it out. My mind is bent upon this, and we shall work furiously. You must come and live in the neighbourhood, so that you may be always at hand when I want you; and as for salary, you may name your own terms.”

Christian scarcely thought that the situation would suit him, inasmuch as he had already seen enough of his lordship

to form the very meanest idea of his general character. But while he was reflecting, and the earl was rattling away with some new anecdote, comprising a tissue of falsehoods, the youth, happening to glance from the window (the library being on the ground floor), perceived two ladies strolling with a gentleman in the grounds. He could not see their faces, but the figure of one of those ladies produced an immediate impression upon our young hero, filling his heart with mingled hope, astonishment, and suspense. His countenance did not, however, betray any of these emotions, and the earl, happening at the same time to glance through the window, exclaimed, "That lady on the right is the Countess of Lascelles. She is a wife every way worthy of such a husband, — young and beautiful, elegant and accomplished. And that is my son, Lord Osmond. Ah! I see you start with surprise, and well you may. You naturally wonder that I can have a son of his age? But between you and me, I was wonderfully precocious, and was a father at seventeen. That other young lady is my niece, Miss Vincent."

The reader cannot be at a loss to conjecture why Christian had started. It was not because he was in the least astonished at the vain and frivolous earl having a son of such an age, seeing that he had rightly guessed his lordship's own years to have reached sixty, so that he might very well have a son of twenty-three, but it was that at the moment the trio turned around at the end of the gravel walk, and Christian not only recognized in Lord Osmond the tall, handsome young man through whom he had already experienced some little degree of mental trouble, but the sight of Isabella's lovely countenance had sent a thrill of joy through his heart. He now no longer hesitated to accept the proffered situation. He paused not to reflect whether he should be allowed to retain it when it came to be discovered that he was acquainted with Miss Vincent. The bare thought of obtaining a post which might bring him for hours together within the same walls which she evidently inhabited was alone sufficient to make him hasten to conclude the bargain. The matter of salary was soon settled, and it was understood that he was to remove into the neighbourhood that very day, in order to be at hand to commence his duties on the ensuing one.

"I mean to treat you quite in a friendly and confidential

manner," proceeded the earl, "and therefore come with me and I will introduce you to the ladies and my son."

Thus speaking, the earl opened a casement reaching down to the ground, and which therefore served the purpose of a glass door, affording egress upon the grounds. Christian followed with a heart palpitating violently. A thousand hopes and fears swept in a few moments through his mind, for he knew that now was the crisis to decide whether he should retain the post so eagerly sought, or whether the earl should think fit to decline his services.

"My dear Ethel," exclaimed the old nobleman, hastening toward the countess, "I am going to do what I have said. I shall write my memoirs. I have engaged a secretary, he is fully competent, we begin work to-morrow morning, and as he is a very genteel youth, I want to introduce him."

Lord Osmond fancied at the first glance which he threw upon Christian that he had seen him somewhere before, but did not instantaneously recollect the how or the when. But Isabella's astonishment — and we may add her pleasure — were great indeed on perceiving Christian Ashton diffidently advancing behind her uncle, and on hearing the old nobleman proclaim that he had engaged him as a secretary.

"Why, Cousin Bella!" said Lord Osmond, suddenly remembering where he had seen Christian, and now turning to Miss Vincent, "this is the very young gentleman who acted so nobly three or four weeks back at the review."

"Hey! — what?" cried the earl, in astonishment, but by no means in dissatisfaction. "Mr. Ashton the one who chastised that impertinent coxcomb? How was it you did not mention his name, Bella?"

"I did mention his name, uncle," answered Miss Vincent, with a modest blush. "I told you it was Mr. Ashton, with whom I happened to be acquainted."

"Yes, I remember perfectly well," said the Countess of Lascelles, "that Isabella mentioned Mr. Ashton's name."

"Then I had forgotten it," exclaimed the nobleman. "But it is no matter."

"I am pleased to meet you again, Mr. Ashton," said Lord Osmond, frankly proffering his hand to our young hero.

Isabella also gave him her hand, and again did the modest blush appear upon her countenance. Lord Osmond observed that tremulous confusion on her part, but affected not to

notice it. As for the earl, he saw it not, for he had turned to his wife, and was launching forth into a description of the marvellous adventures he intended to give in his book, and of the tremendous sensation it was certain to excite when published. Christian now thought it becoming to make his bow and depart, and the earl charged him to be punctual at the mansion at eleven o'clock on the following day. The youth was retiring through the grounds toward the entrance gates, when he beheld that same individual (mentioned to him as Mr. Gibson) who had fetched away Miss Vincent from Mr. Chubb's residence. The recognition was instantaneously mutual, and the man, with a sinister look, started visibly on thus beholding our hero. He however said nothing, and Christian took his departure with feelings of mingled joy and wonderment. The source of his joy needs no description, but we must say a word or two in respect to the other feeling which inspired him. Was he to conclude that it was not on his account, after all, that the beautiful Isabella had been removed from the parish clerk's house? But if not so, then what became of Mrs. Chubb's tale relative to Mr. Gibson's annoyance at finding that he was lodging in the same house with Isabella? However, Christian had obtained the situation, the earl had confirmed him in it after discovering that he was previously acquainted with Miss Vincent, and therefore, though our hero wondered at some part of the whole proceeding, he had nothing to be troubled at; on the contrary, every reason to be rejoiced.

We have said that Lord Osmond noticed Isabella's tremulous confusion when she encountered Christian, but that he affected not to perceive it. This circumstance requires some little explanation. Lord Osmond, as the reader is aware, was profoundly enamoured of his mother-in-law, the beautiful Countess of Lascelles, and therefore he entertained not the slightest scintillation of jealousy in respect to his cousin Isabella and Christian Ashton. On the contrary, when he thought he had discovered that these two were not indifferent to each other, he was rather glad of it, for it immediately struck him that if Isabella and Christian could be more or less thrown together, it would afford him (Lord Osmond) all the better opportunities of being alone with Ethel.

About an hour after Christian's departure, the Earl of

Lascalles was seated in the library, arranging his memoranda in readiness for work on the following day, when the confidential valet Makepeace entered the room on some pretence or another.

"Well, Makepeace," said the nobleman, looking up from his papers with a self-satisfied air, "I mean to astonish the whole world."

"The world, my lord," responded the sycophantic valet, "can be astonished at no achievement on your lordship's part."

"I think there is some truth in that," said the earl, caressing his chin as he lounged back in the chair. "Nevertheless, my contemplated book will crown all my other triumphs, and I have engaged a secretary to assist in writing it."

"That young gentleman, my lord, whom I saw going out just now?" inquired Makepeace, deferentially.

"The same," rejoined the earl. "I am convinced he is a youth of great ability and lively intelligence, by the way he listened to that anecdote of mine about my German feat. I don't think I ever told it you —"

For the first time in his life Makepeace did not wait to hear the anecdote, but interrupting his noble master, said, significantly, "I presume your lordship cannot be aware that this is the very young gentleman —"

"Who lodged at the Rubbs' or the Dubbs' or whatever their name is?" exclaimed the earl. "In general I have an excellent memory for names, but I have lost sight of that one. Do you know, Makepeace, that when I was travelling in Russia I fell in with a young Englishman who had dislocated his jaw?"

"Indeed, my lord? Was it by a fall from his horse?"

"Oh, no. Merely by pronouncing the names of Russian noblemen, some of which would cover a sheet of paper to write them, and are all consonants. But I could pronounce them all with the greatest ease. Indeed, I was always a good hand at hard words. When I was seven years old I had all the classics at my fingers' ends, and made no difficulty of that name which was invented by Plautus — Thesaurοchrysonichochrysidēs."

"I have often admired your lordship's extraordinary memory on such points," said Makepeace. "But about that young man —"

“ Well, I know all about him,” exclaimed the earl. “ He lodged at the parish clerk’s. But don’t you see that things are greatly altered now, and even if there was ever any danger of my niece falling in love with the youth, there cannot be under existing circumstances. Besides, the landlady herself assured you that the young people scarcely ever saw each other; and now that I have purposely had Isabella brought home to the mansion that she may captivate my son’s heart, she will of course jump at so splendid an alliance. Ah, it was an admirable stroke of policy on my part! But I think you will admit, Makepeace, that I am rather a shrewd and far-seeing man? ”

“ Your lordship is aware I have always expressed my astonishment that your lordship has not accepted the post of prime minister, which I am aware has been declined by your lordship on more occasions than one.”

“ Well, Makepeace, perhaps I had my reasons,” said the earl, complacently. “ But about the matter of which you were speaking. You see that when Lord Osmond threw himself at my feet, a couple of months back, and implored my pardon for his previous misconduct in choosing to show his airs in respect to my second marriage, I could not very well help forgiving him. Besides, when I questioned her ladyship with regard to the motive of the visit he paid her at that time, she frankly informed me it was to convey through her the assurance of his contrition. What, then, was I to do? There was no alternative but to forgive Lord Osmond, and in forgiving him, to intimate that he might return and live at home.

“ Then, don’t you see, other reflections arose in my mind? Of course I am not jealous. I flatter myself that Lord Osmond, though younger than me, has not much the advantage in respect to good looks. In fact, between you and me, Makepeace, I don’t think his hair curls so nicely, nor with such a natural effect, as this new peruke of mine. However, without being jealous, you know, it was only proper and becoming enough that I should give the countess a female companion, — you comprehend, — not only for her own sake, and to prevent her from being thrown too much into the society of one whom I know that in her heart she does not like, but also to prevent the scandal-loving, tittle-tattling, gossiping part of the world from having any

ground for impertinent or malicious observations. You understand, Makepeace, eh?"

"Perfectly, my lord," responded the valet, with his wonted obsequious bow. "The policy was admirable, my lord, admirable."

"I was sure you would say so," continued the earl. "Well, then, when you came and told me that, contrary to all previous understanding, there was a young gentleman lodging in the same house where Miss Vincent had been placed, it set me a thinking; and when I do think, Makepeace, it is no ordinary affair, I can tell you. In fact, I always reason with myself, — there is nothing like it; I find it so much easier to convince myself than any one else. So, while I was thinking on this subject, I came to the conclusion that it was necessary to remove Miss Vincent from a house where she might run the chance of falling in love with somebody who would not be rich enough to make her his wife. One thought leads to another, Makepeace, and so it struck me that I might just as well have the girl home at once; for, after all, she had nothing to do with her deceased parents' offences against me. I reasoned that she would be an excellent companion for the countess, and that if my son chose to fall in love with her, I really need not have any objection to their marriage. He will have plenty of money of his own, and, after all, the sooner he does marry the better."

"To be sure, my lord," answered Makepeace.

"And since you told me that Isabella had grown up to be such a beautiful girl, I thought it highly probable that Lord Osmond would fall in love with her. You see, I am very shrewd, Makepeace, very shrewd indeed. Do you know that when I was quite a boy — it was one day at a race-course — I guessed under which thimble the little pea was, — a thing that nobody was ever known to do before or has ever done since. It was the very first time of guessing, and I won half a crown. I remember it perfectly well, because I played on and lost nine pounds afterward, which was all I had about me."

"Your lordship was always noted for intelligence," observed the sycophantic valet.

"Well, you see my calculations are becoming correct. I watch Lord Osmond pretty narrowly, and always in my presence he shows the greatest attention toward Miss Vincent

and is exceedingly cool toward the countess. Perhaps I should be offended at this conduct on his part toward her ladyship were it not that lovers are always obliged to be cool to every lady except the object of their affection. Have not you noticed that my son is cool — almost pointedly so — in respect to her ladyship? ”

“ I have, my lord,” answered Makepeace, who, as the reader has observed, invariably shaped his responses so as to suit the humour of his noble master.

“ Well, then, all things considered, Makepeace,” continued the earl, “ there is no harm done in engaging this youth as my private secretary. You comprehend? Miss Vincent is sure to marry Lord Osmond, and there is not the slightest chance that she will bestow her affections on young Ashton. Besides, don’t you see, the presence of this exceedingly good-looking youth in the house will put my son on his mettle, so to speak, and will make him ply his suit all the more arduously with Isabella. Ha, ha, Makepeace, another proof of shrewdness, eh? another admirable stroke of policy on my part? ”

The valet of course assented, and here the discourse terminated, the foolish old nobleman chuckling over the various combinations which he was thus bringing about, and flattering himself that there was not in all the world such a cunning dog as he was.

CHAPTER X

THE TWO ACCIDENTS

BEFORE removing from Mrs. Chubb's to a new lodging at Kensington, Christian proceeded to pay two visits, one to his sister, and the other to Mr. Redcliffe. He communicated to Christina the intelligence that he had obtained a new situation, and the affectionate girl was delighted to find that her beloved brother so easily procured one employment after another. But on proceeding to Mrs. Macaulay's in Mortimer Street, Christian learned that Mr. Redcliffe had been out of town for some days, and that it was altogether uncertain when he would come back. Christian therefore left a note for him, making his kind friend acquainted with the change in his position, and expressing a hope to hear from him on his return to London. He then removed to Kensington, and entered upon the duties of his new situation.

Two or three weeks passed, and it was now the beginning of April. Three months had elapsed since Christina Ashton became the companion of Lady Octavian Meredith, and it becomes necessary for us to describe what had taken place during this interval. The reader will remember that Lord Octavian had persuaded Christina not to mention to Zoe the circumstance of their previous acquaintance, nor in any way to allude to the duel. It will likewise be borne in mind that it was with considerable reluctance the pure-minded Christina had assented to a course which she conceived to be fraught with a certain degree of duplicity toward her amiable friend and benefactress. Nevertheless, influenced by Lord Octavian's sophistical reasoning, the artless and inexperienced Christina was led to believe it was really for the sake of ensuring Zoe's happiness, and to avoid giving a shock to

her confidence in her husband, that the secret of the duel was to be so religiously kept.

For the first few weeks after our young heroine was installed in her new home, Lord Octavian's conduct was of such a character as to give her not the slightest uneasiness. He never sought to be alone with her; he never regarded her in a way that might lead her to suspect that he cherished a passion for her; his demeanour was precisely what it ought to be, that of a friendly but respectful courtesy. Nevertheless, the young nobleman continued to love Christina passionately, devotedly, we might almost say madly; but he endeavoured to exercise the strongest control over his feelings, and if he could not subdue them, he at least did not betray them. The reader has seen that there were many good qualities about Lord Octavian Meredith, — that he was naturally generous-hearted, and that though he did not love Zoe in the true meaning of the term, he nevertheless cherished a profound gratitude toward the wife who had brought him a fortune, and therefore experienced a full sense of his duty toward that wife. Besides, he perceived that she was devotedly attached to him, and it frequently made his heart cry out, as it were, in anguish to think that he could not adequately return the abounding fulness of the affection which she bestowed upon him. For all these reasons he made the mightiest efforts to stifle the feelings which he experienced toward Christina, and to force himself to remain in deed faithful to his wife, even if he could not be so in thought.

Thus, as we have said, several weeks passed away, and Christina had not the slightest reason to suspect that he cherished so profound a passion for her. It will be remembered that on the first day of her arrival he had rapturously taken her hand, and had regarded her with a degree of fervid admiration which she could not possibly help observing, and which had made her withdraw that hand somewhat abruptly, as the colour mounted to her cheeks and as her eyes were cast down, but she was led to reflect at the time that the man who had rescued her from insult, and had risked his life as the consequence, could not possibly mean himself to insult her. Therefore this particular incident which we have just brought back to the reader's recollection, and which occurred on the first day of her arrival, had not since

dwelt sufficiently in her mind to amount to a suspicion as to the real state of Lord Octavian's feelings toward her. But, at the expiration of a few weeks, a little incident occurred which began to produce a change in Christina's mind and make her think tremblingly on several subjects.

It was one day — while her brother was still in the employment of the German prince — that Christina, while descending with some degree of rapidity from her own chamber to the drawing-room, trod upon one of the brass rods of the stair-carpet which had got loose, and as it rolled beneath her foot, she fell heavily backward. Her head came with such sudden concussion against the stairs that she was so stupefied as to be unable to raise herself up. Some one was at the moment ascending the lower flight; it was Lord Octavian, and on perceiving what had happened, he sprang to our heroine's assistance. He raised her up in his arms, exclaiming, "Good God, are you hurt? Oh, speak to me! for Heaven's sake, speak to me! Sooner my own life, ten thousand times over, than yours."

These words startled Christina into fullest vitality again. Blushing, and full of confusion, she extricated herself from Lord Octavian's arms; bewildered by the effects of the blow and the impassioned ejaculations which had just burst from his lips, she could not murmur forth a single syllable of thanks for the succour he had rendered her; she staggered into the drawing-room, and sank upon a sofa with a returning sense of faintness. Octavian, who had now recovered his own self-possession, rang the bell violently, and ordered the maids to administer at once to Miss Ashton, describing the accident that had occurred. He then, with considerate delicacy, left the apartment, and in a short time Christina was so far recovered that she felt nothing beyond the pain arising from a severe contusion. We should observe that Lady Octavian Meredith was passing an hour with her father, Mr. Armytage, at the time that the accident occurred, and on her return, she was much distressed to hear of it.

But when Christina was alone, and enabled to deliberate without restraint upon the incident just described, what was the nature of her thoughts? Guileless and unsophisticated though she were, she could not possibly help feeling that there was in Octavian's ejaculations a certain enthusiasm and a wildness of fervour thoroughly disproportionate to

the occurrence itself, and which therefore raised up a vague and indistinct suspicion in the young damsel's mind. And now, too, as she pondered thereupon, back to her memory came the incident which marked the first day of her arrival, and which we ere now recalled to the remembrance of the reader. She began to see, too, that there was something more than she had previously fancied in Octavian's conduct in calling on her, after the duel, under a feigned name, and also in so urgently beseeching her not to mention their previous acquaintance to Zoe. All these reflections naturally engendered new ideas and troubling suspicions in the mind of Christina. Still the purity of her nature made her endeavour to throw off the influence of these suspicions, but she could not. And furthermore, in strictly and carefully analyzing her own feelings, the conviction gradually stole into her mind that it was more with surprise than displeasure, more with amazed confusion than with indignation or anger, that she had heard at the time those ejaculations sent forth from Octavian's lips. She shuddered with an unknown feeling. She felt as if she were doing something wrong; she thought that she should no longer remain beneath that roof, and indeed that she never ought to have tarried there at all when once she found that a secret subsisted between herself and Octavian and which was to be withheld from Zoe.

Yet what was she to do? To attach of her own accord importance to those ejaculations, — no, certainly not. To leave the house precipitately, and without being able to assign any specific cause, — equally impossible. She must remain therefore, — at least for the present; there was no other step to be taken. The reader will not be surprised that Christina mentioned not the incident at the time to her brother; it would have been to shock the delicacy of her own soul, to be outraging her own feelings, were she to attach importance to Octavian's ejaculations, or to take it upon herself to give them a specific significancy.

Weeks again passed away, but not in the same manner as before. If ever Octavian and Christina found themselves alone together — which, as they dwelt beneath the same roof, necessarily occurred now and then — there was a mutual constraint; it was a feeling of uneasiness, an awkwardness and embarrassment, reciprocally visible. It appeared as if Octavian had something to say, but dared not

give utterance to it, and as if Christina longed to dart from the room, but dared not take a step which would be so significant. Nor, when conversing in Zoe's presence, did the young nobleman and Christina look each other in the face with the same frankness as before. Octavian dared not trust his own regards, and Christina dared not meet them.

Thus painfully progressed matters after the little accident on the staircase. Nor again need the reader marvel if Christina made not a confidant of her brother, for if she analyzed her own feelings, she could not comprehend them, much less could she have explained them. It was with an effort that she now maintained a degree of cheerfulness; whatsoever gaiety she exhibited was not natural as it was wont to be, but it was forced. At length another incident occurred which proved in its consequences more serious still.

It was the beginning of April; the genial breath of an early spring was wooing the trees and the hedges to put forth their verdure, and the early flowers to show signs of returning animation. One day Zoe expressed a desire to take a drive into the country in a new phaeton which her husband had just purchased. It happened, however, that the domestic who attended the equipages had that very morning received a slight injury from one of the horses, and was unable to do his usual duty. But Octavian — who now more than ever strove to maintain the kindest treatment toward his amiable and devoted wife — was determined that she should not be disappointed, and he suggested that as he himself would drive they could easily dispense with the livery servant. They accordingly set out in the new phaeton, drawn by a pair of handsome galloways, caparisoned in the most tasteful manner. Lord Octavian occupied the box; Lady Octavian and Christina were seated together. The drive took place through the northern suburbs of London, and into the country in the direction of Enfield. The horses were a new acquisition, as well as the vehicle itself; they proved to be spirited, and one of them gave some little indications of being vicious. Zoe questioned her husband upon the subject, but he assured her that there was no danger. The young lady was reassured, and the equipage rolled on to some considerable distance from London.

Presently, on the summit of a hill, the sudden opening of the gate of a stable-yard attached to an isolated dwelling

caused the vicious-disposed galloway to shy; whereupon Meredith, in a somewhat intemperate manner, bestowed three or four good stripes upon the animal. They both set off at full speed, tearing down the hill as if they were mad; the phaeton flying along like a thing of no weight, or as if it were a feather borne on the wing of a hurricane.

“For Heaven’s sake, sit fast!” exclaimed Meredith, who was doing all he could to hold in the apparently frenzied animals.

Zoe and Christina exchanged affrighted glances, each perceiving that the other was as pale as death. And no wonder, for there seemed to be every prospect that the equipage would be dashed to pieces, swerving as it did from one side of the road to the other, — now with the wheels on one side half up a bank, then the next moment a similar process taking place with the wheels on the other side, and the steeds still continuing to tear on in utter defiance of Meredith’s endeavour to hold them in. Long as it has taken us to describe all this, it was nevertheless the work of but a very few minutes, and as the equipage dashed precipitately down to the bottom of the steep hill, it was suddenly upset by the side of the road.

The very instant Meredith found the phaeton overturning, he sprang out with a marvellous agility, and though he fell, yet, as it was upon some grass, he escaped comparatively unhurt, and was immediately upon his feet. Christina and Zoe were flung out violently, and they both lay senseless.

“My God, my God!” cried Octavian, in a voice of the wildest agony, “they are killed,” and he bounded forward to raise one up in his arms, and that one was Christina; then from his lips came ejaculations similar to those which he had uttered on the previous occasion: “Oh, speak to me! speak to me! for Heaven’s sake speak to me! Would that I had died instead of you.”

And Christina slowly opened her soft dark eyes, and Octavian, as frenzied now with joy as he was a moment before with terrible affliction, exclaimed, “Thank God, she lives! she lives! O Christina!”

He was straining her in his arms, when she, awaking to full consciousness, extricated herself from his embrace with an abruptness that under any other circumstances would have been ungracious indeed, but which was now the result of

the sudden conviction that swept in unto her soul that he was paying her an attention to which his own wife had the prior claim, though that wife was left neglected upon the ground. And there Zoe still lay, with her eyes closed, although at the first instant that Christina's glances were flung upon her, it struck her that those eyes were half-open. The next instant, however, she supposed it to be mere fancy on her part.

Octavian raised Zoe in his arms. He inquired kindly enough if she were injured; to do him justice, too, he also appeared much distressed; but there were none of those same wildly vehement and thrillingly impassioned ejaculations which had burst from his lips in respect to Christina. Zoe appeared to be entirely deprived of consciousness; she lay along, half-supported in her husband's arms, her head resting upon his shoulder, and he continuing to inquire whether she were hurt.

"Oh, for assistance," exclaimed Christina, wringing her hands in utter bewilderment; "what can I do? Whither can I go? My benefactress! my friend! Oh, dearest, dearest Zoe," and the young damsel, now throwing herself upon her knees, in a gush of uncontrollable emotion seized Lady Octavian's form from Meredith's arms, and locked it in her own fervid embrace.

She felt Zoe's bosom heaving against her own, as if with the prolonged sigh of returning life; then suddenly the tears deluged forth from the lady's eyes, and flinging her arms around Christina's neck, she wept convulsively. Our young heroine breathed the most tender and soothing words in her ears, again addressing her as a benefactress and a friend, beseeching her to compose herself, and give not way to this outburst, which she naturally supposed to be purely hysterical, — the effects of the accident which had just occurred. But Zoe only appeared to cling all the more tenaciously to her affectionate friend's neck, until seeming suddenly to recollect that her husband was present, she started to her feet and flung herself into his arms. She now grew composed, and Octavian, hastily inquiring of them both whether they felt much injured, was assured that beyond a few bruises neither of the ladies had received any physical hurt.

But now what was to be done? The horses, as if satisfied with upsetting the chaise, had stood still, but the vehicle was

much injured, and moreover it was impossible to think of trusting their lives again to the vicious runaways. Fortunately at this moment a carriage drove up to the spot; it contained only a gentleman, and he at once proffered any assistance that he might be enabled to afford. A footman in attendance upon his carriage was accordingly commissioned to take charge of the phaeton, and drive it back to the Regent's Park, while Lord Octavian, Zoe, and Christina took their seats inside the carriage. During the drive to London, Christina manifested the tenderest solicitude toward Zoe, who continued deadly pale, and appeared to have received a more powerful shock than she chose to confess. Her voice was low and plaintive, but marked by an ineffable sweetness, and from time to time she hurriedly raised her kerchief to her face as if wiping away tears. Christina and Octavian were therefore confirmed in the opinion which they had both alike formed: namely, that Zoe had experienced hysterical results from the accident.

The gentleman to whom the carriage belonged kindly took his companions to their residence in the Regent's Park, although his own destination was in the first instance quite at another point of the metropolis. When once more at home, Zoe sought her couch, by the side of which Christina declared her intention to remain. Lady Octavian besought her to retire to her own room and rest herself likewise, but our young heroine, experiencing now only very partial effects from the accident, would not listen to the entreaty. Octavian sent for a physician, who prescribed what he thought requisite for Zoe, and agreeing with the others that she was somewhat hysterical, he ordered her to be kept extremely quiet. The medicament he administered doubtless contained some opiate, for shortly after it was taken, Zoe sank into a profound slumber, and Christina remained watching by her side.

And now we have some leisure to speak of Christina's thoughts. A portion of the ejaculations which burst from Octavian's lips, as he held her in his arms on the scene of the accident, had fallen upon her ears. Besides, had she not the fact present and patent to her knowledge that Octavian had shown the first solicitude on her behalf, instead of flying to the succour of the one who had the prior claim? However uncertain she might before have been as to Lord Octa-

vian's sentiments, she could doubt them no longer now. And, alas, too, she could not conceal from herself that she on her own side felt not as her sense of duty told her that she ought to feel. On the contrary, there was for an instant a soft thrill of pleasure in her soul as she recalled to mind that ejaculation, "O Christina!" There was a world of avowal in that ejaculation; it was unmistakable, it was more than the eloquence of ten thousand tongues, — it was the very heart itself laid bare.

Thus reflected Christina, but now her mind was made up how to act, and this resolve being taken, she felt more at ease. When it was announced to her that dinner was served up in the dining-room, she requested that a morsel of food might be brought to her in Lady Octavian's chamber, where she was resolved to remain. Zoe slept until the evening, and when she awoke and found Christina still seated by her side, and saw by the tray which by accident was not as yet removed that our heroine had dined there, she took her hand, drew her gently down toward her, and circling the young girl's neck with her arms, strained her to her bosom. She could not at first find words wherewith to express all her gratitude, but presently she burst into tears. These relieved her surcharged heart, and then she murmured forth in a broken voice her thanks for all Christina's kindness.

Lord Octavian now entered the room to make inquiries concerning his wife, and Zoe, smiling up at him with an amiable sweetness, assured him in a low, plaintive voice that she should be better soon. He bent down to kiss her, and she embraced him fervently. Octavian spoke of having a nurse to sit up with her ladyship, but Christina at once said in a voice, the firmness of which showed that she would take no refusal, "That is my duty, and I intend to discharge it."

Zoe remonstrated with all that sweetness which was natural to her, and which now seemed more than ever amiable, invested as it was with the serene but plaintive melancholy that was upon her, but Christina was not to be dissuaded. Octavian withdrew, and our young heroine remained to keep the vigil by Zoe's bedside.

On the following day the physician discovered symptoms of fever on the part of his patient; they progressed rapidly, and in a few hours Zoe was seriously ill. During the night she

became delirious, giving utterance to incoherent things, none of which, however, had any particular significance. Christina remained in faithful attendance upon her, never once closing her own eyes the entire night. For ten days did the dangerous period of Lady Octavian Meredith's illness last, and several times she appeared to be hovering upon the very verge of the grave. The physician, on the third evening, had insisted upon having a nurse; nevertheless Christina would not abandon her friend, but remained with her night and day, recruiting, however, her own strength by lying down for a few hours in a bed which she caused to be prepared in the same room for the purpose. With her own hand she administered all Zoe's medicine, but usurping this duty with such sweetness of manner and with so much amiability that the old nurse, though belonging to a class amazingly jealous of their prerogatives, could not find it in her heart to be offended. Nor throughout all this time did Christina once incur the chance of finding herself alone with Lord Octavian. Occasionally, when his visits were paid to his sick wife's chamber, the nurse was absent, Zoe was unconscious of what was passing around her, and thus it may be said that he and Christina were virtually alone. But then she would sit on the opposite side of the couch from that where he placed himself, and half-concealed by the curtain, she would not once meet his gaze. When he spoke to her — which was in the same manner of friendly courtesy as was formally wont to mark his bearing — she on her side responded with equal courtesy, but gave no encouragement for a protracted conversation.

Thus did the time pass, and on the twelfth day after the accident, the physician pronounced Lady Octavian Meredith to be out of danger. She now became conscious of what was passing around, and from the lips of both the physician and the nurse she learned how Christina had affectionately and tenderly ministered unto her during her severe illness. Indeed the medical man, who was generous-hearted and conscientious, hesitated not to give Zoe the assurance that she owed her life to Miss Ashton, observing that though the physician may prescribe, and though the pecuniary position of the patient may be such as to ensure every comfort, yet that there is something which surpasses all professional skill and which no wealth can purchase, — namely, the unwearied

and tender ministration of a devoted friend. In Christina had Zoe possessed such a friend, and as the sick lady wound her arms about our heroine's neck, she murmuringly said, "Christina, dearest Christina, you have been to me as a sister. Oh, you know not how I love you."

Let us suppose another fortnight passed. It was now verging toward the end of April, and on a bright, beautiful day, Zoe was reclining upon the sofa in the drawing-room, enveloped in a wrapper, still pale and feeble, but completely out of danger, and with every prospect, according to the physician's declaration, of a speedy convalescence. One of the casements was open, and the genial air, in which the freshness of spring mingled with the warmth of approaching summer, was wafted into the room. Christina sat near the invalid; her cheeks were also pale, for she had not once issued from the dwelling since the return after the accident. Octavian was out, and the two young ladies were alone together.

A newspaper lay upon the table, and during a pause in the conversation — for Zoe was prohibited from speaking too much — Christina took up the journal. It was more a mechanical action than a voluntary one, for her thoughts were preoccupied, and in that same listless, unintentional manner her eyes moved slowly over the columns of the front page. But all in a moment something appeared to rivet her gaze and concentrate her thoughts, for she gave a start like that of one who suddenly discovers an object which has been sought after. Then she appeared to be studying with profound attention the particular passage, paragraph, or whatever it might be, which had thus so abruptly claimed her interest. Zoe — who had her regards settled in plaintive and tender contemplation of Christina's beautiful countenance — noticed that start, and observed likewise the deep study which followed it. A minute or two elapsed in continued silence, and then Zoe said, in a soft, gentle voice, "What is it, dear Christina, that so interests you?"

Our heroine again started, as if aroused from a reverie, and she flung a half-timid, half-deprecating look upon Lady Octavian Meredith, as if she feared for a moment to give such explanation as the question required. But then suddenly recovering her self-possession, she answered with a sweetness singularly blended with firmness, "Here is an Eastern lady

of rank who is advertising for a companion, who must possess certain qualifications, all of which are minutely specified."

"And wherefore, my dear Christina," inquired Zoe, a strange expression for a moment fitting over her countenance, "why does that advertisement interest you so much?"

"Because — because, my dear friend, my kind benefactress, my own sweet Zoe," was Christina's tremulously given response, "the advertisement appears to suit me."

Lady Octavian Meredith did not immediately make any answer; she, however, gazed earnestly upon Christina's countenance, as if seeking to read into the very depths of her soul, but the amiable lady's regards were notwithstanding fraught with an ineffable sweetness and a tenderness that was at the same time full of affection, surprise, and suspense.

"And you will leave me, Christina?" she at length said, but in a voice so low that it was only audible through its tremulous clearness.

"Yes, dearest Zoe," answered Christina, "I shall seek this situation," and then she averted her countenance to conceal the tears that were trickling down it.

She said not another word; she volunteered not another syllable of explanation. What more indeed could she say? To enter into particulars was impossible, and she would much rather lie under the imputation of deep ingratitude — painful though such an imputation were — than be guilty of the far blacker and perhaps more hidden ingratitude of remaining beneath that roof to stand in the way of Zoe's claims to all her husband's devoted love.

There was a long silence, during which Christina dared not turn her eyes again upon Lady Octavian Meredith, for she naturally feared that this silence on her friend's part denoted astonishment and displeasure. At length feeling her position was awkward in the extreme, she slowly and timidly reverted her eyes upon Zoe, and then to her mingled amazement and relief, she perceived that Lady Octavian, having just wiped the tears from her cheeks, was surveying her with an expression of tenderness ineffably sweet, indescribably angelic. Christina threw herself upon her friend's bosom; they embraced with true sisterly warmth; they mingled their tears together. For some minutes did they thus remain clasped in each other's arms, and not a syllable

was spoken. Zoe was the first to break that silence at length, and then it was not to give utterance to a word of remonstrance against Christina's resolve, — much less to breathe a syllable of reproach; it was merely to express the heartfelt prayer that her dear young friend would experience happiness wherever she might be.

Was it that Zoe penetrated Christina's motives, and that she esteemed them in the proper light, appreciating them too with thankfulness? Such was the question which Christina naturally asked herself, and she knew not how to answer it. Very certain it was, however, that for the remainder of the time she stayed beneath that roof — which was now very short — she experienced nothing but the most sisterly kindness on the part of Zoe, — a kindness which she was never wearied of displaying, and which though mild, soft, and gentle was all the more touching and profound. Our heroine applied to the Princess Indora, for she indeed was the Oriental lady advertising for a companion, and, furnished with a testimonial from Lady Octavian, she was readily accepted by the King of Inderabad's daughter.

It was on the third day after the scene above described between Christina and Zoe that the former took her departure to remove to her new home. But since the accident she had not been once altogether alone with Lord Octavian, and inasmuch as when in his presence under any circumstances, her conversation was most guarded, she had not alluded in his hearing to this purposed removal. Whether Zoe had informed her husband or not, Christina was unaware. The young girl chose for her departure a moment when Lord Octavian was absent from the house, and on Zoe proffering the use of the carriage to take her to her destination, she declined it, being determined that, unless from Zoe herself, the young nobleman should have no means of discovering whither she was gone. And something in her heart told her that Zoe had not spoken to her husband on the subject, and that she would not acquaint him with her new place of abode.

“Dearest Christina,” said Lady Octavian, when the instant for parting arrived, “to you am I indebted for my life; my eternal gratitude and my heartfelt love are yours. Oh, believe me, dearest Christina, the feeling I cherish toward you, is — is — But I can say no more. God bless

you, Christina! But we do not part for ever — No, no. I shall see you again, my sweetest, dearest friend; I shall visit you at the princess's, if her Highness will permit it. Farewell, Christina, farewell."

They embraced fervently; again and again did they embrace, the tears rained down their cheeks, one last kiss, one last farewell, and they separated.

CHAPTER XI

INCIDENTS AT THE EARL OF LASCELLES' MANSION

Now that the fine weather had set in, there was a particular room on the ground floor of the Earl of Lascelles' mansion which the Countess Ethel seemed particularly to like. It was not large, but elegantly furnished, and, as her ladyship said, it had the finest piano of any apartment in the house. Adjoining this room was a bedchamber, likewise so exquisitely appointed that it might serve as a lady's boudoir, and the windows of these apartments were on the side of the house looking upon a grass plat dotted with parterres of flowers, and beyond which stretched a noble extent of garden.

For the last week or two the Countess of Lascelles had complained of indisposition, representing that she was nervous, had sick headaches, and was affected by the slightest noise. She had therefore begged the earl to permit her to occupy these rooms for a brief space, adding that she only thought thus of separating herself from him in order that she might recover her health all the more speedily; and as at the same time she made this request, she cajolingly desired him to send her the first proof-sheets of his memoirs to peruse, assuring him that she burned with impatience to become acquainted with a work that would astonish the world, the vain, frivolous old man assented to the temporary separation of chambers.

Now it happened that one morning at about nine o'clock, the earl made his way to the apartments which we have just been describing, he having taken it into his head to relate to the countess an adventure which he had never yet told her, and for the simple reason that he had only concocted it since six o'clock on that same morning, at which hour he had

risen to prepare notes and memoranda to serve as a guide for his literary occupations by the time his secretary should arrive. Full of his newly concocted anecdote — to which he mentally added a few embellishing exaggerations as he threaded the passages toward the apartments above alluded to — the earl reached the door, and without the ceremony of knocking, he walked in. Oh, incautious Ethel, to have left that door unlocked. It was a sad oversight, but if such oversights never took place the chapters of romance would lose half their charm, actions for crim. con. much of their piquancy, and the public curiosity no mean portion of the food which occasionally gratifies it. The door was left unlocked, then, and as the earl entered, he might have been knocked down with a straw — redoubtable, according to his own account, though he was — on beholding a female figure at the window half-clasped in the arms of a young gentleman on the opposite side, and who seemed as if having just leaped out, he was taking a farewell kiss of the beautiful frail one.

That this latter was his wife and the other his son Lord Osmond, the earl had not a doubt, though a sort of dimness immediately came over his vision. He stopped short; he tried to roar out something, but he could not; his powers of utterance seemed suffocated. All that he could do was to raise his clenched fist, and shake it in speechless, impotent rage; then in total bewilderment he turned from the room, not thinking of closing the door behind him, and scarcely knowing whether he was walking on his head or his feet.

At that same instant Lord Osmond was stricken with dismay on catching a glimpse of his father's form ere it disappeared by the doorway. The countess beheld the change which suddenly came over the young nobleman's countenance, and the abruptness too with which he retreated from her arms. She also was seized with consternation, and a few hurried words on Osmond's part confirmed all her worst and wildest fears. Good heavens! what was to be done? This was the question they both with simultaneous rapidity put mentally, and which the next moment they orally asked each other. Ethel was sinking with affright; visions of fearful exposure, of infamy and disgrace, were sweeping like vultures through her brain, when Osmond, suddenly

smitten with an idea, showed by the quick brightening-up of his countenance that all was not quite lost.

"What is it — what is it that you think of?" demanded Ethel, with the feverish haste of suspense.

"My father will be straight off to Makepeace, and that fellow can alone save us. Fear not, dearest, dearest Ethel."

The lady staggered half-fainting away from the window, and sank upon an ottoman, while her paramour, darting from the casement in another direction, sped in quest of Makepeace. Fortunately he encountered the valet at an angle of the building, and laying his hand upon his shoulder, he said, in a quick, excited tone, "Five hundred guineas if you will serve me."

Now, as Makepeace was just the man to sell his soul to Satan for about half the sum, he was by no means the one likely to refuse such an offer as that which Lord Osmond thus made him. He accordingly returned an affirmative answer with the most zealous readiness, and Lord Osmond at once gave him the requisite explanations, vowing however that he was merely jestingly whispering something in the ear of his youthful mother-in-law, and that thus though his lips might seem suspiciously near to her countenance, it was only in the playful mood he had described, and not for the purpose of either receiving or bestowing an illicit caress. This was of course said to save Ethel's character in the estimation of the valet, though Osmond might have known that the attempted explanation was far too clumsy to impose upon so astute an individual as Makepeace. The most intelligent persons, however, often stultify themselves in such peculiar circumstances, and hug the belief that the most transparent gloss thrown over particular incidents serves as a successfully enshrouding veil. So was it with Lord Osmond on this occasion, and Makepeace affected to receive the young nobleman's explanations as the legitimate and veritable one. He bade Osmond be of good cheer, and hastened off to throw himself purposely in the earl's way.

He knew perfectly well that the old nobleman would on his own side at once seek an opportunity of unbosoming his wrongs to him (Makepeace), and therefore he hurried up into the earl's dressing-chamber, where indeed at that hour in the morning it was his duty to lock up in the drawers all the cosmetics and the artificialities which played so considerable

a part in the nobleman's toilet. On entering the room, Makepeace found that the earl was not as yet there, but he knew that he would come, consequently he did not go to search for him in any other part of the mansion, but began putting away the divers articles above referred to. In a few minutes the door opened, and the earl entering, flung himself upon a chair with a countenance so truly comical in its misery that it was difficult for Makepeace to suppress a smile. But with the air of one who seemed to fancy that nothing unusual had taken place, the valet went on with his work, while the old earl sat literally gasping in continued bewilderment, as if still quite at a loss to persuade himself that what he had seen had positively and actually taken place.

"Makepeace," at length he said, "I do verily believe that I am — a — a —"

"I know that your lordship is the most enlightened nobleman of the age," observed the valet, with an air of profound respect.

"Yes, yes, Makepeace, I am aware that the world does entertain such an opinion of me. But that does not prevent me, all the same, from being a — a —"

"The most modest and unassuming nobleman, my lord, that could possibly be," rejoined the valet.

"Well, yes, I think that in this respect," said the old earl, "I possess the qualities of all great minds. But still some of the greatest men that ever lived have been what I fear I am now. I mean a — a —"

"A little too diffident in respect to your lordship's own powers," interjected Makepeace, still with an air of respectful gravity the most complete and the most imperturbable. "For instance, your lordship might have been Prime Minister if your lordship had thought fit to take advantage of the occasion when you made that wonderful speech —"

"Well, I think I was rather forbearing at the time," said the earl, "but I did not like to be too hard upon the government, and oust them completely. But I feel very queer, Makepeace, very funny indeed. I could not have believed that such was the sensation when a man finds himself out to be a — a —"

"Popular author — as your lordship will assuredly become," said Makepeace. "It is already whispered abroad

that your lordship has got a work in the press, and I know it is creating an immense sensation, for when I went to the circulating library yesterday to fetch your lordship Gulliver's and Baron Munchausen's Travels — ”

“ Yes, yes, I just wanted to look at the books you name, to see how the tremendous falsehoods those fellows have recorded stand in sad contrast with the adventures, so startling though so truthful, which I am chronicling. But I never thought, Makepeace, that I should have to wind up my book by writing myself down — not an ass, Makepeace, as Dogberry did, but a — a — ”

“ Traveller of the most unimpeachable veracity,” rejoined the valet, and now there was really something so exceedingly ludicrous in his master's countenance, — his sense of degradation struggling with his pride, the conviction of a sustained wrong yearning to proclaim itself, but held back by the shame of declaring what he felt himself to be, — all these feelings finding such comical expression in features whose aspect was at the best of times most ludicrous that the valet never experienced such difficulty in keeping his countenance.

“ It's all very well that I am everything you say,” continued the earl, with unusual pettishness, for never was his idea of his own greatness so cruelly shocked, or brought down to a level so closely bordering on a sense of abject littleness, “ but it does not prevent me from being, Makepeace — eh, Makepeace? — you know what I mean — a — a — ” and then with a desperate effort, and before the valet could interject another complimentary phrase, the earl blurted forth, “ a cuckold.”

Makepeace started with an astonishment so admirably feigned that his master believed it to be perfectly genuine, and for nearly a minute they gazed upon each other, — the valet as if in speechless amazement, the earl with a grin that was most ludicrously doleful.

“ My lord,” at length said the valet, “ there must be some terrible mistake in all this. What! the countess forget her duty to her husband, and such a husband, — a husband who is in all respects one in ten thousand. Surely your lordship is labouring under a delusion? ”

“ Well, I don't know, Makepeace. It's true I've seen strange things in my time. There was the spectre of the

Hartz mountain, — I nodded familiarly to him, but he took his hat right off to me.”

“ A homage to your lordship’s rare qualities,” said the valet.

“ Well, and then there was the mirage, too,” continued the nobleman. “ I was once riding on an elephant in Africa, and in the horizon which bounded the desert, I beheld the reflection, but with this simple difference, that the elephant was riding on me.”

“ Emblematical of your lordship’s great bodily strength,” interjected Makepeace.

“ Well, they were optical delusions, after all,” said the earl, “ but really, when one sees a young gentleman kissing a young lady, it is difficult — eh, Makepeace? — to persuade oneself that that is an optical delusion.”

“ And yet, my lord, with due deference to your superior understanding,” replied the valet, “ there might be an optical delusion on such a point as even this. Indeed, when I bethink me, I just now saw something that might serve as an illustration, if I dare introduce such names in connection with such a matter — ”

“ Speak out, Makepeace,” said the earl, fidgeting about on his seat; “ though I tell you it will be no easy thing to persuade me that I am not — you know what I mean. But about this illustration of yours? ”

“ It is simply this, my lord,” resumed the valet. “ Just now, when your lordship descended from the dressing-room, I went into the garden to pick a flower or two for my own chamber, — I am very fond of flowers, my lord, — when I beheld Lord Osmond — ”

“ Ah, Lord Osmond,” muttered the earl, grinding his false teeth and clenching his fist. “ My own son — the villain.”

But Makepeace, as if not noticing the interruption, went on to say, “ I beheld Lord Osmond laughing gaily with Miss Vincent, and she too was laughing heartily, evidently at something which he had just been saying to her. Well, my lord, just at that moment the countess appeared at the window of her own room, and her ladyship gaily exclaimed, ‘ What lovers’ secret is this passing between you? ’ ”

“ She said that, did she? ” cried the old nobleman, eagerly, and quivering with suspense.

“ Yes, my lord, that is what the countess said, and she ap-

peared to enjoy amazingly the confusion into which her sudden appearance at the casement had thrown Lord Osmond and Miss Vincent. Then Miss Vincent, with many blushes, said to Lord Osmond, 'Do pray, my dear Adolphus, tell the countess what it is we were saying.' You will pardon me, my lord, for being so explicit —"

"Yes, yes, go on, go on," said the earl, catching eagerly at the hope of finding himself no cuckold after all.

"Well, my lord, the rest is soon told," continued Makepeace. "Lord Osmond rushed up to the window, while Miss Vincent stood blushing aside, and he forthwith whispered the secret in the ears of the countess. Now, my lord, what I mean to infer from all this is, that suppose any one had been near enough at the time to see merely Lord Osmond and her ladyship under those circumstances, and yet too remote to have overheard what previously took place, the impression might have been very detrimental indeed —"

"By Heaven!" shouted the old earl, "I am no cuckold after all," and springing up from his chair, he began dancing and capering about the room, performing the most extraordinary antics and throwing his body into the most grotesque contortions. "Why, do you know, Makepeace," he ejaculated, when it at length pleased him to desist from those demonstrations which, however interesting as an expression of feeling, were certainly somewhat uncouth if regarded in the light of attempts to exhibit the twistings and twirlings which the human limbs can achieve, and to display how the human frame can become as circumvolved as a corkscrew, — "do you know, Makepeace, that it is the very incident you have been so innocently describing which put such a dreadful idea into my head? And yet I now see it all. It was an optical delusion, — yes, and an auricular delusion also, for would you believe it, Makepeace, that I could have not only sworn I saw the kisses but likewise heard them?"

"It shows, my lord, how even the most intelligent can deceive themselves," said the valet, gravely.

"It does indeed. But what a fortunate thing I did not give way to my rage. I would not for the world have exposed myself so foolishly."

"It would indeed, my lord, have been a very sad business," rejoined Makepeace.

"Yes, and what would the countess have thought of me?" exclaimed the old nobleman. "You see, Makepeace, what extraordinary command I have over my temper. There is not another man in England that could have so restrained himself. But I am exceedingly cool and collected in emergencies. I remember once when I was first in the commission of the peace — it was down in the country that the thing happened — I was called upon to stop a prize-fight that was taking place. I proceeded to the spot, and saw two great, hulking fellows — each at least six feet high, and with fists that could fell an ox — fighting in the midst of a ring. Well, Makepeace, I did not rush in to part them, I let them go on fighting —"

"Which proves, my lord," responded the valet, "that your lordship does indeed possess an extraordinary degree of coolness."

"And never did I display it more completely than just now. Of course, Makepeace, you will not mention to a soul that such a thing ever entered into my head? Ah! and Adolphus and Isabella have got on so well together that they are regular lovers, eh? Capital capital," and the old earl, chuckling at the idea, rubbed his hands gleefully, for though his suspicion was fully removed, yet somehow or another he was very anxious that Lord Osmond should wed with all possible despatch and bear his bride away to another home. "I tell you what, Makepeace, it is quite evident that my son and niece are immensely attached to each other, so we must marry them off as soon as possible. But young people are so diffident; they take months and months before they dare speak of settling the wedding-day. I know it was the case with me when I fell in love with my present countess. I was exceedingly diffident, and then, too, you know, I had that long attack of the gout which chained me to my room for three months. But about this young couple — I will do something to make Adolphus hurry matters on apace. Ah! the idea strikes me, and you will confess, Makepeace, when you hear it, that it is an admirable stroke of policy."

"I have no doubt of it, my lord," said the valet; "everything your lordship does is impressed with a high intelligence."

"Well, I think that you are about right there, Makepeace," said the old earl, complacently. "And now I will tell you

what I propose to do. That Christian Ashton is a very nice lad, and so genteel too in his manners, indeed quite the gentleman — ”

“ He could scarcely be otherwise,” observed Makepeace, “ after being a month in your lordship’s employment.”

“ Yes, gentility reflects itself. But about my plan, — I propose to throw him in Isabella’s way; I will invite him to dinner. I will leave Adolphus to hand down the countess from the drawing-room, so that young Ashton must give his arm to Miss Vincent, and then he will sit next to her at table. Perhaps I will drop him a hint that he is to pay her attention, — he is so docile and obliging, he does everything I tell him. For instance yesterday he wanted to spell shrubbery with two b’s, but I bade him put only one, and he obeyed me immediately, with such a pleasant smile too, so that I am sure he will do what I tell him in the present case. His attentions will be flattering to Isabella, for all young girls are coquettishly inclined, just as young men like me are apt to be rakish. However, as I was saying, Isabella will be pleased, Adolphus will be jealous, and he will be urged on to ask his cousin to name the day. Now, what do you think of my scheme, Makepeace? ”

“ I think your lordship possesses the wisdom of Solomon,” answered the valet.

“ Well, I believe that you do not exactly stand alone in that opinion. But now I will just run and ask the countess how she is to-day, for I am prouder and fonder of her than ever, after having so shamefully suspected her.”

Away sped the old earl to Ethel’s apartments, and the moment he made his appearance, she saw that Lord Osmond’s device, practised through the medium of Makepeace, had completely succeeded, and she was infinitely relieved by a result which she had scarcely dared hope would have been attained. Alas, we are bound to declare that Ethel was guilty! Those fine resolves which some months back she had adopted — and at first, too, with a prospect of really having strength of mind sufficient to carry them out — had gradually melted away beneath the influence of Lord Osmond’s tender looks, of his impassioned language, and of his great personal beauty, since the young nobleman had contrived to obtain admission once more into the paternal mansion. Yes, Ethel had fallen, but we choose not to dwell

at unnecessary length upon guilt which under all circumstances was so deep, so deadly.

The silly old earl lost no time in putting his precious scheme into execution. Christian came at the usual time that day, and having written to his noble employer's dictation for three or four hours, and an astounding admixture of mendacity, self-conceit, and nonsense it was that he had thus to write, he was about to depart, when the earl caught him by the arm, and addressed him as follows:

"You are a very good youth, and I am very much attached to you, but you must not put two b's in shrubbery for the future. You are to dine with me to-day. Make yourself look as spruce as possible, and come at six o'clock. There will only be ourselves, the countess, Lord Osmond, and my niece; make yourself quite at home, and don't hesitate to pay such little attentions to Miss Vincent as a young gentleman is bound to show toward a young lady. Why, God bless me, how crimson you turn! You blush just like a woman! Pooh! no diffidence. Mind you hand Isabella down to dinner, sit next to her, and talk without restraint. And now go, for I mean to sit down for an hour or two and invent — I mean make notes of some more adventures for our occupation to-morrow."

Christian went away astounded, as well indeed he might be. What could it possibly all mean? Had the old lord suspected his passion for the beautiful Isabella? Did he suspect likewise that his niece had not regarded the youth with indifference? Did he purpose to favour their loves? Or was he adopting some means to inflict a crushing punishment, and overwhelm our presumptuous hero with the most humiliating exposure? But no; Christian could not fancy that this latter conjecture was the solution of the mystery. He had seen quite enough of the earl's character to be aware that he was incapable of any proceeding that had aught grand or striking in it, and moreover, that if he meditated mischief, he was unable to conceal the pettiness of his mind beneath an air of frank cordiality and kindness.

"However," thought Christian to himself, "no matter what his lordship's motives are, let me think only of the joy afforded by this prospect of passing hours in the society of Isabella."

We must observe that Christian had no longer the slightest

jealousy in respect to Lord Osmond. He had often noticed the young nobleman, the countess, and Isabella walking together in the grounds, and had invariably seen that while Osmond and Ethel kept together, Isabella would either linger behind, or else walk by the side of the countess and not by that of her cousin Adolphus. Thus, although Christian felt tolerably well certain that Lord Osmond was not thinking of paying his addresses to Isabella, yet on the other hand his naturally pure mind suspected not for an instant the criminal intimacy which subsisted between that young nobleman and his beauteous mother-in-law. We may here observe too that Isabella — even more femininely chaste-souled than one of the opposite sex could possibly be — was equally far from imagining that an unholy passion subsisted on the part of her uncle's wife and son.

Two or three weeks more passed away, and during this interval Christian frequently dined at the earl's table. Lord Osmond and the countess were perfectly well aware of the motive for which he was thus brought into their society, and treated as an equal in the little family circle, for Makepeace, whom the five hundred guineas had bought entirely over to Lord Osmond's interest, had failed not to inform the young nobleman of his father's delectable scheme. Isabella imagined that her uncle was merely displaying these civilities toward Christian in consequence of a disinterested esteem for the youth's merits, while Christian himself continued as much in the dark as ever in respect to the whole proceeding on the part of his noble employer.

CHAPTER XII

YOUTHFUL LOVE

It was a serene but profound happiness which the youthful lovers now enjoyed, for lovers they assuredly were, although as yet no syllable from our young hero's lips had revealed the affection which he experienced. But the eyes speak a language more eloquent than that of the tongue, and the sympathies of two hearts, pouring forth in reciprocal transfusion, gentle and unseen, make mutual revelations which are not to be mistaken. When hand touches hand and the pulses of the two beat quicker, when the gaze of the lover settles in respectful tenderness and bashful admiration upon the countenance of the adored one, as if his eyes would penetrate through the mirror of her own orbs, deep down into her heart's tabernacle and feast their looks upon the hived sweetness of her own pure love, and when her eyes, modestly sinking beneath that gaze, veil themselves with the richly fringed lids, then is love's tale told on the one hand and understood on the other, — reciprocated too as well as understood, though not a syllable from the lips may pass between the enamoured pair. Thus was it with Christian Ashton and Isabella Vincent.

In the presence of the earl, Lord Osmond and the countess were exceedingly upon their guard, and as the young nobleman had every reason to be rejoiced that Christian was now so much brought within the sphere of the family circle, he had not the slightest notion of interfering in respect to the loves of the youth and Isabella. For that such an affection subsisted between them was visible enough to any eyes save those of the foolish old earl. Christian joined them in their rambles in the garden, and as he walked with Isabella, it necessarily threw the countess and Adolphus together with-

out the risk of exciting any suspicion on the part of the younger pair as to the illicit intimacy existing between them. Thus was it that both Lord Osmond and the countess had every reason to be pleased that Christian was so much at the house, and for the same motive the young nobleman did not choose to pay any marked attention to Isabella, even though by so doing he might the more effectually have lulled the earl into complete security in respect to the countess.

One day Miss Vincent was to be presented at court at one of the royal drawing-rooms. The Countess of Lascelles, as a peeress, was to introduce the young lady, but when the appointed day came, she was really indisposed and unable to leave the house. Isabella's naturally retiring disposition would have shrunk from this ceremony which to her had the aspect of an unpleasant ordeal, but it was a whim of her uncle's, and therefore must be gratified. He was resolved that the presentation should take place, and therefore as the countess could not assist in it, the earl speedily enlisted the services of two titled ladies of his acquaintance. The fact is, the old nobleman was getting wearied of his son's delay — as he thought it — in openly proposing for Isabella's hand, and therefore he was resolved to accomplish another of his fine strokes of policy. He fancied that if Isabella were seen apparelled with all the elegance, taste, and richness which were inseparable from court costume, her appearance would be so ravishing that Adolphus could not possibly for another moment resist beseeching her to name the nuptial day.

And truly beautiful indeed was Isabella Vincent on this occasion. Her glossy dark brown hair, showering in ringlets upon her shoulders of dazzling whiteness, was decorated with a single white camellia, — a fitting emblem of her own immaculate purity. The dress that she wore — combining the necessary attributes above specified — set off her tall, slender, sylphid shape to the utmost advantage; while the fear that she might not acquit herself properly heightened the colour upon her cheeks, which made her seem the fairest image of modest loveliness that ever mortal eye rested upon. And to court Isabella went, but while proceeding thither in the carriage with her lady chaperons, while ascending the staircase at the palace, in the midst of a throng of all that was highest in rank, most brilliant in beauty, and most eminent in respect to state dignitaries, while passing through

the splendid saloons, while kneeling to kiss the hand of royalty, and while returning again to the mansion at Kensington, there was one image which was never absent from the charming maiden's mind, and this was the image of Christian Ashton.

The Earl of Lascelles was again completely out in his reckoning. Lord Osmond was too deeply enamoured of the countess to be affected with the charms of any other being in feminine shape, no matter how transcendently lovely were the aspect which this being wore. But how was it with Christian Ashton? He beheld Isabella pass out of the carriage when going, and alight from it on her return, and never in his eyes had she appeared so fascinating, so sweetly beautiful, so matchlessly charming. He knew that she loved him, but yet he felt that to complete his happiness, he must obtain the avowal from her lips. At once did he take the resolve to seize the first opportunity to confess his passion and elicit a reciprocal tale from her. But the next moment a feeling of sadness came over him; how dared he aspire to the hand of an earl's niece? And how could he ever hope to be in a position to make her his wife? This very circumstance of her presentation at court was a source of pleasure and pain to our young hero, — of pleasure inasmuch as it enabled him to behold Isabella apparelled in a way to set off her loveliness to its utmost advantage, and of pain because it forced upon him the conviction that situated as he was it seemed presumptuous to a degree, if not absolutely hopeless, for him to aspire to the hand of one who belonged to the circle of aristocracy and was enabled to enter within that of royalty.

And this strain of thought led him on to reflect for the hundredth, perhaps the thousandth time, on those mysterious circumstances which had recently enveloped Isabella as with a veil of mystery. From being ignored by her relatives, she was suddenly transferred into their very midst; from occupying a humble lodging in the house of coarse, vulgar people, she was all in a moment removed to a palatial mansion. What could be the signification of all this? Wherefore had Makepeace assumed the name of Gibson when calling at the Chubbs' to liquidate the stipend for Isabella's board? Christian was bewildered; he knew not what to conjecture, what to surmise. When walking with Isabella in the grounds,

and when having the opportunity of private conversation, he had not ventured to touch upon those subjects, nor had she of her own accord ever in the slightest way alluded to them.

But from the contemplation of these mysteries, Christian's mind reverted to that of Isabella's loveliness, the amiability of her disposition, and the elegant sweetness of her manners. Despondency on account of the difference of their social positions was again succeeded by hope, and again too did the determination settle in his mind that he would seek an opportunity to avow his love and to elicit a reciprocal confession from her own lips.

That opportunity presented itself in the evening after Isabella's return from court. Christian was invited to dinner at the earl's mansion, and after the dessert, Lord Osmond proposed a stroll in the garden. The earl refused to be of the party, for he was inwardly chuckling at the idea that his last grand stroke of policy was producing its effect, and that Isabella's appearance of that day was now certain to elicit something decisive from his son's lips toward her: hence his refusal to join the party, for he concluded that Adolphus would take care to stray apart with Isabella, while Christian kept the countess company. So the earl sat over his wine, partly chuckling at what he fancied was going on, and partly sketching forth in his imagination some astounding adventure for the literary lucubrations of the morrow.

Little did he suspect that while Lord Osmond and the countess were seated together with hands fondly clasped, in an arbour situated in the most secluded part of the grounds, Christian and Isabella were walking in a shady avenue quite on the other side of the enclosure. And Christian told the tale which he had resolved to tell, and obtained the avowal which he had hoped to elicit. The hearts of that young pair were confessed the one to the other, and both were happy. Would the reader have us enter into the minutest details, and chronicle every word that passed between them? Would he have us extend our narrative into the fullest particulars descriptive of this love scene? And yet we might do so, for though the tale of love is the oldest known to human beings, and commenced in paradise itself before the fall, yet is it ever new, and therefore ever interesting. The forms of speech which convey it may be infinitely varied, yet are the end and purpose ever the same, and countless though the

world's languages be, different too in the richness or the poverty of idioms, figures, and phrases, yet have they each and all a sufficiency, — ay, even a copiousness of words wherewith to form that tale.

But it is not our purpose to record the conversation which then took place between Christian and Isabella. Suffice it to say that after hesitating and trembling and falling into confusion, the youth, in the very midst of his bewilderment, at length found himself breathing the avowal which he had so much longed to make, and in Isabella's blushing cheeks and downcast looks he read the response long ere it was softly murmured from her lips. Then they were happy both, oh, so happy, joy beating in their hearts, and their hands thrilling to each other's touch. The maiden spoke but little, the youth not much more, when once the reciprocal avowals were made; and the little that they did say was connected only with their love; they spoke not of the future, they thought not of how the hope which was in their hearts was ever to be realized; it was sufficient for them that they loved each other, and that for the present they were together.

It was not until the following day that Christian ventured to speak to Isabella relative to those mysteries which had surrounded her at the time of their first acquaintance at the parish clerk's house, and now it was that our young hero received the following narrative from Miss Vincent's lips:

“ My mother, Lady Isabella, was the sister of the Earl of Lascelles, and many years younger than himself. Were she alive now she would be scarcely forty. She was young therefore when she first learned to love my father, Mr. Vincent, who was only a poor lieutenant in the army. But though poor in respect to the world's goods, he was rich in every intellectual accomplishment and generous quality of the heart. Lady Isabella, who had long been an orphan, did not reside with her brother the earl, but with a maiden aunt in the country. This aunt was proud, harsh, and severe, and the moment she perceived that a feeling of affection was springing up between her niece and Lieutenant Vincent, she unceremoniously and rudely forbade the latter her house. At the same time she wrote to the Earl of Lascelles, who was in London, informing him that his sister had fallen in love with a penniless officer, and that he had better come and fetch her away at once. The earl did so, and when he had

his sister with him in the metropolis, he insisted that she should receive the addresses of a particular friend of his own, — a nobleman of rank and wealth, but who was old enough to be Lady Isabella's father. Vainly did my poor mother beseech that her brother would not sacrifice her so cruelly; he was inexorable, and perhaps you have already seen enough of my uncle to be aware that whatever idea, whim, or caprice he takes into his head must be gratified. Perhaps he thought that he was only doing a brother's duty toward a young orphan sister; perhaps his motives were good, since his aim was to secure for her a prosperous position. At all events, as I have said, he remained deaf to her entreaties, and matters progressed so far that the day was fixed for her elderly suitor to conduct her to the altar. At that crisis Mr. Vincent arrived in London on a temporary leave of absence from his regiment in the provincial town; he and Lady Isabella met, and they resolved to part no more. She fled with him to the dwelling of a female relation of his own, and so soon as circumstances would permit their hands were united. Alas, my poor mother! she found herself discarded by all her relations, even by her own brother, but she had a consolation in my father's devoted love."

Here Isabella paused for a few minutes, during which she wiped away the tears which the recital of her parent's history drew from her eyes, and Christian, taking her hand, pressed it tenderly.

"I do not remember my father," continued the young maiden, in a soft, plaintive voice; "he died when I was only three years old. You may easily suppose that the widow of a lieutenant in the army did not find herself very happily placed in a pecuniary sense. It was for my sake — for the sake of her orphan child — that she wrote imploring letters to her aunt and her brother, beseeching their forgiveness and their succour. I regret to say that so far as forgiveness was concerned their hearts were closed against her, but her brother the earl consented to make her an allowance of three hundred pounds a year. This was at least some consolation to my poor mother, for she knew that her child whom she loved so tenderly would be beyond the reach of want, and that she would likewise be enabled to give me a good education. It was in Lincolnshire that my father died, and it was there that my mother continued to dwell. I was edu-

cated, until the age of fourteen, under her immediate supervision; she would not send me to a boarding-school; she could not consent to separate even for a single day from the only joy of her heart. It was when I had obtained that age of fourteen that this fond and affectionate parent of mine was seized with an illness which speedily threatened to prove fatal. Ah, Christian!" continued Isabella, in a voice so low and tremulous that it was scarcely audible, "never, never can I forget the scene at my mother's death-bed. It often steals upon me during the day, and comes back to me in dreams by night; methinks that I feel the last fond pressure of her arms now around my neck, the last kisses she imprinted upon my cheeks, and the tears too which bathed these cheeks of mine. Then it was that she told me her own past history, and amidst convulsing sobs informed me that I should be left in the world dependent upon an uncle whom I had never seen. But I must observe that when her indisposition had first threatened grave consequences, she had written to the Earl of Lascelles, imploring him to send her the assurance that her daughter — so soon to become an orphan — would not be neglected. The earl wrote back to say he would look after my welfare, and thus my poor mother's death-bed was not one of unmitigated affliction; she had still the hope that her brother's promise would be fulfilled on behalf of myself. And while breathing this hope, and invoking Heaven's choicest blessings upon my head, that dear mother of mine surrendered up her spirit into the hands of the Eternal."

Here Isabella again paused, and Christian gently said, "Do not continue your narrative now; it afflicts you too much."

"Yes, I will complete it, Christian," she answered, "for it is a tale which must be some day told to your ears. You may well conceive that the task is a painful one, but being entered upon, it is better to achieve it than to be compelled to renew it at a future period."

Christian recognized the truth of the sweet maiden's remarks, and she continued in the following manner:

"I wrote to my uncle the Earl of Lascelles, to inform him of my poor mother's death; he remitted me money, and bade me, when the funeral was over, come up to London, where he had secured me a home beneath the roof of a highly

respectable family, whom he named. Conceive my distress when I thus learned that I was an object of no sympathy with my titled relative, but merely a being for whom he felt himself bound to make an eleemosynary provision so that I should not starve. Instead of hastening in person to bestow a paternal protection on the poor orphan of so tender an age, he bade me journey up to London by myself; I was not even to find a home beneath his own roof, but was to be consigned to the care of strangers. Ah, Christian, my first experience of the world was thus sad enough."

"Do not weep, sweetest Isabella," whispered our young hero, as he now pressed her hand to his lips. "Fortune's aspect has changed toward you, and you are differently situated now."

Isabella threw upon her lover a look of bashful tenderness, and she continued her narrative.

"I arrived in London, and proceeded at once to the house of the Reverend Mr. Hickman, by whom, as well as by the ladies of his family, I was kindly received. Mrs. Hickman took an early opportunity to make me understand that in conversation before strangers I was not to claim relationship with the Earl of Lascelles, nor on any account was I to speak of the circumstances of my mother's history."

"Doubtless the earl was somewhat ashamed of his conduct toward his deceased sister," remarked Christian, "and hence that injunction of secrecy and silence conveyed through the medium of those to whose care he had entrusted you."

"That was the conjecture which I also formed at the time," rejoined Isabella, "and I have no doubt it was the true one. I remained in the Reverend Mr. Hickman's family for nearly two years, during which I was well treated, and as Mr. Hickman had daughters of my own age, and a governess to instruct them, my education was completed under the same tutelage. But Mr. Hickman died suddenly, and as he left his family but indifferently provided for, they had to go abroad, to accept a home that was offered them at the house of Mrs. Hickman's brother, who was a merchant or banker, — I know not exactly which, — residing on the Continent. The departure took place hurriedly after the funeral, and as I could not of course accompany them under such circumstances, it became necessary to find me another

home. That was the first occasion on which I ever beheld the person who then called himself Mr. Gibson. He informed me that he was the Earl of Lascelles' confidential agent, and that he was empowered to provide for me temporarily, until my uncle should make up his mind in respect to other arrangements. Everything was done in a hurry, and by Mrs. Hickman's recommendation, a lodging was procured for me in the house of her deceased husband's clerk, where, Christian," added Isabella, with a soft blush, "we first met."

There was another pressure of the hand on the part of the enamoured youth, and he observed, "But the change from a residence with a genteel family to the abode of those coarse, vulgar people —"

"I do not think it was altogether my uncle's fault," interrupted Isabella, "and I will presently explain wherefore. First of all I must tell you that the earl's valet — whom I then knew only by the name of Gibson — repeated the injunction which I had originally received from Mrs. Hickman, — to the effect that I was never in my new home to make the slightest allusion to the Earl of Lascelles, never to speak of him as my uncle, never to mention that my deceased mother had belonged to a noble and titled family. He also informed me that I must on no account form any new acquaintances. Indeed, Makepeace spoke far more plainly on these subjects, and therefore less delicately, than Mrs. Hickman had formerly done, for he gave me to understand that if I violated his injunction — if I spoke of my uncle either in language of boasting or complaint — his lordship would abandon me altogether, and withdraw whatsoever he purposed to allow for my support."

"Ah, this was most cruel," exclaimed Christian, his blood tingling with indignation, and he thought to himself that he should never again be able to endure the old earl's presence with even an ordinary degree of patience.

"Yes, it was cruel," said Isabella, "for if my poor mother had mortally offended her relatives, it was not well for them to visit their rancour upon the head of her orphan daughter. However, I accepted my destiny with resignation; I promised to obey the injunction so earnestly given, and now, Christian, you can comprehend wherefore it was that when you so kindly offered that your sister should pay me a visit, I was compelled to refuse, and yet I could give you no expla-

nations. I need not speak of my experiences of Mr. and Mrs. Chubb; you know them, and you saw enough to be well aware that I could not possibly be happy beneath their roof. When Makepeace called — ”

“ And why, do you suppose, did he take an assumed name? ” inquired Christian.

“ Doubtless to render it all the more difficult — and indeed impossible — for the Chubbs to discover by whom he was employed. But as I was about to observe,” continued the amiable Miss Vincent, “ I occasionally asked him, when he called at the house, and I had an opportunity of speaking to him in private, whether my uncle intended me to live there altogether, and he invariably replied that when his lordship had time to give his attention to the matter, some other arrangements should be made and something fixed with regard to my future career. Indeed, Makepeace hinted that it was possible a situation as governess, or as companion to a lady, would be found for me, and that therefore it was not worth while to remove me to any other place at present. Then all of a sudden was I informed that my uncle had altered his mind entirely concerning me, that he meant to have me home, to acknowledge me as his niece, and to receive me with open arms. You know how abruptly I was borne away from beneath that roof where we first became acquainted. I must now add that on the morning after my arrival at this mansion, Makepeace — whose real name I had of course by that time discovered — sought an opportunity of speaking to me alone. He expressed a hope that I had always found his conduct perfectly respectful toward me, and he further hinted that it would be doing him a service if I did not mention to my uncle how meanly and humbly I was provided for at the parish clerk’s house. I had no inclination to commence my new career beneath the earl’s roof by making mischief, or vexing my uncle with complaints; and I therefore gave the assurance which set his mind at ease. But I suffered him to understand that I penetrated his motive in making the request, and that though I pardoned him, I did not the less despise him.”

“ Ah, I comprehend,” exclaimed Christian, indignantly; “ the unscrupulous man had paid but a mere pittance on your behalf to the Chubbs, and self-appropriated the remainder of the allowance furnished from the earl’s purse.”

“There can be no doubt, Christian,” answered Isabella, “that such was the conduct of Makepeace, and you understand wherefore I just now expressed my belief that the change from a comfortable home at the Hickmans’ to a comparatively wretched one beneath the parish clerk’s roof was not to be altogether ascribed to any unfeeling conduct on my uncle’s part. And it is with pleasure I add that from the moment I set foot within these walls, I have received nothing but kindness at the hands of the amiable countess; my cousin Adolphus treats me, as you see, with an attention courteously respectful; the earl himself appears glad to have me with him, and in no sense have I been made to feel that I am in a state of dependence, — much less that I am an interloper.”

Thus terminated the young maiden’s narrative, and as the dusk was now closing in, the two youthful lovers sought Lord Osmond and the countess, that they might reënter the mansion together. Those whom they thus sought had likewise deemed it time to rejoin the earl, and the party accordingly repaired to the drawing-room.

Two or three days elapsed, and still the Earl of Lascelles heard nothing of the hoped-for intimation that his son Adolphus had proposed for the hand of Miss Vincent. His lordship began to fear that his fine stroke of policy in respect to Isabella’s presentation at court had failed to produce the desired effect upon Adolphus, and he was determined to bring matters to a solution and pack off Lord Osmond and Isabella to the hymeneal altar with the least possible delay. He therefore reflected upon what new step he should now take in order to bring about this consummation. He still felt persuaded that it could be nothing but diffidence on his son’s part, and the current of his thoughts flowed in the following channel:

“Perhaps, after all, the loves of my son and my niece have not made quite so much progress as I had anticipated. And really, considering that Adolphus is but a mere child,” for the earl would not even admit to himself that his son was a grown-up young man of three and twenty, “he may be a mere puling schoolboy in the art of love. I will just satisfy myself on the point. I will ask that young Ashton to dine with us again to-day; they are all sure to walk out in the garden as usual in the evening. Ashton will of course

bear the countess company, Adolphus will roam apart with his cousin Isabella, and I will conceal myself amongst the evergreens, and just listen to what takes place between the young couple. They will of course talk of love, and I shall be enabled to judge to what point matters have reached, — whether there is any chance of Adolphus soon popping the question, or whether he is so timid and bashful that he wants me to give him a helping hand."

The old earl chuckled amazingly at this new scheme; he considered it to be another brilliant stroke of policy on his part, but for a wonder he did not communicate it to Makepeace. He invited Christian to dine at his table that day, and everything progressed as he could wish, for after the dessert, the usual walk in the garden was proposed, though at a somewhat later hour than heretofore. The earl excused himself, as was his wont, and for about half an hour he sat drinking his wine and pondering the various matters he had in hand, not forgetting his literary labours, which were progressing as rapidly as his own fertile imagination and Christian's fluent penmanship could possibly enable them to do.

The half-hour having elapsed, and the dusk coming on, the Earl of Lascelles issued from the mansion, struck into the shadiest avenue, and, proceeding stealthily, came near one of the arbours which were interspersed about the grounds. He thought he heard voices speaking in gentle tones; he stopped and listened, he recognized Isabella's voice, but could not catch what she was saying. Noiselessly as a serpent gliding amongst the trees and shrubs did the earl steal to the rear of that arbour, and there, inwardly chuckling at his astuteness and his cunning policy, he listened. The voices continued speaking in the same low tone as before, and love was assuredly the topic of their discourse. But gradually the suspicion stole into the earl's mind that it was not precisely the voice of his son Adolphus which he heard in conversation with his beautiful niece. His lordship continued to listen with suspended breath, until he could no longer conceal from himself the suspicion — almost amounting to a conviction — that it was none other than Christian Ashton whom he thus heard in tender discourse with Isabella. The earl was amazed, bewildered, petrified; he felt as if he were in a dream, and none of the fictitious adventures in his own

forthcoming volumes seemed half so marvellous as this reality. Whether he was standing on his head or his heels, the old nobleman had not a very clear conception. At length, as he began to awaken somewhat from his astoundment, he resolved to have ocular demonstration of the fact itself ere he proclaimed his presence, for the "optical delusion" in respect to his wife some weeks back had made him particularly cautious how he took any rash step for the future.

Therefore, still as noiselessly as a serpent, did the earl creep along around the arbour, until he was close by the entrance of that dense umbrageous bower. It was now almost completely dusk, and the earl, gently protruding his head, looked in. The lovers both at the same instant caught sight of a face thus peeping upon them through the obscurity, but they did not recognize it. Isabella gave a faint scream, and Christian — smitten with the conviction that it was a piece of impertinent curiosity on the part of the gardener whom he had a little while back seen in the grounds — darted forward and dealt the countenance such a vigorous blow that he sent the unfortunate old earl sprawling back into the midst of a group of sweetbrier shrubs.

His lordship roared out with the pain; as well indeed he might, for the thorns had entered his person in all directions, and as he had a pair of light trousers on, it was particularly in the lower limbs that he suffered. Christian and Isabella at once comprehended that it was none other than the earl himself who was the victim of this catastrophe. The young maiden was overwhelmed with confusion and dismay; the youth sprang forward to drag his lordship forth from the briars, and Lord Osmond at that moment rushed up to the spot. Hearing his father's cries, Adolphus had fancied there was something wrong, and he had accordingly urged the countess to return to the mansion while he sped to see what was the matter.

"I am murdered, Adolphus," exclaimed the earl, in a towering rage; "this young rascal has vowed to have my life, and he has been making love to your cousin Bella."

"Most sincerely and humbly do I beseech your lordship's pardon," said Christian, "for the blow which I inflicted —"

"But my nose," cried the earl, rubbing his nasal promontory in a most ludicrous manner. "Be off with you, sir!

Get out of my sight. Never cross my threshold again; and whatever is due to you shall be forwarded to your lodging in the morning."

"I hope, my dear father," interposed Lord Osmond, "that you will deal leniently —"

"What! with this nose of mine all swollen and puffed up, my good looks spoilt," vociferated the earl. "Where is the countess?" he abruptly demanded.

"Oh, she has been indoors for some time," replied Adolphus. "She complains of headache —"

"Ah, well," interrupted the earl, satisfied that it was all right in that quarter, "the countess acted prudently to go indoors. Come, Bella, away with us at once. Take your cousin's arm — It is shocking of you to have listened to this jackanapes of a boy when you know that Adolphus —"

"Hush, my dear father," hastily whispered the young nobleman; "poor Bella is dreadfully agitated. And you, Mr. Ashton," he added, now turning quickly to our hero, and speaking in a low, hurried voice, "depart at once; your presence only irritates my father. Rest assured that I will do all I can to intercede in your behalf."

He wrung Christian's hand as he spoke, pushed the youth forward to hasten his departure, and then giving his arm to Isabella, whispered, "Cheer up, my dear cousin; we will see what can be done for the best."

But Isabella was weeping bitterly, and on regaining the house, she hurried up to her own chamber, where she gave unrestrained vent to her affliction. Meanwhile the Earl of Lascelles repaired to his dressing-room, to detail his grievances to Makepeace, and to have a poultice applied to his nose, which was somewhat swollen from the effects of the blow so vigorously dealt by Christian.

On the following morning Lord Osmond called upon our hero at his lodgings, and with much real sorrow informed him that though both the countess and himself had pleaded their utmost with the earl on Christian's behalf, they had found him inexorable. Lord Osmond therefore counselled the youth to look out for another situation, and offered to render him any service that lay in his power. Christian bashfully expressed the hope that Miss Vincent would not suffer in her uncle's estimation; and it was a solace to him, in the midst

of his affliction, to learn that his lordship had expressed no particular views with regard to his niece, but had merely hinted that he should keep a sharp eye upon her for the future.

CHAPTER XIII

THE VISIT TO THE REGENT'S PARK

MEANWHILE Christina had been for a few weeks fulfilling the light and pleasing duties which she had to perform toward the Princess Indora. These consisted chiefly in reading to her Highness, in practising music with her, and assisting her researches into the historical records and the institutions of the British empire. The princess treated her precisely as Lady Octavian Meredith had done, namely, as a friend and as an equal, so that our youthful heroine experienced not the slightest sense of a dependent position. She took all her repasts with the princess, and rode out with her in the carriage. Now that the fine weather had returned, they walked in the garden of an evening; and the more Christina saw of the King of Inderabad's daughter, the greater was the esteem she experienced toward her.

Christina had, on her first visit to the secluded villa residence, been astonished at the mingled sumptuousness and elegance of that abode, which appeared to realize all her dreamlike notions of Oriental splendour, or of those miniature palaces whereof we read in fairy-tales. But far more was she amazed by the magnificent beauty of the princess and the dark splendour of Sagoonah's charms. Indeed, everything connected with this retreat of the Oriental exotics was fraught with interest and novelty for the young maiden. Not the slightest idea had she of the motive which had brought the princess to England; nor had she the least suspicion that Mr. Redcliffe had ever crossed that threshold. On the day that she first applied for the situation, Indora had confidentially informed her that her real rank was that of a princess, but that, in order as much as possible to avert public curiosity, she concealed her high position and passed

merely as an Oriental lady of fortune. Christina had mentioned Zoe's name as that of one to whom reference could be made if requisite; and Indora, perceiving from the way in which Christina spoke that she was on intimate terms with Zoe, gave her permission to mention confidentially the real rank of the lady into whose household she was about to enter. Thus there was no breach of trust on Christina's part in stating that much to Lady Octavian Meredith.

For an hour or two every day the Princess Indora shut herself up in that exquisitely appointed boudoir which we described on the first occasion that we introduced her to the reader; and there she employed herself in examining a portion of twenty enormous volumes which were piled up in the room, and which consisted of files of the *Times* for as many years as there were volumes. Once or twice during the first two or three weeks of her residence beneath that roof, Christina had occasion to enter the boudoir to speak to the princess, and she found her poring over the leaves of those files with a most earnest intentness. The young maiden however attached no importance to the circumstance, but simply ascribed it to that love of instruction which the princess displayed in all matters that concerned the affairs of Great Britain.

One day, as Christina entered the sumptuously furnished drawing-room, she perceived a note lying upon the carpet, and fancying that it was some stray piece of paper of no consequence, but that it ought not to be left to mar the exquisite neatness with which the apartment was kept, she picked it up. A glance, however, at the paper showed that it was a letter, and without reading even a single word of it, she placed it upon the table. At that very instant the Princess Indora entered, and Christina, presenting her the note, said, "I found this lying upon the carpet."

The Oriental lady's superb eyes appeared to recognize it at a glance, and for a moment there was a gentle flush sweeping over the delicate duskiness of her countenance. Christina beheld it, and mistaking its cause, said, somewhat proudly, "Your ladyship" (for the title of Highness was not used beneath that roof) "cannot possibly think that I would violate the sanctity of your letter."

"No, my dear Christina," exclaimed Indora, with the enthusiasm of generous frankness, "not for a single moment

could I do you such injustice. Besides, after all," she added, as if she thought it necessary to account for whatsoever change of features might have inspired our heroine with that misapprehension, "there is nothing in this note that you may not see. I received it some months back, as you will observe by the date."

Thus speaking, the princess opened the letter, and handing it to Christina, bade her read it. Miss Ashton obeyed, and with considerable surprise read the following lines:

"MORTIMER STREET, CAVENDISH SQUARE,
"January 11, 1848.

"Mr. Redcliffe presents his most dutiful regards to her Highness the Princess of Inderabad, and begs to inform her it has come to his knowledge that some evil-disposed persons may probably seek to inveigle her Highness or the ayah Sagoonah into a snare, for purposes to which Mr. Redcliffe will not further allude. He however deems it his duty thus to put her Highness upon her guard, and if instructions be issued that no communication is to be held by her Highness's dependents with strangers, every needful precaution will have been adopted.

"Her Highness the Princess of Inderabad."

The moment she caught sight of the address from which the note was dated, and of the name of Redcliffe, an expression of surprise appeared upon Christina's countenance, but this deepened into alarm as she continued the perusal of the letter. The princess failed not to observe the effect which it produced upon her, and perceiving that the surprise was something apart from the announcement contained in the note itself, she said, "What thus strikes you, my young friend?"

"Simply," responded Christina, "that I have some little acquaintance with the gentleman who penned this billet, and my brother — who has occasionally visited me here, with your ladyship's kind permission — is far more intimate with him."

"Indeed, you know Mr. Redcliffe?" said Indora, subduing as well as she was able the thrilling trepidation which she ever felt on breathing that name.

Christina proceeded to explain how she herself had once

lodged in the same house where the note was dated, and how, on subsequently meeting Mr. Redcliffe, she had been enabled to interest him in the case of the poor seamstress, Mary Wright. She went on to expatiate on Mr. Redcliffe's bounty toward that unfortunate creature, showing how delicately yet unostentatiously his ministrations were rendered until she sank into the eternal sleep of death. Indora listened with the deepest inward interest, but she had sufficient guard over herself to prevent her countenance from betraying all she felt.

"And that was not the only good deed on Mr. Redcliffe's part that has come to my knowledge," continued Christina. "Through him the dreadful purposes of a wicked husband toward an amiable and innocent wife were completely frustrated; and I am proud to reflect that my brother Christian played no insignificant part on the side of justice and virtue."

"Tell me this narrative," said the princess. "The little you have already spoken on the subject interests me."

Christina accordingly entered upon the recital of those incidents which are so well known to the reader, and the full particulars of which she had received from her brother's lips. In the course of her history it became necessary to speak of the pond by the side of the road, in the vicinage of Oaklands, where the murder had been committed nearly nineteen years back; and to the entire narrative did the princess listen with the utmost attention.

"No wonder that the young woman, Letitia Rodney," remarked Indora, "should have been so overwhelmed with horror when accosted by Mr. Redcliffe by the side of that pond in the deep darkness of the night."

"The tragedy which took place there so many years ago," rejoined Christina, "was a very dreadful one. My brother Christian read the account in a piece of an old newspaper when he was first in the employment of the Duke of Marchmont."

"And did he recite to you all the particulars?" asked the princess.

"Briefly so," responded Christina. "Yes, it was a sad tale, full of a romantic and fearful interest; but it has left a dread stigma upon the names of the Duchess Eliza and of Bertram Vivian."

The Princess Indora rose from her seat and advanced toward the window, from which she gazed forth in silence for two or three minutes. At length again turning toward Christina, she said, "Our conversation has flowed into a channel which has interested me. I have a complete file of a London newspaper in the boudoir. You are far more expert than I am in everything which relates to the concerns of your own country. Will you endeavour to find for me the accounts of the particular tragedy of which you have been speaking?"

"With pleasure," answered our heroine, and away she tripped to the boudoir, the princess shortly afterward following. Christina referred to the volume which contained the set of newspapers for the year 1829, and she had little difficulty in discovering the accounts of the appalling tragedy at Oaklands. They ran through several numbers, and even for weeks and months after it occurred, there were occasional paragraphs referring to it, and chronicling the various surmises that were abroad at the time in respect to what had become of the Duchess Eliza and of Bertram Vivian. All these did Christina mark with ink, so as to be more easy of reference for the Princess Indora, and having finished her task, she was about to retire, when Sagoonah entered, bearing a letter addressed to the young maiden. The volume of the *Times* which she had been searching lay open upon the table; the ayah's dark eyes glanced for an instant toward it, as if in wonder at the colossal subject of her royal mistress's and her youthful companion's studies. She presented the letter with that graceful inclination of the form which showed all its willowy and bayadere-like elasticity to such advantage, and then withdrew.

Christina instantaneously recognized the handwriting of Lady Octavian Meredith, and she passed into the drawing-room to peruse the letter. Therein Zoe informed her that though her health had improved since Christina left, it was not yet sufficiently reëstablished to enable her to fulfil her promise of calling upon her at the Princess Indora's residence; but she begged our heroine to come and pass a few hours with her on the following day, adding that she should be otherwise altogether alone, as Lord Octavian had promised to spend the whole of that day with his father the Marquis of Penshurst. Christina could not help thinking that there was a certain significancy in this latter notification, and that

it was meant as an assurance that she might in all safety accept the invitation without the fear of encountering Meredith. The young girl caught a sigh rising up in her throat, but by a strong and hasty effort she subdued it; and though in the solitude of her own chamber she blushed at this half-betrayal of her own weakness unto herself. To divert her thoughts into a new channel, she sped back to the boudoir, where she found the princess deeply engaged in the perusal of the newspaper volume which Christina had marked for the purpose. The young maiden handed Zoe's letter to her Highness, and when the princess had read it, she said, with her wonted amiability, "I understand, my young friend, that you seek my permission to accept her ladyship's invitation. It is cheerfully accorded, and the carriage shall be at your disposal to-morrow."

Christina thanked the princess for her kindness, and returning to her own chamber, she penned a note to Lady Octavian Meredith, to the effect that she would be with her at noon on the following day. The approaching visit naturally brought recent incidents back to the young maiden's mind with some degree of vividness. She was almost certain that Zoe either suspected or else positively knew her husband's passion, for this alone could explain the tacit readiness with which Zoe consented to separate from our heroine, — or at least how it was that she did not offer any serious remonstrance. And now, perhaps, the reader may wonder whether Christina had acquainted her brother with the circumstances which had led to her change of situation. Yes, the young maiden had spoken frankly to Christian, and had described all that had occurred; but she did not even hint that her own feelings were not altogether so indifferent as she knew they ought to be with regard to Lord Octavian. Her virginal modesty would not permit her to avow even to the ear of an affectionate brother that which she would not admit unto herself; for though there was the suspicion — at times more distinct than at others — in her mind that Lord Octavian's love had not proved entirely displeasing to her, she endeavoured to banish that suspicion, she did all that she could to crush it, and whenever she found the handsome young nobleman's image stealing into her thoughts she at once strove to turn them completely into some other channel.

In the evening, when seated at the dinner-table with the Princess Indora, Christina observed, "The conversation with your ladyship this morning changed to a topic which so engrossed our attention that I had not the opportunity of expressing my hope that Mr. Redcliffe's warning letter was never justified by any actual attempts of the nature to which he alluded."

"Immediately on the receipt of it," responded the princess, "I gave to the faithful Mark," — thus alluding to her steward and majordomo — "the instructions which Mr. Redcliffe had himself suggested. Two or three persons, male and female, had been noticed by Mark lurking about in the neighbourhood, and they endeavoured to enter into conversation with him; but he treated them with so chilling a reserve that they saw they had nothing to gain in that quarter. During the last two or three months I have heard no more of such attempts to pry into my proceedings."

"Is it possible that your Highness has enemies in this country?" asked Christina, with the most perfect ingenuousness; for her pure mind, as inexperienced as it was artless, entertained not the slightest notion as to what the snare could be into which it was sought to inveigle the princess and Sagoonah.

"No, thank Heaven, I fear not enemies," answered the princess. "But you, my sweet young friend, comprehend not as yet that there are persons wicked enough in this world to spread nets for the feet of others," and having thus spoken, the Oriental lady gave the conversation an immediate turn, — not, however, with abruptness, but in a way that seemed perfectly natural.

Precisely at noon on the following day, Christina alighted from the carriage at the Merediths' habitation in the Regent's Park; and as it was already arranged that the equipage was to return to fetch her at four, she had no fresh orders to give, and the vehicle was at once borne away again by the handsomely caparisoned pair attached to it. In a few moments the young maiden found herself clasped in the arms of Zoe.

Lady Octavian received Christina in the drawing-room. She looked pale and languid, and our heroine was distressed to perceive that her beloved friend was yet some distance from complete restoration to health. Zoe questioned her

in the kindest manner as to her new position, and she expressed her delight to hear that Christina was so happy with the Princess of Inderabad. An hour thus passed while they were in conversation together, and during the whole time Lady Octavian never once mentioned the name of her husband. There was, however, nothing pointed in this avoidance of such mention; it might or it might not have been a mere accident arising from the circumstance that the conversation flowed in channels rendering any allusion to Lord Octavian perfectly unnecessary. Refreshments were served up, but scarcely was the luncheon-tray removed when his lordship's well-known knock was heard at the front door. Christina recognized it in a moment; she was thrown off her guard, she started, she blushed, she was filled with confusion.

"It is Lord Octavian," said Zoe, in a quiet tone; and yet it struck Christina, as she glanced toward her friend, that a slight tremulousness was visible in her frame. "He must either have changed his mind in respect to passing the day with his father, or else the marquis must have some other engagement which prevents him from entertaining his son."

While Zoe was thus speaking, Christina had leisure to recover somewhat from her confusion, and she felt the necessity of retaining all her self-possession. She was about to hint that she must now return to Bayswater, when she recollected that she had ordered the carriage to return not until four in the afternoon, and she therefore immediately perceived that were she now to depart abruptly it would be admitting to Zoe that she attached a significance to the circumstance of Lord Octavian's unexpected presence. For though she had little doubt in her own mind that Zoe had more or less penetrated the circumstance which led to her removal to another home, yet it was one of those things concerning which the pure minds of two friends could not very readily show that they had any tacit but mutual understanding.

While all these thoughts were sweeping through Christina's mind, Lord Octavian's well-known footsteps were ascending the stairs; they approached the drawing-room door, and he entered. Fortunately he had heard from the footman who gave him admission that Miss Ashton was with

her ladyship, and therefore he was not taken by surprise on finding Christina there. Ah, but he should not have entered the drawing-room at all, while thus knowing whom he was destined to meet! He had even said so to himself while ascending the stairs, yet an irresistible impulse urged him on; and though conscience told him that he was doing wrong, inclination was stronger than conscience.

Assuming an air of mere friendly courtesy, he advanced to Christina, proffering his hand. She hesitatingly gave him hers; he retained it for a single moment, and having exchanged with her the usual compliments of courtesy, sat down close by Zoe's easy chair.

"You did not expect my return so soon, dearest Zoe," he said, as if endeavouring to concentrate the greater part of his attention upon his wife, "nor did I, when leaving you in the morning, think that I should see you again until the evening. But my father was called into the country on unforeseen business scarcely an hour ere I arrived, and then I received a message requesting me to postpone my visit till the day after to-morrow."

"I hope it is nothing unpleasant," said Zoe, with that amiable placidity and soft mournfulness which had characterized her tone and manner ever since the accident that led to her illness.

"No, nothing of any great consequence," answered Octavian, — "merely a suddenly discovered defalcation in the accounts of his bailiff, but it is to no serious amount."

The young nobleman then proceeded, with well-bred facility, to glide into a conversation on general topics, and in which Zoe bore her part, if not with cheerfulness, at least with an apparent interest; though Christina could not help thinking it was really to prevent the discourse from flagging and thereby causing embarrassment to perhaps all three. The young maiden herself spoke but little; the mere necessity of keeping continuously on her guard, so as not to betray that sense of awkwardness that she inwardly and strongly felt, was at times hurrying her to the very brink of confusion. She sat with her eyes bent down, or else with her looks averted in another direction from the spot where Lord Octavian was seated. She did not choose to meet his regards. Not that she in this respect mistrusted herself. It was impossible for that pure-minded girl to display any significance

of look under such circumstances, but she knew not how Octavian might gaze upon her, or into what increased embarrassment and awkwardness he might plunge her.

Thus half an hour passed. Christina glanced at the time-piece, — still two more hours must elapse ere the carriage would come. Did Lord Octavian intend to remain in the drawing-room the whole time? It appeared so. All of a sudden Zoe directed Christina's attention to a portfolio of new and splendid prints which lay upon the table, and the young maiden, infinitely relieved, — and half-suspecting that Zoe meant purposely thus to relieve her, — hastened to look over them. In doing this she seated herself in such a way that without absolutely turning her back in rudeness toward Octavian, she nevertheless could without restraint avoid meeting his looks. By these means another hour was passed, and then Zoe requested Christina to favour her with an air upon the piano. The young maiden was compelled to advance toward the instrument, but she did so with a visible embarrassment, and Lady Octavian suddenly exclaimed, "No, my dear Christina; it is too bad that I should thus task you when you come to visit me out of friendship, and we have so short a time to be together."

"I see," said Lord Octavian, rising from his seat, and endeavouring to smile, though the attempt was but a sickly one, after all, "that I am one too many here, but I know that you ladies have your little secrets. I shall bid you farewell, Miss Ashton."

Again he presented his hand, again hers was given hesitatingly; he held it but for a moment, and then somewhat hurriedly quitted the room. Christina resumed her seat close by Zoe, and it struck her at the moment that the amiable lady was forcing herself to suppress a sigh. At that same instant, too, our heroine's gentle bosom was so full of emotion that she could have thrown herself into her friend's arms and given vent to her feelings with a gush of tears. But by a mighty effort she conquered this weakness. Zoe at once glided into conversation again, and her manner was, if possible, more kind and more sweetly affable than ever toward Christina. At length the carriage came, and when the two friends were about to part, Zoe said, "I am in hope, dearest Christina, to be enabled to return this visit in a very short time;" but she did not add that if this hope were

disappointed she should expect our heroine to renew her own visit to the Regent's Park.

They embraced warmly and separated. Christina was half-afraid of finding Lord Octavian down-stairs in order to hand her to the carriage, but he was not there, and she took her way back toward Bayswater. While seated in the vehicle she reviewed every incident which had occurred within the last four hours. Scarcely a doubt remained in her mind as to the fact that Zoe had penetrated her husband's secret, and now a reminiscence suddenly fitted into Christina's brain. She wondered that she had not thought of it before. For, on that day when the accident with the phaeton occurred, it had struck her for an instant that she beheld Zoe's eyes suddenly close as she turned toward her immediately after those passionate exclamations had burst from Octavian's lips. Ah, doubtless Zoe's ear had caught them! They had revealed to her the secret of her husband's love for another; and if Zoe had really thus known it all along, it would account for the entire tenor of the admirable lady's conduct since that moment which struck a fatal blow to her happiness.

"Good heavens!" thought Christina to herself, shuddering and shivering at the bare idea that her surmise was correct, "what a sacrifice of feeling is the generous-hearted Zoe making in every way. She knows her husband's unlawful and disastrous love; she knows that I, though Heaven can tell how unwittingly, am its object, and yet she does not hate me. No, she is too magnanimous. And she will not make her husband blush in her presence by suffering him to perceive that she has penetrated his secret. Perhaps she pities him; perhaps she feels for him, making allowances for a heart that has no power over its own volition, and now she is cherishing this secret, she locks it up in her own bosom, she studies by every action, word, and look to excite the belief that she suspects it not. Admirable Zoe! Ah, no wonder that there is sadness in her tone, soft plaintiveness in her looks, for these it is impossible she can altogether control."

And then, while still seated in the carriage which was bearing her homewards, Christina wept scalding tears of anguish, — wept as if she herself were a wilfully guilty destructrix of the amiable Zoe's happiness.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MILLINER

BUT in the meanwhile, let us see what had taken place at the villa residence of the Princess Indora.

The carriage left that house at about three o'clock in order to reach the Regent's Park at the hour appointed to fetch Christina home; and Mark, the steward, went with it as far as Oxford Street, as he had several purchases to make on behalf of the household which he superintended. Sagoonah issued forth as if to walk in the garden, and her tall, lithe, supple form, arrayed in the white garments of an ayah, was lost amidst the avenues of embowering trees. There was a strange expression in Sagoonah's lustrous eyes; they seemed to burn with an unearthly light, a mingled fierceness and satisfaction hovered in their luminous depths, defying all power of description. Her lips of vivid scarlet were at first compressed as if with the resoluteness of some settled purpose, but on reaching the extremity of the garden, where it was bounded by a close fence separating it from a field, the ayah paused to listen, and then her thin, bright lips, parting with the hushed state of suspense, revealed her teeth of ivory whiteness and purity. The finely modelled bust, which the white garment only partially concealed, and which in its round and well-divided contours, unsupported by corset, resembled sculptured marble of a dusky hue, remained upheaved with that same suspense. Then she advanced through the shrubs, and looked over the fence. She perceived a female very handsomely dressed, and carrying a large brown paper parcel in her hands, loitering about in the field. Sagoonah, on catching that female's eye, made an imperious sign for her to advance; the woman hastened to obey it, and came close up under the fence.

"Why were you not here at the moment?" demanded the ayah, angrily, and though she spoke in broken English, yet her language was perfectly comprehensible.

"I was fearful of approaching too close up to the fence," was the well-dressed female's response, and she likewise spoke the English tongue in a manner which proved her to be a foreigner.

"And yet I sent word by your spy this forenoon," rejoined Sagoonah, "that you were to be here punctually at a quarter past three. However, it is of little consequence since you are here. Go around boldly to the front door—I will give you admittance. You are certain to obtain an interview with her ladyship, and you must then manage according to your own ingenuity."

As she uttered these last words, Sagoonah's eyes flashed again with a fierce, unnatural brilliancy, as if from the present proceeding she anticipated some grand triumph for herself.

"Is there nothing to be apprehended?" inquired the female with the parcel.

"Nothing," responded Sagoonah. "As I sent you word in the morning, the men servants were sure to be out with the carriage, and Mark had arranged to go up into London to make purchases."

Having thus spoken, Sagoonah glided away from the vicinage of the fence, and reëntered the house, while the woman with whom she had been conversing passed around to the front door. Her summons thereat was promptly answered by Sagoonah, who admitted her into the hall, and pretended to remain conversing with her a few minutes, as if to learn what her business might be. Then the ayah proceeded to the drawing-room, where her mistress was reclining upon one of the luxuriant ottomans, and with the wonted graceful inclination of her form when addressing the princess, or any other person whom she had to regard as a superior, she said, "May it please your ladyship, the milliner has called."

"The milliner, Sagoonah?" exclaimed Indora. "I do not expect any such person. It must be a mistake."

"It does not appear to be a mistake, lady," rejoined the ayah, "for the woman speaks with the confidence of one who knows that she is right."

“ Then let her come hither,” answered the princess, “ and I will ascertain what her proceeding can mean.”

Sagoonah bowed again, and issued from the apartment. Descending to the hall, she bent a significant look with the lustrous flashing of her eyes upon the woman who was waiting there, and whom we may as well at once announce to our reader to be none other than Madame Angelique herself.

This infamous creature followed Sagoonah to the drawing-room, and as she entered the ayah closed the door behind her. Madame Angelique — who had now personally taken in hand a business for which none of her spies nor agents had hitherto appeared competent — had seen Indora when riding in her carriage or walking in her garden, and therefore knew that she was beautiful. But now that she beheld her close, she was perfectly amazed by the mingled grandeur and enchanting magnificence of those charms which she thus contemplated. Nor less too was she astonished by the elegance, the richness, and the sumptuousness of the apartment itself. Self-possessed as the wily woman was, and generally having all her wits about her, Madame Angelique was for a few moments bewildered and astounded by the fairy scene which she beheld and the Oriental houri who was its presiding genius. Indora, with her accustomed affability, gave the woman an encouraging smile, for she perceived her astonishment, and she imagined her to be respectable. Indeed, it had not for a moment entered the mind of the princess that the visitress could be a female of infamous description, or that she was one of those very persons against whom Mr. Redcliffe's warning letter was directed.

“ I am told that you are a milliner,” said Indora, “ but I think that there must be some mistake, as I have not sent for any one of that description.”

“ Your ladyship will, I hope, pardon my intrusion,” replied Madame Angelique. “ I did not tell your domestic that I was sent for, but the young woman understands English so indifferently, and I myself speak it with such little accuracy, that the error arose from these circumstances.”

“ Ah, then,” said Indora, with a glitter of suspicion for a moment appearing in her eyes, “ you have called of your own accord?”

“ I have taken that liberty, my lady,” replied Madame

Angelique, assuming her blandest smile and her most coaxingly affable demeanour. "The truth is, I go my rounds amongst ladies of fashion and wealth — and beauty," she added, glancing with admiring significancy at Indora's splendid countenance; "I display pieces of the newest and most exquisite materials —"

"I am obliged to you for including me amongst the number," interrupted the princess, "but I require nothing of the sort at present, nor indeed at all."

Indora made a movement as if to indicate that the woman might withdraw, but Madame Angelique was not to be so easily disposed of.

"Pray bear with me for a few minutes, gracious lady," she said, "and I will show you so rare and choice a material that I am convinced your ladyship will be ravished with it. I work for some of the highest ladies in the land: for instance, the Marchioness of Trevelyan, the Countess of Mordaunt, the Countess of Lascelles, the Duchess of Marchmont —"

"Ah, you work for the Duchess of Marchmont?" said Indora.

"Yes, my lady," responded Madame Angelique, inwardly delighted to think that she should thus have succeeded in enlisting the interest of the princess. "I have been with the duchess this very day." It was, however, a monstrous falsehood which she uttered, inasmuch as Lavinia had not employed her since the discovery relative to the duplicate dresses, but if she had said she had seen the duke that day, it would have been perfectly correct.

"Are the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont in London now?" inquired the princess.

"They are at their mansion in Belgrave Square," rejoined Madame Angelique.

"I have heard of their splendid seat of Oaklands," resumed Indora, "and should like much to see it."

"Dear me, how extraordinary," ejaculated Madame Angelique, with well-feigned astonishment. "I can easily become the means of gratifying your ladyship's curiosity, and shall be proud and happy to do so."

"Indeed! How?" exclaimed the princess, with visible interest depicted on her magnificent countenance.

"His Grace the Duke of Marchmont is accustomed to treat me quite in a familiar manner," responded the wily

Frenchwoman, who could scarcely conceal her mingled surprise and joy that matters should thus be taking a turn which seemed so favourable to her own atrocious designs. "You see, my lady, I have worked some years for the duchess, and the duke takes such pride in beholding his wife well dressed, that he seems to fancy he can never sufficiently display his gratitude toward the French *artiste* who furnishes her Grace's toilet, and that *artiste* is your ladyship's humble servant," added Madame Angelique, with a low curtsy.

"I understand," observed Indora; "the duke is kind to you, and if you ask him a favour would grant it?"

"Your ladyship has only anticipated what I was about to say," rejoined the infamous woman. "Ah, my lady, Oaklands is a most beautiful place. Such magnificent grounds, gardens so exquisitely laid out, superb aviaries, fountains, and statues, ponds with gold and silver fish, ornamental water, with stately swans floating on its surface, conservatories of the choicest fruits and flowers, — it is a perfect paradise. And then, too, the interior of the mansion itself, its sumptuous apartments, the delicious views it commands, and its splendid picture-gallery, — I am sure, my lady, that with your exquisite taste, and with your love of the beautiful," continued Madame Angelique, glancing around the drawing-room, "you would be delighted with a few days' residence in that charming place."

"Your description has indeed excited my curiosity," observed Indora, "and I should much like to pay a few hours' visit to Oaklands."

"A few hours, my lady," exclaimed Madame Angelique. "I am confident that if I said but a single word — and you would so far honour me as to bid me say that word on your behalf — I could obtain permission for your ladyship to make Oaklands your home for a week or a fortnight. The duke and duchess are not there, and you would be undisturbed mistress of the mansion."

"But it would be a most extraordinary request to make on the part of a perfect stranger," said the princess.

"Nothing extraordinary, when that stranger is an Oriental lady of rank and fortune. Besides," added Madame Angelique, "these things are frequently done in England, so that the duke and duchess would be delighted to

place their mansion at your ladyship's disposal for a short period."

"I am exceedingly indebted to you for this assurance," answered Indora, "and I am almost inclined to accept your courteous offer. Open that parcel, and show me the contents."

Madame Angelique did as she was directed, and exhibited four or five superb pieces of dress material, — each piece containing the requisite quantity to be made up into costume.

"What are the prices of these?" asked Indora.

Madame Angelique named the specific sums, inwardly chuckling the while at the prospect of succeeding in the object of her mission, in comparison with which she cared little for the sale of her costly materials, which indeed, as the reader may suppose, she had only brought with her as a blind.

"I will purchase them all," said Indora, and drawing forth a purse from beneath the immense velvet cushion on which she was half-reclining, she counted forth the sum in Bank of England notes.

"Your ladyship will perhaps permit me to make up these materials after the European fashion?" said Madame Angelique. "Pardon me for the compliment, but your ladyship would look as well in such apparel as in that sweetly picturesque costume which your ladyship now wears."

"No, leave these pieces here," replied Indora. "But you may make me three or four dresses of a far more simple character, — such, for instance, as English ladies ordinarily wear. You may furnish me likewise with bonnets and shawls to match, for if I am really to pay this visit to Oaklands, I must appear there in a garb which will avert the gaze of disagreeable curiosity."

"I understand, my lady," answered Madame Angelique.

"I have your exquisite form so completely in my mind's eye that no measurement is necessary, and I am confident of being enabled to afford your ladyship the completest satisfaction. Indeed, such faultless contours as your ladyship's —"

"But look you," interrupted Indora, "I have my own reasons for desiring all this to be contrived with some little privacy. In short, when I return to my native land, I

would not have it known that I had even for a few days assumed the national garb of English ladies. Therefore come not yourself again to this house, but when the costumes are in readiness forward them to me, packed in boxes. Send me your account by the post, and I will remit you a draft for the payment. At the same time that you will have occasion thus to communicate with me, you can let me know whether you have been enabled — ”

“ To obtain the ducal permission for your ladyship to make a short sojourn at Oaklands? ” exclaimed Madame Angelique. “ Oh, I can take it upon myself to give your ladyship a most positive assurance upon the point. And at the same time that I have the honour of communicating with your ladyship, I will furnish instructions relative to the route which is to be taken to Oaklands, should your ladyship proceed thither in a private manner by post-chaise, which will be the better means of conveyance. ”

“ I am really obliged to you, ” responded Indora, “ for all the kind interest you are thus displaying toward the gratification of the whim which I have conceived. Probably in a week or ten days I shall hear from you? ”

“ Assuredly so, my lady, ” replied Madame Angelique.

Indora now, by a gesture, intimated that the audience was at an end, and the Frenchwoman carried herself by dint of a continuous series of curtsies toward the door. But perhaps, if she had observed as she closed that door behind herself the singular expression which swept over the superb countenance of the Oriental lady, she would have had some misgiving as to the real meaning of Indora's conduct throughout this proceeding, for it was an expression of such mingled scorn, contempt, triumphant satisfaction, all so strangely blended as scarcely to be definable in words.

Madame Angelique found Sagoonah waiting in the hall to afford her egress, and the rapid, significant look which the wily woman bent upon the ayah conveyed to the latter an intimation of complete success. Then Sagoonah's naturally lustrous eyes flashed still more brilliant fires, but assuredly not alone with a gratified greed experienced on account of the gold which Madame Angelique thrust into her hand. Indeed, the Frenchwoman herself could not comprehend the luminous strangeness of the ayah's looks, and for a moment they troubled her as if with a sort of vague

and unknown terror. Yes, and even as she hurried away from the villa residence, and while chuckling too at the success of her scheme with regard to that Oriental lady of an almost fabulous beauty, she felt as if she were still followed by the wild influence of Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

CHAPTER XV

THE PRISONER

It was now the beginning of June and three months had elapsed since the dreadful murder of Mr. Pollard at Liverpool. The spring assizes had passed without seeing Lettice Rodney brought to trial, but as there was to be a summer assize held, it was expected she would on this occasion appear before the jury. The reason for the postponement of the trial at the first-mentioned assizes was the serious illness of the prisoner. It was, however, rumoured that she was not altogether without friends, that eminent counsel had been engaged in her behalf, and that Sir William Stanley, a wealthy baronet residing in the neighbourhood, and who was in the commission of the peace, had exhibited much interest in her behalf. Still the general impression appeared to be that she was guilty, — the details of the circumstantial evidence telling so fearfully against her. Sir William Stanley, however, seemed to be an exception to the rule, and so far as his friends could judge from the few words he let drop on the subject, and the peculiarity of his look when it was broached in his presence, it was believed that he at least was not so strongly impressed by that evidence, even if he did not go so far as to imagine her completely innocent.

Lettice Rodney had indeed been seriously ill. The terrible accusation which pressed against her, the weight of the testimony upon which she was committed, had almost completely crushed her. If really guilty of the crime, she would have perhaps borne herself more courageously than she did when, being conscious of her innocence, she thus lay under an imputation of the blackest turpitude. After her committal for trial, she was for many weeks in a state bordering upon dissolution, sometimes raving in the delirium

of fever, at others sinking into a torpor so profound that it appeared as if it were the highroad leading to the portals of death's mansion. She was lodged during this severe illness in the infirmary of the gaol, and every attention was shown her by the official authorities and the medical men. To a certain extent this humane treatment would have been displayed toward her without the prompting of any external influence, and notwithstanding the fearful crime with which she was charged, but those attentions had been perhaps all the more indulgent on account of the intervention of Sir William Stanley on the young woman's behalf. The baronet nevertheless suffered it to be understood, for his own character's sake, that he had no previous acquaintance with Lettice Rodney, and that he was actuated by mere motives of humanity, — an averment which was fully supported by his reputation for the highest honour and integrity. We should observe that Sir William Stanley was a man of about sixty; all the early part of his life had been passed in India, where he had amassed a considerable fortune, and by the services rendered to the government in a variety of ways had obtained the title of baronet. He was a widower, but had one son, — a young man of about four and twenty, and who was a captain in a cavalry regiment. We must further observe that circumstances had induced Sir William Stanley to revisit India some three years previous to the date of which we are now writing, and that he had only returned to England about a twelve-month back.

It was the first week in June, and in a chamber communicating with the female infirmary of the Liverpool gaol Lettice Rodney sat. How changed was her appearance from that glory and bloom of beauty which had invested her ere she found herself charged with the tremendous crime of murder. But terrible are the ravages which those joint scourges — care and illness — are enabled to effect upon the human form, and the most blighting influence of the former as well as the fiercest rage of the latter had wreaked themselves upon the unfortunate Lettice Rodney. Her shape, once so voluptuous in its superb proportions, had become emaciated; her cheeks, once so plump and with the roseate bloom of health upon them, had grown sunken and deadly pale; her eyes, deep in their cavernous orbits, had lost their fire, and the ashy lips received an added

ghastliness from the fine white teeth. And her look too, oh, how profoundly sad it was! That countenance which had been wont to beam with sunny smiles, or to glow with the flush of sensuous passion, now seemed to be the tombstone of a perished heart, and on which was traced the epitaph of a happiness that was gone, never to come back.

It was about noon when she was thus seated in her chamber on the occasion that we now propose specially to direct the reader's attention thither. She was clad in the very plainest dress that she had brought with her from London at the time of her ill-fated journey; there was nothing coquettish about her now, no studied air of seductiveness in her toilet any more than there was in her looks. She seemed an altered creature, but one of those beings whom it is necessary for the hand of Providence to drag, for its own wise purposes, through the most terrible ordeals, and whose hearts must pass through fiery furnaces in order that they may be chastened. Books were before her upon the table at which she sat, and they were books which she read now, but which only a few months back, when in the luxurious saloons at Madame Angeli's house of gilded infamy, she would have tossed away from her with the light laugh of scorn.

Yes, and bitterly, bitterly did Lettice Rodney repent of her misdeeds. She thought of the Duchess of Marchmont, to accomplish whose ruin she had lent herself, and the conviction was strong in her mind that her own calamity was to a certain extent a judgment upon her head for her wickedness then. But she knew that she had many, many other sins to answer for: for instance, her personation of Mrs. Rayner in order to rob the lawyer of his money, and then too the very object of the journey which she had undertaken at the time, — namely, to try and wean away Eveleen O'Brien from that parental home to which the reformed young woman had gone back. For all these misdeeds, either accomplished or meditated, — and for the life of voluntary pollution and depravity which she had led, — did Lettice Rodney believe herself most righteously punished now.

And yet she was not altogether without the hope that her innocence would yet be made apparent, and entertaining this hope, her present contrition was all the more praiseworthy, for it would indeed have been comparatively little

worth if merely the result of that terrorism which belongs to the anticipation of an inevitably ignominious fate. But whence arose that hope? A few words will explain. When Lettice Rodney was beginning to recover from her dangerous illness — when she awoke from that long period of mingled delirium and torpor to a consciousness of her dread position — she was visited by Mr. Redcliffe. This gentleman questioned her minutely as to the whole incidents of the tragedy at Pollard's house; he likewise gave her certain instructions, and bidding her put faith in Providence, he declared that all that man could do should be done to make her innocence apparent, if innocent she really were. Then, too, did he inform her that he was the individual whom she had encountered on that memorable night by the side of the pond where he had extorted from her a full confession of her misdeeds toward the Duchess of Marchmont, and he likewise gave her to understand that when he visited Madame Angelique's den of infamy, it was in reality from no sensuous inclinations, but because he had special objects to serve. Nor less did he unfold to her that it was through his interposition the penitent Eveleen O'Brien was restored to her home and had received the parental forgiveness. From that visit on the part of Mr. Redcliffe was it that Lettice entertained the hope of her innocence being yet proclaimed to the world.

And now we return to the special occasion on which we have been speaking of her as being seated in her prison-chamber, and devoting her attention to the volumes which the chaplain and the governor had furnished. Presently the door opened, and as Lettice slowly turned her mournful look thither, expecting that it was merely the matron of the infirmary, she beheld Mr. Redcliffe. The door closed behind him, and taking a seat on the opposite side of the table, he bade Lettice resume her own, from which she had risen through respect toward the kind friend whom Heaven had sent her. He made inquiries concerning her health; he questioned her as to her present frame of mind, and he found that the soul was in a better condition than the body.

“Even if my innocence be made apparent, Mr. Redcliffe,” said the prisoner, in a voice of profound melancholy, “and even if I go forth from this gaol into the great world again, I shall never recover from the blow which has so cruelly smitten me. But as for my penitence, — oh, believe me

to be sincere! — I beseech you to believe that I am truly contrite.”

“Six weeks have elapsed,” said Mr. Redcliffe, “since I last beheld you. You had then only just awakened, as it were, from unconsciousness of alternating fever and torpor, and your mind was under influences but little calculated to render it calm and collected. Do you remember all that you told me then?”

“Every syllable, Mr. Redcliffe,” answered Lettice, emphatically.

“And every syllable was consistent with truth?” said the philanthropist, inquiringly.

“As I have a soul to be saved,” rejoined Lettice. “I have been very wicked, but never, never was I capable of such a crime as that, — no, never. My soul would have abhorred it.”

“I believe you,” answered Mr. Redcliffe, “for certain little incidents have come to my knowledge which tend more or less to corroborate some portions of your narrative. Describe to me once more, as accurately and minutely as you can, the appearances of the two men whom — as you allege — you saw on that fatal night in company with Mrs. Webber the housekeeper.”

Lettice did so, and Mr. Redcliffe murmured to himself in a musing manner, “Yes, they are the very same.”

“Do you — do you think that there is a prospect of my innocence being proved?” asked Lettice, with an almost anguished eagerness.

“I hope so,” responded Redcliffe, “but I charge you not to indulge too much in a hope which might possibly be disappointed. Heaven is the disposer of all events, and it is only by Heaven’s sufferance that man can be permitted to work them out to a particular end. I shall tell you nothing of the plans I am adopting on your behalf; suffice it for you to know that I am not idle.”

“What can I say, Mr. Redcliffe,” asked Lettice, profoundly moved, “to convince you of my gratitude?”

“I am certain that you are grateful,” he answered, “but it is not gratitude that I require, — it is the assurance that you are truly penitent for those misdeeds that you have committed. And in this also I believe you. I learn from the governor sufficient to convince me that you fulfilled

the injunctions which I gave you on the occasion of my former visit."

"Oh, not for the world, Mr. Redcliffe, would I have neglected them," exclaimed Lettice. "That infamous woman Madame Angelique came down from London to see me a few days after you were last here, but I refused to receive her. Then she sent an attorney residing at Liverpool, to offer to conduct my case, but I told the man of business that I was fortunately not without friends, and that even if I were, I would accept nothing at the hands of Madame Angelique."

"These particulars I have learned from the governor," remarked Mr. Redcliffe, "and I am pleased to find that you have thus fulfilled all my instructions. Your trial will come on shortly; able counsel has been retained for you, and as I have already hinted, I am not idle in other respects. I have entrusted your case to the most eminent solicitor in Liverpool, and this afternoon he will call upon you to ascertain whether he has correctly taken down every detail of the statement which I made him on your behalf. I purpose to remain in this neighbourhood for a few days, and I shall see you again. But ere I leave you on the present occasion, let me repeat my warning, — that you indulge not too far in whatsoever hope I may have held out, but that you fix your thoughts upon that Heaven whose forgiveness you so much need."

Lettice made a suitable answer, and then, as Mr. Redcliffe was about to leave her, she said, "May I hope, sir, that Madame Angelique has not succeeded by other means in enticing away Eveleen from the home to which you restored her?"

"No," answered Mr. Redcliffe, "Eveleen is with her parents. She is fully upon her guard against the machinations of that vile woman, and I have no fear that she will either relapse into error, or become the victim of any new snare."

Mr. Redcliffe then took his departure, accompanied by the heartfelt gratitude of the penitent Lettice Rodney.

While this interview was taking place between the philanthropist and the prisoner, the following conversation was being held in the grounds of a handsome country-seat, about four miles from Liverpool. That country-seat was

the abode of Sir William Stanley, and the discourse to which we have just alluded was progressing between this gentleman and his son. Captain Stanley had only arrived within the same hour at the paternal mansion, where he was to spend a few weeks, he having obtained leave of absence from his regiment. We have already said he was about twenty-four years of age; we may add that he was a handsome young man, of the middle height, well made, and of genteel figure. He was steady in his conduct, endowed with high notions of honour, of generous disposition, and of considerable intellectual acquirements. He had a good parent, but he himself was a son of whom any father might be proud.

“And who is this Mr. Redcliffe whom you are expecting to-day?” inquired Captain Stanley, as he sauntered with Sir William through the spacious and well laid-out grounds attached to the mansion, which we may as well observe bore the name of Stanley Hall.

“Do you not remember, my dear Robert, how I was indebted to a gallant Englishman for my life when traversing the Indian jungle —”

“Can I, my dear father, ever forget an occurrence which, when I read it, caused me for the moment as much cruel terror as if I had indeed lost you, but which the next instant was succeeded by as thrilling a joy at the certainty of your escape? You however omitted in your letter to specify the name of the valorous Englishman who rescued you from those bloodthirsty Thugs, and after your return to England you never happened to mention it.”

“That gentleman, then,” rejoined Sir William, “is the Mr. Redcliffe who will be with us presently.”

“And most heartily shall I grasp the hand of my father’s deliverer,” exclaimed the captain. “Sincerely do I hope, too, that he will remain with us some while, for his is a friendship which I shall be proud to cultivate.”

“You will have the opportunity,” replied Sir William Stanley, “for according to the letter which I received from Mr. Redcliffe this morning, he purposes to remain with us a few days, and I know that he will be here again shortly, before your leave of absence expires, inasmuch as he takes considerable interest in a case which has caused great excitement in our neighbourhood, and which will be brought

forward at the approaching assizes, — I mean that of the accused young woman, Lettice Rodney.”

“ Ah! that reminds me, my dear father,” exclaimed the captain, “ that when you wrote to me some time ago upon the subject, you hinted that you were not quite so convinced as other persons seemed to be of the prisoner’s guilt.”

“ Nor am I, Robert,” returned the baronet, “ and I will explain to you wherefore. The crime — by whomsoever perpetrated — took place, as you recollect, about three months back, and it was only a few days after the occurrence that as I was walking in Liverpool I encountered Mr. Redcliffe. I instantaneously recognized the brave man to whom I owed my life, and we got into conversation. He then explained to me what had brought him to Liverpool. He had read in the newspapers the account of the murder, and the remarkable story which the accused Lettice Rodney told in her defence before the borough magistrates. He had known something of her previously, and though he was acquainted with nothing to her credit — but the very reverse — he nevertheless did not think, from his knowledge of human nature, that she was a young woman of so thoroughly black a heart as to prompt her to the commission of such a frightful deed. Besides — without entering into detailed explanations — he informed me that he had very recently encountered her under circumstances when she was so completely overawed by the idea of being upon a spot which was the scene of a fearful murder perpetrated some years back that he felt persuaded she had not the courage, even if she were sufficiently wicked, to accomplish such a crime. Her tale, too, — that tale which she related in her defence, — had struck him as being too extraordinary to be a mere concoction, and he spoke emphatically of the danger of trusting to circumstantial evidence, as well as of the deplorable errors into which mankind has at different times fallen when rushing precipitately to a belief of a fellow creature’s guilt. Such was the tenor of Mr. Redcliffe’s discourse when I encountered him nearly three months back in Liverpool, and he further informed me that he had been to the gaol to see Lettice Rodney, but that she was raving in the delirium of fever and unconscious of everything that was passing around. I invited him to the hall; he came and passed a few days with me, during which he instituted

secret but minute inquiries into the character of the murdered lawyer's housekeeper, Mrs. Webber."

"And what was the result?" inquired Captain Stanley.

"Nothing of importance," responded the baronet; "indeed, she appeared to be almost a complete stranger in Liverpool, and had only been a very short time in Mr. Pollard's service before he met his death in so terrible a manner. Mr. Redcliffe besought my good offices as a magistrate on behalf of Lettice Rodney, and ere he took his departure for London, he begged me to write to him so soon as the young woman should be in a condition to receive a visit from him. Six weeks elapsed before I was enabled to make such a communication, but in the meantime I received two or three letters from Mr. Redcliffe, informing me that a few little incidents which had come to his knowledge, seemed to afford something like a corroboration of certain parts of the tale which Lettice Rodney had told in her defence. At the expiration of those six weeks, Mr. Redcliffe returned, in consequence of a communication which he received from me, and he then had an interview with Lettice Rodney in the gaol. The result was to establish the conviction in his mind that she is really innocent. But he prudently abstained from giving her too much hope, lest after all it should be doomed to disappointment. On that occasion he remained with me a few days, and now he is returning into our neighbourhood to assure himself that the lawyer to whom he has entrusted the case thoroughly understands it."

"All this is most extraordinary," exclaimed Captain Stanley; "the whole tale is a romance."

"From the positive manner in which Mr. Redcliffe has written and spoken to me," rejoined Sir William, "I am fully inclined to adopt his opinion. Besides, as a visiting magistrate I have seen this Lettice Rodney, I have conversed with her, I have questioned her upon various features of her tale, and I have found her consistent in all its parts. That she is penitent, too, I am well assured, and most sincerely do I hope that Mr. Redcliffe will succeed in his humane purpose."

"And I entertain a similar hope," cried Captain Stanley, with warmth. "If I can render Mr. Redcliffe the slightest assistance in prosecuting his inquiries or researches, I shall be only too happy."

"He is a strange man, Robert," observed the baronet, "and chooses to do things in his own way. I heard it mentioned in Calcutta that he had been for many years resident — some said a prisoner — in the capital of Inderabad. It was moreover stated that he was possessed of considerable wealth. That he is the bravest of the brave, I had the best proof when he delivered me from the murderous villains in the jungle; that he is magnanimous and noble-hearted, his conduct in respect to Lettice Rodney fully certifies. It must not however be thought for a single moment that his acquaintance with this young woman originated in anything immoral. Far from it."

"I long to form the friendship of this admirable man," exclaimed the warm-hearted Captain Stanley.

At this moment a post-chaise was seen approaching through the grounds, and as it drew near, the baronet recognized Mr. Redcliffe as its occupant. He alighted to join the two gentlemen, and the chaise went on to the hall to deposit his portmanteau. The baronet grasped his guest warmly by the hand, and then introduced him to his son. Mr. Redcliffe stated that he had just come from seeing Lettice Rodney in the gaol, and he expressed his conviction of her full and complete innocence of the murder, whatever her other misdeeds might have been.

The baronet, the captain, and Mr. Redcliffe extended their ramble to where the grounds joined the road leading to Liverpool, and as they were about to turn back again, a strange-looking woman rose up from the other side of the fence, — she having been previously seated there. She was tall and thin, and if her complexion had been swarthy, she might have been taken for one of the gipsy race, but instead of being dark, it had evidently in her more youthful period been fair, and it was now partly sallow and partly sun-burnt. Her countenance was exceedingly emaciated and care-worn, and a certain wild, wandering expression in the eyes showed but too plainly that the unfortunate creature's intellects were unsettled. Her hair — once dark — was streaked with gray, and yet she did not appear to be old; indeed, if her age were two or three years past forty, it was the very outside. As for her apparel, it was this that at the first glance gave her a gipsy aspect. It consisted of an old cotton gown, with a dingy cloak over it, and instead of a bonnet or cap,

she wore a cotton handkerchief tied around her head. Blue woollen stockings and coarse shoes completed her garb. Her appearance was, however, cleanly, and notwithstanding the poverty of her attire, there was a certain neatness in it which impressed the beholder with the idea that she had seen better days.

"Ah! poor Crazy Jane," said the baronet, in a low tone and with a compassionating look, as he beheld the woman stand up from the opposite side of the fence.

"A penny for poor Crazy Jane?" she said, thrusting her skinny arm between the palings.

"You know, Jane," said Sir William Stanley, with a benevolent and pitying smile, "that I never give you a penny;" at the same time he drew forth his purse.

"No, true!" ejaculated the woman. "I remember now. Sir William Stanley is always charitable, and that is the reason I so seldom come near the hall. I don't like to intrude on good nature. Ah, dear me! I was not always a poor wandering outcast," and then drawing back her hand from betwixt the palings, she pressed it to her brow.

"Poor creature," said the baronet. "Here are five shillings for you."

She did not, however, seem to hear him, but with her hand still pressed to her forehead, she muttered incoherently, to herself; then at length speaking in a louder tone, she said, "Ah! I have got something more upon my mind; I wish I could explain it, but I cannot. It is not the same thing that has haunted me so long, — no, it is something new; but alas! I cannot — I cannot," and the poor creature shook her head despondingly, as if she deeply felt her inability to give lucid expression to some idea that was uppermost in her mind.

"Here are the five shillings, Jane," said the baronet, and he thrust them through the fence.

"Heaven's blessing upon you!" murmured the afflicted woman, and tears trickled down her wasted countenance; then, taking the money, she passed abruptly away and was soon out of sight.

"She is as mad as ever, poor creature," said the captain. "I remember her from my boyhood."

"Yes, and I remember her for many, many years," added

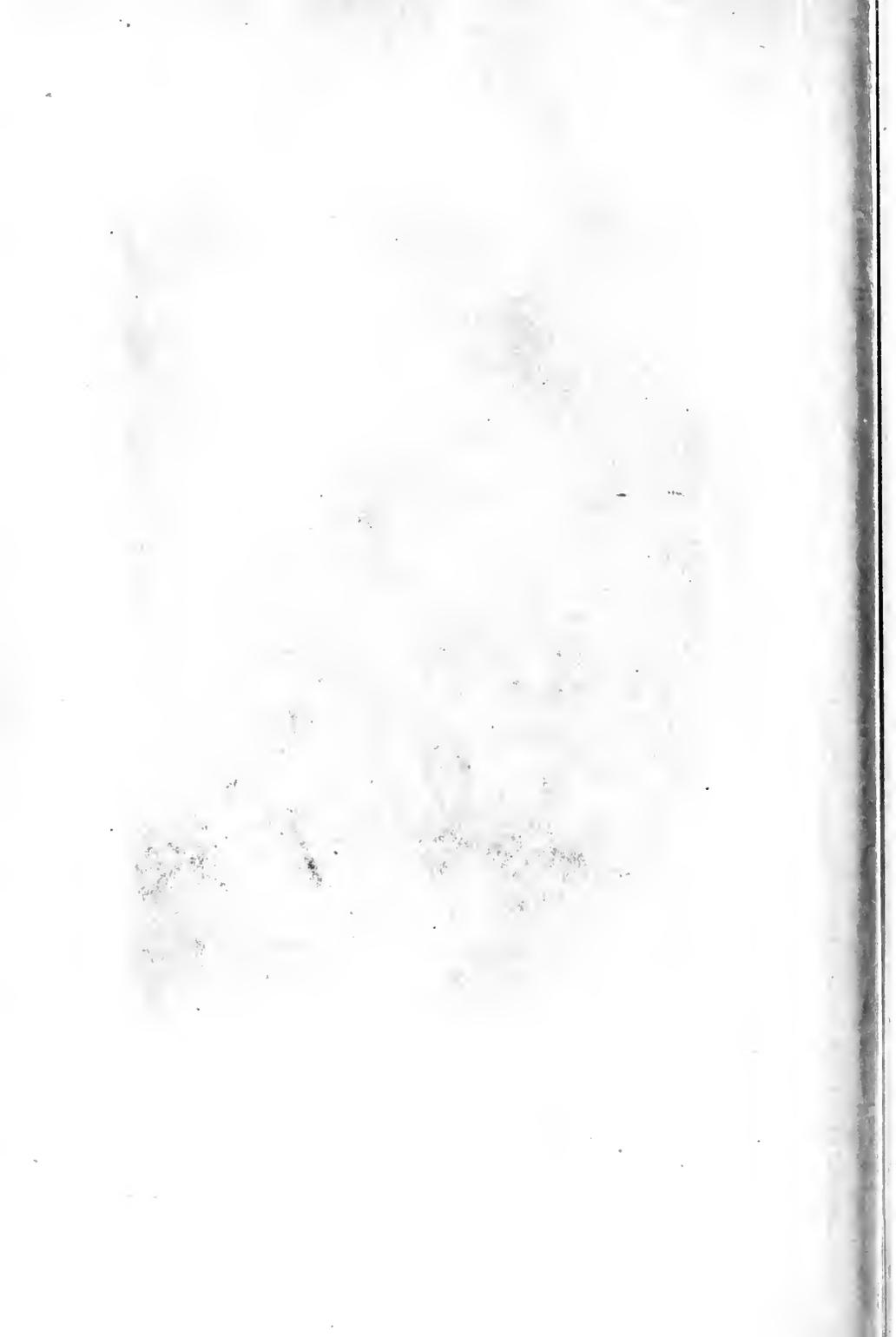
the baronet. "Sadly is she changed, too, since first I knew her. She was then young and good-looking —"

"And who is this unfortunate woman?" asked Mr. Redcliffe.

"No one appears rightly able to give any explanation on the subject," returned Sir William Stanley. "She wanders about the country in all directions, and has been seen more than a hundred miles from here. Sometimes she disappears altogether for several months, and then suddenly turns up again. There is a half-ruined hut about four miles hence, which she inhabits when in the neighbourhood, and as you may suppose, she lives entirely upon charity. I have often endeavoured to lead her into conversation, and ascertain if possible what she originally was, and what calamity turned her brain, but I have never succeeded in eliciting more than that she had seen better days, and that she had stood in the presence of ladies of the highest rank, but whether as a companion or a menial does not very plainly appear, though I should rather suspect in the latter capacity."

The conversation presently turned into some other channel and the three gentlemen retraced their way to the mansion.





CHAPTER XVI

CRAZY JANE

It was in the forenoon — a couple of days after the arrival of Mr. Redcliffe at Stanley Hall, and while the gentleman himself had gone into Liverpool to see the solicitor employed on behalf of Lettice Rodney — that Captain Stanley was riding out on horseback, followed by one of his father's grooms. Diverging from the road, he took a smart gallop through the fields, and had arrived in the neighbourhood of a copse, which he was about to skirt, when Crazy Jane suddenly sprang up before him as if she were rising out of the earth. The captain drew in his steed, and spoke to her with compassionating kindness.

"You are Sir William Stanley's son," she said, gazing intently upon him, "and you are a good young man; you have all your father's benevolence. No, no, do not put your hand into your pocket — I want not money, now. Your father gave me enough to keep me for — I know not how long. Ah, I had something to say the moment I caught sight of you; I determined to say it, and now it is all slipping out of my head."

At first her utterance was rapid, accentuated, and jerking, but these last words were spoken with a profound mournfulness, and pressing her hand to her forehead, she evidently strove to steady her ideas.

"What is it, Jane?" asked the young gentleman, in a kind tone. "Think, reflect, take your time; I am in no hurry if you really wish to speak to me."

"I do, I do," ejaculated the mad woman. "It is something I have got here," and she touched her forehead. "No, it is here," she added; after a pause, and she laid her hand upon her heart. "It is something that oppresses me, —

something that lies as heavy as lead on my bosom, and prevents me from sleeping at night. I wish I could tell it. I thought I could just now; I said it all over to myself, just as I used to say my prayers when I was a child, but it has all gone out of my head."

"What can it be?" asked Captain Stanley, much interested in the woman's words and manner, for he felt convinced that it was not a mere meaningless phase of her madness, but that it was this very madness itself which prevented her from giving lucid expression to something that she had really to reveal.

"What is it, you ask?" she said, with a sudden brightening up of her hitherto vacant desponding look. "Ah! now there is a gleam shooting into my mind — yes, yes, it is about that dreadful murder —"

"The murder?" ejaculated Stanley, all the interest he had previously felt being immensely enhanced in a moment.

"Ah, it is all gone out of my memory again," she said, shaking her head dolefully; "you made me start; you drove it away. It is of no use," and with these words she plunged abruptly into the copse, thus disappearing from the view of the amazed captain and his equally astonished groom.

"There is something extraordinary in this," said Stanley to the domestic; "that woman evidently knows something, but the impression of it is upon her mind like that of an unusual object upon the mind of a child, — too dim and uncertain to be properly explained. We will return at once to the hall and tell my father what has taken place. Mr. Redcliffe, too, said he should be back by luncheon-time, and this is intelligence which he will be deeply interested to receive."

Captain Stanley accordingly took the nearest route to the hall, which he reached just as Mr. Redcliffe was alighting from the baronet's carriage, which had taken him into Liverpool. Sir William Stanley, his son, and their guest were speedily closeted together, and the interview between the young gentleman and Crazy Jane was the subject of deliberation.

"This is indeed most important," observed Mr. Redcliffe, "for it is evidently the same subject to which the woman alluded when we met her at the fence, and when she said that she had something new upon her mind."

"Let us go and see her," exclaimed the baronet, "without delay. But no! Redcliffe, you shall go alone. I have more faith in your power to lead her into lucid conversation than in my own. I have already so often failed. Besides, it is frequently to a stranger that these poor demented creatures will prove more rational than to those whom they have known for a long time, and who have always been accustomed to talk to them in a particular way."

"Yes," said Mr. Redcliffe, "I will lose no time in seeing her. I think you stated that her hut is about four miles distant? If you indicate the particular direction, I will set out and walk thither."

"Take the carriage, or go on horseback," exclaimed the baronet.

"No," rejoined Mr. Redcliffe, "I will walk, because in that case I may stand a better chance of falling in with her if she be rambling about. And I will go alone, too, as she may be the less embarrassed and bewildered in conversing with one than in talking in the presence of two or more."

Sir William Stanley gave Mr. Redcliffe sufficient explanations to guide him toward Crazy Jane's hut, and that gentleman accordingly set out. He had proceeded for a distance of about three miles across the fields, when on emerging into a lane bordered by high thick hedges he perceived Crazy Jane sitting on the green bank under one of these hedges, rocking herself to and fro and speaking aloud. An idea suddenly entered Mr. Redcliffe's mind. He remembered that Captain Stanley had stated how Crazy Jane had spoken of having "said it all to herself," and how by an incautious ejaculation he had driven the poor woman's thoughts out of her head, and it therefore occurred to Mr. Redcliffe that when she was alone she was better able to keep her ideas collected. She had not as yet seen him as he emerged into the lane; he got at the back of the hedge, and stealthily creeping along halted close behind the spot where Crazy Jane was still seated. She was continuing to muse in an audible tone, but in strangely disjointed and broken sentences, the tenor of which was, however, as follows:

"It must be many and many a year since then, but I cannot recollect how many. I was very different at that time — Ah, so different! People did not call me Crazy Jane. No, it was 'Jane my good girl, do this or do that.'

Ah, that was the way my poor dear mistress used to speak. Oh, how I loved her! Alas, alas, that it should have all ended as it did, — shocking, shocking! I know not why I should always and always be thinking of it. And yet I can't help it. Till that other thing came into my mind, I never could think of anything else. How piteously she wept! It really seems as if I saw her now standing before me. Yes, when the mist is deepest around me, I see that one image as plain as ever. She was not guilty; no, no, she was not. I am sure she was not. She was too good, — too kind for that. Oh, what became of you, my dear, dear mistress? ”

Crazy Jane ceased, but her sobs were audible to Mr. Redcliffe as he listened behind the hedge.

“ Who was more beautiful, ” at length continued the mad woman in her audible musings, “ than the Duchess of Marchmont? They should have married her to Bertram Vivian, and not to his uncle. Alas, alas! to have thrown that divine creature away upon that old man, — it was shocking, shocking! Often and often have I thought of going to Oaklands to see the old place, and I have dragged myself for miles and miles — I wonder how many — along the roads and through the fields, until I had not the courage to go farther, and then I have come back to my hut. No, no, I could not look again upon that house where I last saw the good Duchess Eliza. I could not tread those gravel-walks where I once saw her move in all the glory of her beauty. Oh, it was a dreadful day. But those tears which she shed then seem to fall upon my heart even now like scalding drops. My poor dear mistress, I could have laid down my life for you. ”

Here there was another pause in the poor mad woman's musings, and again did her convulsive sobs reach the ears of Clement Redcliffe.

“ What darkness and confusion have been in my brain ever since! ” she once more mused audibly. “ And yet there are times that I see it all before me, so plain — so plain — that I think it is taking place all over and over anew. But this other thing that is now in my mind. Let me reflect. When did it happen? Oh, poor creature that I am. I cannot remember anything about dates, and yet I am sure it was not near so far back as those dreadful scenes at Oaklands, — no, not near so far back. I was a young

woman, and they used to say I was pretty at the time the dear duchess and Bertram Vivian — But what could have become of them both?" she ejaculated, thus suddenly interrupting herself; "what could have become of them? I wander again. There is that other thing I wish to get back to my mind. Let me see? If I steady my head on both my hands, I can always reflect with more clearness; I will shut my eyes, so as to see nothing to take off my attention. There, like that."

Now the woman ceased speaking, and Redcliffe anxiously waited to hear what next might issue from her lips. But five minutes passed, and she said nothing; ten minutes, and still she continued silent. He held his breath suspended; he was motionless behind the hedge; he was so completely on his guard as not so much as to rustle a leaf for fear of interrupting her in the current of her thoughts.

"There now," she abruptly exclaimed, "I have got the whole of it as completely in my head as if this was the night when it happened, and as if I had not thought of anything since. Ah! if any one to whom I chose to reveal it should pass by at this moment."

Redcliffe glided noiselessly along the back of the hedge, reached the gate by which he had entered the field, and passing through it, once more emerged into the lane. Crazy Jane immediately recognized him as the gentleman whom she had seen two or three days back in company with Sir William and Captain Stanley, and by a certain association of ideas, she conceived that any friend of theirs must be a fit and proper person to receive the communications which she had to make. For the woman's intellects were not so completely disordered as to prevent her from having at times a certain amount of the reasoning faculty left, and moreover, as is the case with nearly all persons whose minds are unsettled, there were particular circumstances which would lead ideas into a connected flow and in continuous channels. This was the case now, and for nearly half an hour did Redcliffe remain in discourse with Crazy Jane. He was careful how he dealt with her; he humoured her, he did not interrupt her quickly nor suddenly, he exhibited all possible patience, suffering the woman to tell her tale in her own way; and thus from her jerking, disjointed sentences, he managed to elicit a narrative which in itself was

complete as well as consistent in all its parts. What this was, we need not at present explain to the reader; suffice it to say that having obtained from the woman all he could elicit, he gave her some money and returned to Stanley Hall.

After a long conference with Sir William and Captain Stanley, it was decided that an attempt should be made to induce Crazy Jane to take up her abode at the hall, where it was proposed to place her under the care of the housekeeper, who was a kind-hearted and intelligent woman. We need not unnecessarily extend the details of our narrative by describing how this aim was accomplished; it is sufficient for our purpose to state that it was successfully carried out, and when the poor woman found herself apparelled in decent attire, seated in a comfortable room, supplied with good wholesome food, and treated with the most compassionating kindness, she so fully comprehended the change in her condition that she was melted to tears.

Mr. Redcliffe hastened up to London, to ascertain the progress of those measures which he had some months previously set a foot on Lettice Rodney's behalf, and to which he had distantly alluded in his conversation with her, but on this head it is likewise unnecessary for us to enter into particulars at the present moment, inasmuch as the whole will shortly transpire.

At the expiration of another week the trial of Lettice Rodney commenced at Liverpool. The court, opening with the usual solemnities, was crowded to excess, for all the excitement which the murder had created at the time was now revived. It had been rumoured, too—as we have already said,—that Lettice Rodney was not altogether without friends, and that there were certain quarters in which a belief of her innocence existed. Able counsel were engaged to prosecute, able counsel likewise appeared for the defence; and the countenances of the jury showed that they were fully aware of the deep and awful responsibility which attached itself to the duty they had to perform.

The entrance of Lettice Rodney into the court produced a strong impression upon all present. She was dressed in her plainest apparel; the bloom of her beauty was gone, but of that loveliness a sufficiency remained to show what it must have been before anguish and illness had worked such ravages

upon her. Her demeanour was in one sense timid and retiring, yet blended therewith was the look which conscious innocence can alone assume, but which superficial or worldly-minded observers nevertheless too often fancy to be the evidence of a guilt that seeks to shield itself under a bold effrontery.

The case for the prosecution commenced, and the counsel on that side detailed in his opening speech all those particulars with which the reader is already acquainted. He stated how Lettice Rodney, assuming the name of Louisa Rayner, and personating that lady, had introduced herself to Mr. Pollard for the purpose of receiving the sum of three thousand pounds which that gentleman was prepared to pay to his ward. The counsel dwelt strongly upon the circumstance of the prisoner having self-appropriated the writing-desk containing the papers which were requisite accessories to the carrying-out of the fraud, and he more than inferred that a young woman who would go to such lengths for so vilely dishonest a purpose could not, to say the least of it, be surprised if she found herself in her present position, accused of a crime which somebody must have perpetrated, and of which all the evidence pointed to herself as the authoress. He then detailed the particulars of the murder, according to the deposition which Mrs. Webber had made before the police magistrate, and which she had subsequently repeated before the coroner.

The learned counsel added that Mrs. Webber herself would be almost immediately placed in the witness-box, to reiterate her testimony; and then he proceeded to observe that rumours had been floating abroad within the last few days to the effect that the case for the defence of the prisoner would be far stronger than the public had hitherto expected, but he said that for his own part he was at a loss to know what this defence could be, unless it were to revive the story which the prisoner had told before the magistrate, — a story which must indeed strike every rational person as a most ingenious concoction. But if this story were brought forward, it would be nothing more nor less than an endeavour to turn the tables against the principal witness for the prosecution, and unless there was something more substantial than the uncorroborated assertion of the prisoner in respect to Mrs. Webber and the two ill-looking men whom the pris-

oner's imagination had conjured up to serve her own purpose and exculpate herself, he (the learned counsel) hoped for the honour of the English bar that no member thereof would found a defence upon unsupported recrimination and unjustifiable calumny. But if, on the other hand, the defence — as he (the prosecuting counsel) hoped and expected — was to be conducted fairly, honestly, and frankly, he repeated his former assertion that he could not for the life of him surmise of what nature it could be. He was indeed utterly at a loss to conjecture how any evidence could be brought forward in antagonism with the testimony to be adduced for the prosecution, but he had all possible faith in the wisdom of the jury in arriving at a correct verdict in the end.

The learned counsel sat down, and the crowded auditory felt that the mass of evidence, circumstantial and direct, did indeed press with such fearful weight against the accused that not even by the wildest conjecture could it be surmised how such a case was to be met. For every one of course felt that if the story which Lettice Rodney had told before the borough magistrate was now to be repeated, it would require some very powerful evidence to outweigh that on the other side. Nor less was it comprehended that if this story should be proved true, it would have the effect of turning the whole weight of the dreadful accusation against Mrs. Webber, who was now summoned as the principal witness to prove Lettice Rodney's guilt.

Mrs. Webber entered the witness-box amidst a profound silence which prevailed in the court. It has already been observed that there was something sinister, if not actually repulsive, in this woman's looks, and now that she endeavoured to assume the air of one who had nothing upon her own conscience, but was intent only on serving the cause of truth and justice, there was in reality that hardihood about herself which many persons among the auditory had previously supposed to characterize Lettice Rodney. And Lettice Rodney was seen to shudder as that woman, whom for upwards of six months she had not seen, entered the witness-box, but on the other hand, Mrs. Webber flung a look of loathing and abhorrence upon Lettice, — a look in which all her powers of hypocrisy and dissimulation were concentrated. The result of these conflicting demonstrations on

the part of prisoner and witness was to cause the utmost suspense and uncertainty still to prevail on the part of the audience.

Mrs. Webber, in response to the leading questions put by the counsel for the prosecution, repeated the testimony she had already given before the committing magistrate and at the coroner's inquest. The barrister further questioned her as to her own respectability, on which point she stated that she had for many years been in the service of good families, but that for some time previous to the murder she had resided with her daughter in London, and with her son-in-law, who was a gold-beater in good circumstances; that she possessed some little means of her own,—but that not being altogether comfortable and happy beneath her son-in-law's roof, she had resolved to go out into service again, as a housekeeper; that her son-in-law, Mr. Smedley, having come down to Liverpool on business, had accidentally heard that there was such a place vacant at Mr. Pollard's; that she had accordingly applied for it, and on producing testimonials had received it.

Now commenced the cross-examination of Mrs. Webber, and this we must give somewhat in detail.

“Will you state who were the ladies of rank with whom you formerly lived,” inquired Lettice Rodney's counsel, “and who gave you the testimonials which you exhibited to Mr. Pollard?”

Mrs. Webber, being prepared for this question, had her answer ready, and she accordingly named two or three ladies of whose deaths she had made herself aware. On this response being returned, Captain Stanley, who was present in the court, quitted it for a few moments, but not in a way to attract any particular attention.

“Where are those testimonials?” asked the barrister, “and will you have any objection to produce them in court?”

“Not supposing that they would be required,” answered the woman, “I left them behind me in London.”

“And when did you come from London to attend this trial?” asked the barrister.

“The day before yesterday,” was Mrs. Webber's response.

“Did you come alone? Answer me that question.”

“There was a person in the same carriage with me, certainly.”

"And, on your oath, are you ignorant who that person was?"

"No, I knew him to be a detective officer."

"You had, then, seen him before?"

"Yes," replied Mrs. Webber, and for a moment she looked confused, but quickly recovering her self-possession, she prepared to answer the next query.

"Be so kind as to tell the jury under what circumstances you had seen that detective before."

"A few days back," answered Mrs. Webber, "I was going on a little journey —"

"Stop a moment," exclaimed the cross-examining counsel. "Immediately after the inquest at Liverpool, you returned to London, I believe, where you again took up your abode with your son-in-law John Smedley?"

"Yes, but I had promised the authorities here to come forward when wanted, and give the requisite evidence —"

"Exactly so. You promised, but did you mean to perform? However," exclaimed the barrister, without awaiting an answer, "continue your statement to the jury in respect to the little journey you thought of undertaking a few days back. I believe that for this little journey your boxes were all packed, and a hackney-coach was at the door, when something happened? What was that something?"

"A person accosted me as I was stepping into the hackney-coach, and announced himself as a detective officer. He charged me with an intention to go abroad, but I denied it, as it was altogether untrue. Then he told me that if I went anywhere, — no matter how short or how long the distance, — he should follow me, and that if I attempted to leave England, he should take me into custody."

"To be sure," said the barrister, with a glance at the jury; "he would have taken you into custody as a witness flying from her recognizances. And what else did he tell you? What warning did he give you?"

"That there was a watch set upon my movements, and that it would be totally useless for me to think of getting out of the country. But I told him all along that I had no such intention, nor had I, and I think it is very unfair —"

"Never mind what you think," interrupted the cross-examining counsel; "it is for the jury to think in the present case. The detective officer who accompanied you in the

train was the same who intercepted your departure from London and gave you the warnings of which you have spoken?"

"The same," answered Mrs. Webber, and her look was as much as to imply that it was all very easy for the barrister thus to cross-examine her, but that he could not shake her main testimony against the prisoner.

"How long were you in Mr. Pollard's service previous to the commission of the murder?"

"Three weeks," was the answer.

"And having been absent from your son-in-law's house barely a month, you returned thither notwithstanding the discomfort and unhappiness which had induced you to quit it?"

"Because my daughter naturally supposed I must be very much flurried and excited after the dreadful occurrence in Liverpool, and she wrote to me to come home at once, giving me the assurance that my son-in-law would change his demeanour toward me."

"And during these six months that you have been again living in London, what sort of visitors have you occasionally received?"

"What sort of visitors?" ejaculated Mrs. Webber, as if with a surprised and indignant air, but it was merely to shuffle with the question, which indeed had considerably alarmed her.

"Well, I need not press this point at present," said the cross-examining counsel, "and you may stand down."

A witness from London was now examined by the counsel for the prosecution, to prove that Lettice Rodney had been a gay lady, but the name of Madame Angelique's establishment did not transpire. Then followed the testimony of three or four of the first persons who had rushed into Mr. Pollard's house when Mrs. Webber had opened the front door and had alarmed the neighbourhood with her cries. It was proved that the prisoner was dressed as if to go out, but that she was in a state of unconsciousness when these witnesses appeared upon the scene. In cross-examination they admitted that when Lettice came back to her senses, she seemed horrified or frenzied at being accused of murder, and that she at once hurled the charge at Mrs. Webber and spoke of two villains who were with her. The police con-

stables who had taken her into custody were next examined for the prosecution, and they deposed to the finding of Mr. Pollard's purse, containing fifty pounds, upon Lettice Rodney's person. Mrs. Rayner's documents were likewise produced, and evidence was given to show that in addition to the writing-desk which had contained these papers several articles of Mrs. Rayner's wearing apparel were discovered in Lettice Rodney's box; for the newspaper accounts of the murder had given publicity to the fact that Mrs. Rayner was the previously unidentified victim of the railway accident, and thus her friends had come forward on learning her sad fate.

The case for the prosecution was closed, and Lettice Rodney's counsel was expected to rise to make a speech in her defence. He did rise, and profound was the suspense which prevailed in the court. The silence was breathless, but when it was broken by the counsel for the defence, there was a sensation of disappointment on his at once declaring that instead of making a speech he should proceed without delay to summon witnesses.

The first witness whom he thus called was a middle-aged man, plainly attired, of sharp features and with a shrewd look. Mrs. Webber, who had been ordered to remain in the court, winced somewhat when she perceived this individual, whom she evidently recognized. Having been sworn, and having given his name, he stated that he was a detective attached to the metropolitan police. He then deposed to the following effect:

"A very short time after the murder of Mr. Pollard in this town, I received particular instructions from a gentleman in London. Those instructions were to the effect that I should make all possible inquiries into the character of Mrs. Webber, and that I should watch all her movements. I at once came down to Liverpool, and learned that immediately after the inquest she had returned to her friends in London. I had no difficulty in finding out who these friends were, — her daughter and son-in-law, bearing the name of Smedley. The Smedleys occupy a house of a somewhat respectable appearance, but situated in a low neighbourhood. They used to let lodgings, but have recently given up that avocation. Smedley himself carries on the business of a gold-beater. He seems, however, to have little work to do,

for he is constantly sauntering about, sometimes in idleness, and at other times in distributing religious tracts. I hired a room in a house nearly fronting the Smedleys, and, aided by another detective, I watched them day and night. One evening, about a week after Mrs. Webber's return, a fellow of desperate character, well known to the police, and bearing the name of Barney the Burker, stealthily entered an alley communicating with the back part of the Smedleys' premises, but I cannot take it upon myself to say that he actually entered those premises. If I had followed to ascertain, I should have excited the suspicion that I was watching the house, and this was to be most carefully avoided, at least at the outset. A few nights afterward, a lad of about nineteen, whose name is Bill Scott, and who is believed to be an agent of the Burker, paid a similarly stealthy visit to the alley of which I have spoken, but for the same reason as in the other case, I could not ascertain whether he entered the Smedleys' premises. A month passed, and they came not near the house again, but one night I followed Mrs. Webber at a distance, and I tracked her to the Burker's lodging in one of the lowest neighbourhoods of London.

"Some weeks later I again saw the Burker pay a visit to the narrow alley, and an hour elapsed before he came out again. Subsequently Bill Scott repeated the visit three or four times, and I have not the slightest doubt that these visits had reference to Mrs. Webber. I learned in the neighbourhood that she had lived for some years with her son-in-law and daughter, but so far from her having ever been on bad terms with them, or being rendered uncomfortable by Mr. Smedley, the contrary was supposed to be the case. A few days ago Barney the Burker paid another visit to the alley, and on this occasion he remained at least two hours. Early on the following morning a hackney-coach was fetched by Smedley, a number of boxes were brought out, and Mrs. Webber was just on the point of stepping into the vehicle, when I thought it at length time to interfere, in pursuance of a certain portion of my instructions from the gentleman employing me. I accordingly hastened to the spot, and asked Mrs. Webber where she was going. She looked confused and frightened, but almost immediately recovered herself, saying that she was only bent upon a little excursion for change of air. I glanced at the boxes, and saw that they

were labelled, 'Mrs. Smith, passenger, Dover.' I asked her why she took a false name? She gave some evasive reply, but again recovering her effrontery, demanded, who I was. I told her that I was a detective officer, and gave her to understand that my mission was merely to prevent her from running away from her recognizances, and to enforce her attendance at this trial. She did not choose to pursue her journey after receiving this intelligence, because I further stated that if on arriving at Dover by the railway, she attempted to embark on board a vessel, I should at once take her into custody. She remained at home for the few days which intervened until it was necessary for her to set off to come to Liverpool. Myself and the other detective continued to watch the house unceasingly after the affair of that intended journey, and in order that Mrs. Webber might not give me the slip between London and Liverpool, I took my place in the same carriage with herself."

The detective, whose evidence had produced a considerable sensation in court, was now cross-examined by the counsel for the prosecution, and the following string of answers will show the nature of the questions put :

"I have been watching Mrs. Webber for six months. I decline to say what is the name of the gentleman who employed me, but this I will of my own accord declare, — that my conviction is he never was the protector of the prisoner, nor was improperly familiar with her, but merely took up her case from motives of humanity. It is true that he has paid all my expenses and has rewarded me liberally. It is no unusual thing for the detectives to be employed by private individuals; nor is it unusual for them to be thus occupied so long a time. I know nothing, and did not mean to infer anything, against the character of the Smedley's. It is perfectly true that they pass in their own neighbourhood as respectable people, and that Smedley is an active member of a religious congregation. It is likewise true that Mrs. Webber is considered in the same neighbourhood a respectable woman."

Here ended the cross-examination on the part of the prosecuting counsel, and the barrister for Lettice Rodney's defence said to the detective, "You must now go out of court and out of hearing, but I shall require your attendance again presently."

The officer accordingly issued from the tribunal, and the counsel for the defence then addressed the judge in the following manner:

“ My lord, I am about to make an application of a somewhat extraordinary character. There is a witness whose evidence is of vital importance to the present case, but it is impossible she can give that testimony personally and orally before this solemn tribunal. Indeed, I will at once admit that her intellects are in so weak a state that she would become bewildered and would inevitably break down. But she has been examined by two justices of the peace: namely, Sir William Stanley and Mr. Simon Ellis, both gentlemen of the highest respectability, and this examination took place in the presence of two physicians well known for their skill and experience with respect to the insane and in all psychological matters. The woman’s deposition has been committed to paper; it is accompanied by attesting affidavits on the part of the two justices who received her evidence, and there are likewise affidavits from the medical gentlemen, to the effect that the woman’s testimony is held by them to be perfectly credible. I now request permission to introduce that deposition as evidence. Its value can be tested by unmistakable means. If it should be found to constitute an indisputable link in the general chain of evidence it stamps itself with truth, but if, on the other hand, it should be found irrelevant and unsupported by collateral facts, it can easily be discarded, and your lordship will direct the jury, as well as their own discrimination will tell them, whether or not they are to attach any importance thereto.”

The counsel for the prosecution objected to the production of such evidence, and the judge himself appeared to consider it inadmissible, but the foreman of the jury expressed a hope that in a matter where a fellow creature’s life was concerned, no objection would be raised against the production of the evidence alluded to. The judge accordingly ruled in favour of its production, and the reader may conceive how breathless was the suspense which prevailed in the court, how deep was the anxiety of Lettice Rodney, who had remained in perfect ignorance of the nature of the defence to be set up on her behalf, and how serious were growing the guilty Mrs. Webber’s apprehensions.

The counsel for the defence unfolded a document which lay before him, and then spoke as follows:

"This deposition is to the effect that the female who made it was in the town of Liverpool on the same night that the murder was committed. She was wandering about, when her wayward steps led up a narrow lane into which open the yard gates belonging to that row of houses where Mr. Pollard dwelt. She heard one of these gates open and shut, and with some feeling of curiosity which she cannot define she remained at that gate. Voices were speaking immediately inside; they were conversing in an undertone, but she listened, and overheard every syllable that was spoken. One voice was that of a man, — the other that of a woman. The woman said she had just discovered that there was a mint of money in the iron safe; the man said he supposed therefore the job was for that night. The woman assented, and spoke of having waited for positive information whether Mr. Pollard had got the money in the house to pay to Mrs. Rayner. After some little more conversation, the witness overheard the man say something about the means that had been adopted to get the woman into her position as Pollard's housekeeper, but all that was said upon this point is not clearly remembered by the witness. The woman addressed the man as Barney, and the name of Bill Scott was two or three times mentioned. The witness tarried at the gate until it suddenly opened, and then she hurried away. But hearing the man follow her, she was apprehensive of mischief; she accordingly crouched down under the wall; he passed close by her side, but happened not to come in contact with her, and as the lane was involved in total darkness, he beheld her not. Such, my lord and gentlemen," concluded the counsel for the defence, "is the deposition of the witness who for the reasons stated cannot appear in your presence, and those same reasons will account for the fact of her having abstained from declaring to the authorities all she knew, until a few chance words which she the other day let drop caused an inquiry to be made, and led to the sifting of the matter."

It would be impossible to describe the sensation which prevailed in the court during and after the reading of this deposition. Lettice Rodney clasped her hands together. The tears ran down her cheeks; she was well-nigh overpowered by her emotions. Mrs. Webber grew pale as death, and

her troubled looks were flung nervously around, to ascertain the impression made by this document. The counsel for the prosecution was astonished, — a feeling in which the judge and jury evidently participated, and the spectators showed by their countenances that their opinions were undergoing a rapid change, turning in Lettice Rodney's favour and therefore against Mrs. Webber.

"I will now read from my instructions," said the counsel for the defence, "the description which the prisoner has given her legal adviser of the two ill-looking persons whom she alleges to have seen with Mr. Pollard's housekeeper on the memorable night of the foul tragedy which has led to this judicial inquiry."

The barrister accordingly read the personal descriptions of the *Burker* and of *Bill Scott*, and when he had finished, he said, "At this stage of the proceedings I will call back the witness whom I just now sent out of court, — I mean the detective officer."

This witness was accordingly resummoned, and on again making his appearance, he was desired by the counsel for the defence to describe the persons of *Barney the Burker* and of *Bill Scott*, — the two individuals whom he had seen on several occasions enter the alley communicating with the *Smedleys'* abode. That description tallied to a nicety with the one given by *Lettice Rodney*, and ere now read from the barrister's instructions.

But there was still another witness forthcoming for the defence, and this was the landlord of the low public-house, or boozing-ken, at which *Barney* and *Bill Scott* had lodged when they were at *Liverpool*. The public-house itself was in the close vicinage of the late *Mr. Pollard's* abode, and the landlord proved that the time when the *Burker* and his acolyte lodged beneath his roof was precisely that when the murder was committed. He even recollected that they were out late on the particular night itself, and that they took their departure at a very early hour in the morning; but he had not then the faintest idea that they were the authors of the crime, inasmuch as it appeared to be so completely brought home to *Lettice Rodney*.

Scarcely was the landlord's evidence given, when a person entered the court and handed a paper to the counsel for the defence. It was now six o'clock in the evening, the trial

had lasted the whole day, and several hours had elapsed since Mrs. Webber first appeared in the witness-box.

"I have yet something to submit to the court," said the counsel for the defence. "The detective officer who is in attendance here instructed his brother detective who was engaged with him in the metropolis in the same case to be at the London terminus of the railway this day, so that he might be in readiness to act according to any instructions telegraphed up to him. At the outset of her evidence in the morning, the woman Webber stated that she had some time back been in the service of certain deceased ladies, whom she named. Upon this answer being given, a gentleman in court — who from humane motives is interested in the case — sped to the electric telegraph office, and sent up certain instructions to the detective in London. These were promptly acted upon; the results of certain inquiries have been telegraphed down to Liverpool, and the paper containing them has just been placed in my hand. Though the ladies whom the woman Webber named have ceased to exist, yet their families still live, and still occupy the same dwellings. The answers they gave to the queries put to them by the detective officer in London furnish a complete refutation to the woman Webber's statements in respect to her ever having occupied situations in the service of the deceased ladies."

The counsel for the defence handed the telegraphic despatch to some one near, that it might be passed to the clerk of the court, and when it had been read, the barrister observed, "My lord, and gentlemen of the jury, without another syllable that is my case."

All eyes were now turned upon the counsel for the prosecution, and this gentleman, rising from his seat, simply remarked that he had done his duty in placing the charge before the court in the first instance according to the instructions he had received, but he significantly added that after the turn which matters had taken he should not for a moment think of exercising his right to reply to the case for the defence. This announcement was received with a certain sensation indicative of applause, which the ushers of the court did not attempt to suppress, for they themselves doubtless had their feelings enlisted in the same startling drama which thus for so many hours had been commanding

so vivid an interest. The judge said but a few words in charge to the jury, merely remarking that he believed their course to be plain and simple enough. They were of the same opinion, for after only five minutes' consultation, and without leaving the box, they returned a verdict of "Not Guilty."

Although this decision was expected by Lettice Rodney, yet the instant it was delivered she was so overwhelmed by her feelings that she sank down in a swoon, and was thus borne out of court. At the same time Mrs. Webber was given into custody, charged with the crime for which Lettice Rodney had been tried, but it was understood that the infamous woman should not be placed upon her own trial until the autumn assizes. The reason was not specified in court, but every one comprehended that the delay was agreed upon in order that time might be allowed for the capture of her two accomplices, Barney the Burker and Bill Scott.

Before concluding this chapter, we may as well observe that Mr. Redcliffe was the unnamed gentleman who had employed the detectives to watch the proceedings and movements of Mrs. Webber. It was in consequence of the information from time to time received from those officers, about the visits of Barney and Bill Scott to the alley communicating with the Smedleys' house, that he had dropped certain hints to Sir William Stanley, both in his letters and his conversation, relative to circumstances corroborative of Lettice Rodney's innocence. It will be likewise understood wherefore in that interview with Lettice which we have described, Mr. Redcliffe questioned her so particularly with regard to the ill-looking men whom she had spoken of as Mrs. Webber's accomplices. We may likewise add that when Captain Stanley left the court at the earliest stage of Mrs. Webber's examination, it was for the purpose of transmitting to the metropolis the telegraphic message which brought back the information of that woman's mendacity in respect to the former situations she had filled.

CHAPTER XVII

LOW LIFE IN LONDON

IT will be remembered that Captain Stanley had expressed to his uncle, Sir William, his desire to be of service to Mr. Redcliffe in those proceedings which the latter gentleman had so secretly but so judiciously carried on. The captain's offer had been duly mentioned to Mr. Redcliffe, and it was in pursuance of a hint received from the generous philanthropist that Captain Stanley set off to London by the first train which started after the trial.

Mr. Redcliffe purposed to remain a few days longer with his friend Sir William Stanley, in order that he might adopt some measures for the future welfare of Lettice Rodney, and to place her in a position which would save her from the chance of being driven by poverty back again into the way of life which she had been leading at Madame Angelique's. As Mr. Redcliffe therefore could not immediately return to the metropolis, he had hurried off Captain Stanley in the manner described, in order that this gentleman might assist the detectives, and coöperate with them to the best of his ability, in ferreting out the *Burker* and *Bill Scott*.

Captain Stanley reached London early in the morning, and after a few hours' rest, he proceeded in the forenoon to call upon the lieutenant-colonel of his regiment, who was likewise then in the metropolis. This was none other than *Lord Charles Meredith*, the brother of *Octavian*. He was residing with his father the *Marquis of Penshurst*, and though he had reached so high a rank in the army, he was but twenty-seven years of age. Captain Stanley received a kind welcome from his superior officer, with whom indeed he was on most intimate terms, and he explained the business that had brought him to London.

"But do you not think, my dear fellow," inquired Lord Charles, "that the detectives are a thousand times more likely to discover these miscreants than you are?"

"I am not so sure of that," responded Stanley. "These villains will be so completely on their guard that they may manage to elude the detectives for a long time to come."

"Then doubtless you have some plan in view?" said Lord Charles Meredith.

"I purpose to throw myself, as it were, every night into the lowest neighbourhoods, and to penetrate into the vilest dens, as if merely impelled by curiosity, or else under the pretence of discovering some one whose fictitious description I shall render as different as possible from that of either of the real objects of my search. By these means I may possibly light upon them, and if not, there will be no harm done."

"But you have never seen either of these ruffians?" said Lord Charles.

"No, it is true," rejoined Captain Stanley, "but I have received from the detective so minute and accurate a description of them that I am convinced I should recognize them in a moment."

"I have a very great mind to bear you company in your search, or at least for the coming night," said Lord Charles Meredith. "I have heard and read much of those loathsome neighbourhoods and hideous dens where poverty and crime herd together, and I should like to see them."

"It was in the hope you would be my companion that I have sought you now," replied Captain Stanley.

The two officers then settled their arrangements; it was agreed that they should dine together in the evening, and afterward set out upon their excursion.

A little after ten o'clock they might have been seen wending their way toward Westminster Bridge together. Although it was the middle of summer, the night was cold and inclement; a drizzling rain made the shop lights and the street lamps appear as if they were seen through a mist. The daughters of crime were standing under doorways, or huddling together at the entrances of courts, while the ragged and half-starved children of poverty were dragging themselves shivering along to the resorts and dens where they harboured at night, or else to such places as would afford them any kind of shelter against the chilling and damping

atmosphere. Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley, protected by their paletots, and smoking their cigars, boldly faced the inclement night. The lieutenant-colonel was not unlike his brother Octavian, being of the middle height and of slender figure; he likewise wore a moustache, but his hair was somewhat darker. He had a military look, and was altogether a personage of prepossessing appearance. Such was the companion whom Captain Stanley had found for his present excursion.

Having crossed Westminster Bridge and passed some little way down the Waterloo Road, they plunged into the maze of close streets, alleys, and courts which lie in that neighbourhood. Presently they encountered a police constable, and him they accosted. Captain Stanley acquainted the officer in a few words with the business which they had in hand, and desired his succour. The request was backed by a piece of gold, and an affirmative answer was at once returned.

"Follow me, gentlemen," said the constable, "and I will soon show you a little of low life in London."

He led them along two or three narrow and obscure streets; then he turned into a court, which was but feebly lighted by the rays struggling through the dingy window-panes of the sombre-looking houses. Two or three of the front doors stood open, and women loosely apparelled, and with looks of brazen immodesty, stood upon the thresholds. They flung forth filthy gibes and obscene jests at the passers-by, and when the policeman roughly bade them hold their tongues, they vomited forth torrents of abuse, closing their doors at length, but only to open their windows and continue their hideous outpouring. The constable led the two officers to the extremity of the court, and knocked sharply at a door which was shut. It was speedily opened by a wretched-looking old man, and without the slightest ceremony the police officer entered, followed by Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley. Pushing open a side door, and abruptly drawing forth his bull's-eye, or lantern, the constable threw the light into the room, but there was no one there. An inner door however immediately opened, and it vomited forth so loathsome a flood of human nature that the two officers gazed with mingled horror and dismay on those hideous specimens of the lowest of both sexes.

The room into which they thus poured themselves was almost entirely denuded of furniture, but that from which they had emerged had the floor almost completely covered with filthy mattresses, and both had their walls and ceilings as grimy and blackened as if the whitewasher's brush had never touched them. Old men and boys, elderly women and young girls, formed this motley group, a glance over which sent a sickening sensation to the heart. Rags and filth, the stamp of poverty and the impress of crime, misfortune and vice, ugliness and deformity in all their most revolting shapes, together with the brazen hardihood of female depravity, were the jumbled characteristics of this loathsome scene.

"Now, gentlemen," said the police constable, "is the person you want amongst these?"

"No, he is a boy of about fourteen, with a sickly appearance, and very sharp features," answered Captain Stanley, who thus had his tale ready.

Significant looks were rapidly exchanged amidst the motley crew, — these looks being as much as to imply that the individual so described was not anywhere upon the premises, nor was he indeed known to them, which was not astonishing, inasmuch as the pretended object of the search was of Captain Stanley's own imaginative creation. But the visitors observed that a young woman, on hearing that description, disappeared from among the group, and returning into the inner room, she issued forth by a door opening into the passage. She hastened up-stairs, and a door was speedily heard to open and shut on the first landing.

"Well, gentlemen," said the police constable, "if the boy is not here, we must look into the rooms up-stairs."

"You won't find him," said the old man who had opened the front door, and who had lingered in the passage; he was the landlord of this loathsome lodging-house.

"We sha'n't take your word for it, Mr. Dyson," said the constable, purposely assuming a decided air. "I know you of old, and there is not a better keeper of a padding-ken in all London than you are for stalling off us policemen."

The old man grumbled something, and the constable led the way up the staircase. The other floors were visited, and they abounded in similar specimens of lost, degraded, and demoralized humanity as those which were seen below.

That small house, which according to its size would have only just sufficed for the residence of a decent family of half a dozen in number, contained a swarm of at least fifty persons, huddling and heading together like so many swine, breathing an atmosphere which seemed fraught with pestilence, and rendering the entire place a hotbed for all the elements of plague, cholera, and the fearfullest epidemics.

The police constable and the two officers issued forth from the house, and were speedily outside the court.

"Did you observe, gentlemen," asked the constable, "that girl who suddenly disappeared from the ground-floor rooms and hurried up-stairs —"

"Yes. What was her object?"

"It was to tell those above that it was all right, — that they might make themselves easy, for it was none of them who were wanted. Suppose for argument's sake that you had given a true description, inadvertently letting it slip out of your mouth, and suppose that the person who was really wanted had been all the time up-stairs, — the warning would have been quickly given, and an escape effected by a back window, or perhaps a trap-door on the top of the house. Ah! gentlemen, you don't know what dodges the keepers of these padding-kens are up to for the purpose of helping those who lodge with them."

The police officer now conducted Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley to another house in the same neighbourhood, and where suppers were going on in every room. It was the resort of beggars and tramps, and was seldom frequented by thieves, — the mendicants who patronized it endeavouring to keep it as "select" as possible. For there are aristocracies, grades, and distinctions even amongst the lowest strata of society, and amidst the whole range of demoralization's sphere. In every room throughout this lodging-house, the tables were covered with immense joints and dishes of vegetables; the knives and forks were all chained to the tables; the beer was drunk out of the commonest brown mugs, for no publican would trust his pewter pots within the walls of that place. The atmosphere was of the sickliest description, — hot, fetid, and nauseating, made up of the breaths of many persons, the odours of the damp rags which wrapped their forms, the steam of the greasy viands, and the strong smell of the vegetables. But what

hideous objects were the beings who were thus banqueting. The blind, the halt, and the maimed; the paralyzed and the consumptive, as well as the hale, lusty, and strong, the sturdy beggar who obtains charity by coercive insolence, and the whining one who elicits it by his piteous tale; the one who for twenty years has always had a wife and five small children perishing at home; the woman who every day for the last dozen years has had a husband lying dead and no money to bury him; the girl of sixteen who ever since she was ten has told the same tale of having only just come out of the hospital and got no home nor father or mother; that great hulking fellow in a ragged seaman's garb, whose daily narrative of shipwreck and loss of all he possessed has won for him five shillings in the course of a few hours' wandering, the sanctimonious-looking, calculating vagrant, whose diurnal reckoning is that from eleven to five he can traverse sixty streets and in every street pick up at least a penny, so that his daily income is likewise five shillings; the elderly woman dressed in widow's weeds, who every day for the last five and twenty years has just lost an excellent husband and been thrown out of a once happy home; the ingenious fellow who in the winter-time is a starved-out gardener, and in the summer-time a factory operative suffering from the badness of the times, — all these, and other varieties of imposture and mendicant roguery, were fully represented at this congress of joyously feasting beggars.

On quitting the scene which we have just described, the constable conducted the two officers to the large tap-room of a public-house situated in the neighbourhood of a saloon where theatrical representations, singing, and dancing take place. Previously to entering this tap-room, the policeman informed Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley that every individual whom they would see there was a noted thief, and that there would not be one present who had not figured in the police courts, — many at the sessions, some at the Old Bailey, and all more or less often upon the treadmill. With this information the place was entered; a few knowing winks were bestowed upon the police constable, but apart from these familiar signs of recognition, little attention was paid to the visitors. The frequenters of that place were accustomed to behold "swells," as they denominated them, drop in to see a little of London life, or, on the other hand,

to search after some thief who had exercised his manipulating skill upon them. All the varied and manifold impressions which villainy and crime, in their different grades and degrees, can stamp upon the human countenance might be discerned in that room; and, heavens! what a study for the phrenologist. Wherefore go to Newgate to inspect the plaster casts of the countenances of defunct criminals, when there are these haunts in London where the faces of shoals of living evil-doers can be studied; and with all the more fearful accuracy, with all the more frightfully real intensity, inasmuch as the worst and darkest passions which are known to the human soul can be then observed working upon animated features and in their most hideous vitality.

At the numerous tables in this room the company were seated, — all of them smoking, and all drinking too, but the liquors were varied according to tastes and pecuniary resources; so that passing through those grades which were represented by the daring burglar, the bold thief, the cunning larcenist, the pitiful area-sneak, or the miserable pudding-stealer, a corresponding gamut might be specified in the form of steaming punch, tumblers of hot spirits and water, quarterns of gin, pots of ale, and pints of porter. In this delectable place Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley remained for about half an hour, — at the expiration of which they took their departure, still accompanied by the police officer. Three or four other dens of depravity were visited, and it was now past midnight, but as yet not the slightest sign was discerned of the objects of their search. They did not of course think it of the slightest use to visit the house in which the *Burker* and the *Scotts* had been wont to live, nor to take the slightest trouble in watching the premises of the *Smedleys*, for there could be little doubt that the *Burker* and *Bill Scott* had kept out of the way at the time they must have known the trial was coming on at *Liverpool*, so as to be on their guard in case of a result perilous to their own personal safety. And now, too, that the intelligence of this result had arrived in London, it was all the more certain that the ruffian and his guilty accomplice would have taken the best possible precautions to elude the search which was sure to be instituted after them.

Captain Stanley and Lord Charles now held a consultation

with the police constable, for a certain idea had struck the first-mentioned gentleman, and he thus expressed himself:

"Thanks to your assistance, constable, we have received the initiative into the various phases which the haunts of crime, vice, poverty, and debauchery exhibit. But it strikes me there must be places which such villains as those of whom we are in search would specially seek under existing circumstances, and whence the very first glimpse of a police officer's uniform would scare them away. Now, are not these likewise places into which it may be possibly sought to inveigle those well-dressed persons who might chance to be in the neighbourhood?"

"Yes, there are such places," replied the constable, "but it would be next to madness for you to seek to penetrate into them. You would risk your life, but even if you escaped with that, you might reckon with certainty upon being robbed and ill-treated."

"Nevertheless," rejoined Captain Stanley, "only show me such a place as we have been speaking of, and I will risk everything."

"And I assuredly am not the man to flinch from such danger," said Lord Charles Meredith. "But there is one thing to be thought of. If it be possible for us to obtain admission to such a place, would not the detectives themselves assume a particular apparel and penetrate thither?"

"Bless you, sir," answered the constable, "those kind of villains would recognize the detectives in a moment, no matter how disguised. They are keen and cunning enough to distinguish between real gentlemen, such as you are, and other persons dressed up to play the part of gentlemen. That you can get into these haunts of which we are speaking, there is little doubt; indeed you are pretty sure to be invited there by those who would at once mark you as their prey. But I again warn you of the risk you will have to run, and unless you are well armed —"

"We took that precaution before we set out," interrupted Captain Stanley. "We have each a brace of double-barrelled pistols and a good clasp-knife upon our persons."

"And this stick of mine," added Lord Charles Meredith, "though it seems only a gentleman's walking-cane, is a life-preserver and well loaded at the top."

"Then you are decided, gentlemen?" asked the constable,

still with a hesitating and dubious manner, "for recollect that I cannot accompany you."

"We are decided," said Captain Stanley. "Lead the way as far as you consider it prudent to conduct us, in order to show us the route."

The constable accordingly struck into another labyrinth of low streets, alleys, and courts, all of which he assured Lord Charles and Captain Stanley were swarming with loathsome life like a morass with reptiles, and the two gentlemen soon lost every idea of their whereabouts. At length the constable stopped short in the middle of a narrow street, feebly lighted with gas-lamps, and where the houses all had a dark and sinister appearance.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "I must accompany you no farther, or my presence may frustrate the object you have in view. Proceed to the end of this street, take the turning to the right and the second to the left. If you could make a pretence of being in liquor, it will serve your purpose all the better. I need tell you no more, for if anything happens to forward your views, it will take place somewhere about the spot to which I am directing you, and you will be enabled to judge for yourselves."

Another liberal donation rewarded the police constable for his civility and his assistance, and he then parted company from Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley.

CHAPTER XVIII

MOTHER BAMBRIDGE'S ESTABLISHMENT

FOLLOWING the constable's directions, the two adventurous military officers took the turn to the right and then the second to the left, this latter bringing them into an alley which was very narrow at its entrance, but suddenly widened somewhat as they advanced into it, from the fact of the houses being built farther back on either side. These houses which thus stood back were higher than those at the entrance of the alley, and they had wooden fences in front, enclosing what were meant to be little bits of garden, about a couple of yards wide.

Midway down the alley stood two public-houses, nearly fronting each other; or to be more particular still, one was a public-house and the other a beer shop. Over the former was a flaring gaslight, over the latter a lamp of more modest pretensions, but the two together illumined all that part of the alley. Lights were still burning in several of the adjacent houses, and as the drizzling rain had by this time ceased, there was no misty veil to obscure the light thus thrown forth. From both public-house and beer shop the sounds of uproarious revelry pealed forth, and in such discordant strains as to leave a doubt in the minds of the two officers whether there was not as much wrangling as merriment in the din which thus smote their ears. In front, too, of both these houses of entertainment several loose women — some apparelled with flaunting pretension — were loitering in company with men who were dressed in what may be termed a "swellish style."

A little beyond the beer shop, a black doll with a piece of white calico wrapped around, doubtless to serve as a frock, swung over the door of a rag and bottle shop, — the

windows of which displayed pictures in rudely executed water colours, representing plum-puddings, as an intimation that housewives by means of thrift in disposing of their dripping, their rags, and their broken glass might at the end of the year save up sufficient to provide the Christmas comestible thus illustrated. Nearly opposite the shop just named was a marine-store dealer's, and both establishments were open, although it was now close upon one in the morning. The light of candles shone dimly forth from the doorways, and every now and then an individual — male or female — might be seen coming from the opposite extremity of the alley and diving abruptly into one or the other of these shops, having, however, in the first instance cast a rapid glance of scrutiny around, to make sure that no police constable was nigh. It required no prompting beyond what their own common sense suggested to enable the two officers to judge that both the marine-store dealer's and the rag shop were in reality receptacles for stolen goods, and that it was for the accommodation of their patrons they thus kept open so late.

Mindful of the friendly constable's advice, Captain Stanley and Lord Charles Meredith affected to be somewhat the worse for liquor as they advanced within the sphere of light.

"Where the deuce have our wandering steps brought us?" exclaimed Stanley, purposely speaking loud enough to be overheard by the loiterers in front of the two houses of entertainment.

"I have no more idea than the man in the moon," responded Lord Charles. "It was all owing to that last bottle of wine —"

"Well, never mind," cried Stanley, with a well-assumed manner of devil-me-care rakishness. "We must get somewhere at last, — that's very certain."

They were now both surrounded by the flauntingly dressed women whose bullies and flash men purposely hung back, thinking it better to keep aloof until the girls should have got the "swells" in regular tow.

"Treat us to a glass of wine," said one; "there's a dear fellow."

"Or what is better, come home with us," exclaimed another, "and we'll send out for the wine."

It naturally struck the two gentlemen that this was the sort of scene to which the constable had alluded when he

had said that they would be enabled to judge for themselves whether their desired object would be forwarded in this alley to which he had directed them. They therefore made up their minds simultaneously, and as if by tacit understanding, to accompany the girls, but they pretended to hesitate in a tipsy manner for some little time before they gave a final assent. At length they moved slowly along in the direction whither two of the flauntingly appavelled creatures led them, and a glance over their shoulders showed that there was a move amongst the flashily dressed men in front of the public-houses. The girls conducted them to the farther extremity of the alley, where they stopped at the door of a house of considerable size in comparison with the others in the same neighbourhood. One of the girls knocked at the door in a manner that was evidently peculiar, and therefore intended to serve as a signal, but which would not have been noticed if the two officers were really in their cups, as they pretended to be. The summons was answered by a tawdrily dressed elderly woman, in a gown of rusty black silk, a cap flaunting with pink ribbons, and with a gold chain — or at least a very good imitation of one — hanging over her enormously protuberant bust. Her naturally rubicund countenance had upon it a still deeper flush, produced by recent potations, and she simpered and smiled with an air of half-tipsy vacancy. She bade the gentlemen walk in, whisperingly asking whether they chose to be accommodated with separate chambers at once.

“We are going to drink a bottle of wine first,” answered Captain Stanley, who did not consider it expedient to be parted from his companion.

“By all means,” said the mistress of the establishment, and she led the way into a back parlour of some dimensions and tolerably well furnished.

The two girls who had accompanied the officers flung off their bonnets and shawls, and Captain Stanley, still preserving his tipsy air, tossed a couple of sovereigns upon the table, desiring that wine might be fetched. An elderly servant-woman entered the room to receive the order from the mistress of the establishment, who had likewise seated herself there, and after a few minutes' absence she returned with a couple of bottles of wine. She handed all the balance of the money to Mother Bambridge, as the mistress was

called, and which sum of thirty shillings Mother Bambridge coolly consigned to her own pocket. Glasses were placed upon the table, but both Stanley and Meredith were careful not to touch a drop of the wine until they had first seen Mother Bambridge and the girls empty their own glasses. Being thus satisfied that the liquor was not previously drugged, the two officers began to drink in order to keep up appearances, and they likewise chatted away as if in a reckless strain of dissipated hilarity.

Half an hour passed, and the gentlemen began to think that they had got into the midst of some adventure that was quite different from what the advising constable had anticipated, and that it was by no means of a nature to throw them in the way of the attainment of their object. But all of a sudden something was said by one of the girls, which turned all their thoughts into a new channel.

"This sherry is capital," were the words thus spoken. "Wouldn't poor Barney like a glass?"

Rapid was the deprecating glance which Mother Bambridge flung upon the girl, as much as to give her to understand that she should not have mentioned a name which might possibly be recognized by the two gentlemen in connection with the newspaper report of the previous day's trial at Liverpool, and then, with a simpering air, she said to Meredith and Stanley, "It's a poor dear invalid brother of mine that the kind-hearted young lady is alluding to, and with your permission I will just step up-stairs to him with a glass of this wine, which is sure to do him good."

"By all means," exclaimed Lord Charles, now looking more tipsy than ever, "and send out to get us a fresh supply."

Thus speaking, he in his turn tossed from a well-filled purse a couple of sovereigns upon the table, and Mother Bambridge, having given a suitable order to the servant, poured out a glass of wine, and therewith quitted the room. The reader will comprehend the significancy conveyed by the words of the girl who had recommended the wine to be carried up to the man whom she had named. It was to afford Mrs. Bambridge a feasible pretext for leaving the room in order to make whatsoever arrangements she might deem necessary for the plunder of her guests, and all this without the risk, as it was hoped, of exciting their suspicions. Mere-

dith and Stanley penetrated the manœuvre promptly and clearly enough, but affecting to become more and more influenced by the effects of liquor, they played their game so admirably as to prevent the slightest misgiving from entering the minds of the two girls. The name of Barney had been unmistakably pronounced, and as it was not altogether a common one, and was precisely the familiar appellation by which the principal object of their search was known, — moreover, as it was in some such low neighbourhood as this that they had hoped and expected to fall in with him, and likewise as Mother Bambridge's look of warning significance must be taken into account, — they were morally certain that the individual alluded to was he whom they sought. But there were evidently a number of desperate characters about, succour would be promptly at hand, the utmost caution must be used, and thus they could not instantaneously adopt any measure toward accomplishing his capture. Sudden violence on their part might fail, and therefore they must wait yet a little while and trust to circumstances. But we must observe that all the time Mother Bambridge was absent, Stanley listened attentively to catch the sounds of her footsteps, though he appeared to drink as if being intent on nothing of the sort.

The girls dropped several hints about retiring, but it by no means suited the two gentlemen's views to be separated, and moreover they had an excellent excuse for remaining where they were, at least for the present, by reminding their frail companions that a fresh supply of wine had been sent for. In a few moments Mrs. Bambridge reappeared, and almost immediately afterward the woman servant entered with two fresh bottles of wine. These were opened, and one of the girls officiously filled the two gentlemen's glasses; but the latter perceived that it was from the first supply, which was not completely exhausted, that the other glasses were replenished. They therefore at once comprehended that the wine last brought in was drugged.

"You do not drink?" said one of the girls, in a cajoling manner to Stanley.

"I am already tipsy enough," was the response, given in a hiccupping manner.

"Oh, no! do try one more glass."

Stanley reached forth his hand, and with every appearance of drunken awkwardness he upset the glass.

"I'm sure you're not so clumsy," said the other girl to Lord Charles.

"Let's try," answered the nobleman, and lifting the glass, he spilt all its contents down his paletot.

Both the girls affected to laugh, but at the same time they darted suspicious looks toward Mrs. Bambridge.

"Who can sing a good song?" asked Stanley, with the hope of giving a turn to the proceedings and averting the suspicions which he saw were awakened.

"It just happens," replied Mother Bambridge, with her simpering air, "that there are three or four gentlemen — real gentlemen, like yourselves — in the front parlour, and they seem as much inclined as you to make a night of it. They sing capital songs, and with your leave I'll go and fetch them."

She quitted the room accordingly, and during her absence, which lasted two or three minutes, the girls again endeavoured to cajole the officers into retiring, but they were resolved not to be separated, and they vowed, with tipsy declamation, that they would not go to bed till daylight.

Mother Bambridge reappeared, with the four "gentlemen" of whom she had spoken, and the two officers at once recognized some of the flashily dressed fellows whom they had seen hanging aloof behind the girls in front of the public-houses. The four bullies — for such indeed the newcomers were — themselves affected to be drunk, and sitting down, they began singing a bacchanalian song. The girls endeavoured to persuade Lord Charles and Stanley to drink of the last supply of wine, but as a matter of course, without effect. The looks which the women rapidly exchanged grew more and more suspicious, as the excuses of the officers for refusing to drink became proportionately more and more transparent, — their conduct now being so little consistent with that of tipsy men, and yet they had no alternative but to persist in the refusal, even at the risk of having their aim altogether frustrated.

"Come now," suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Bambridge, rising up from her seat, "I must have the house quiet, or else I shall stand the chance of being indicted. You must all be off to bed without any more delay."

A crisis was now reached; Lord Charles and Stanley knew full well that if they separated from each other, they were almost certain to become the prey of superior numbers, for they had no doubt that there were even more bullies at hand than those who were present, and their only chance of a successful resistance, in case of violence, was to keep together. But a thought suddenly flashed to Stanley's mind, and affecting to drop his pocket-handkerchief close to where Lord Charles sat, he pretended to fall completely upon him as he stooped to pick it up. This manœuvre afforded him the opportunity of rapidly whispering, "Let us suffer ourselves to be robbed without the slightest resistance."

"Come, do you hear?" cried Mrs. Bambridge; "off with you to bed."

"If you won't let us sit up any longer," said Stanley, hiccuping at every word, "I shall go and finish the night at the public-house."

"Bravo!" cried one of the four bullies, "and we'll go with you."

The door of the room was now opened; Stanley and Lord Charles rose staggering from their chairs, and with uneven steps walked into the passage, a girl clinging to the arm of each. In the darkness of that passage, they each felt that their purses and watches were dexterously filched from them; they pretended not to notice it, the front door was opened, and as they passed out, it was slammed behind them, neither bullies nor girls being now any longer in their company.

They walked away from the immediate vicinage of the place, and observed that both public-house and beer shop were now shut up. This was of no consequence to them, for, as the reader may suppose, Stanley had all along no intention of adjourning to either of those places. The dawn of morning was now glimmering, and as they looked back, they perceived the head of one of the girls thrust out of an upper window. They made her an apparently friendly sign, and still staggering along, stopped short, as if in astonishment, before the shut-up public-house. Then, with the air of men who determined to carry their tipsy frolics to some place which was yet open, they passed out of the alley, — another glance thrown backwards showing that the girl was still watching their movements.

"Now, my dear fellow," said Lord Charles Meredith, when they were out of the alley, and therefore out of view of the house which they had recently left, "pray explain yourself, for to tell you the truth, I cannot for the life of me understand this last proceeding on your part."

"It is easily explained," responded Stanley, "but we have yet much to do, and the most difficult as well as the most perilous part of our enterprise is still to be performed."

"Proceed; I am all attention," rejoined the nobleman. "But unless we get back our purses and our watches, it will be rather an expensive night's entertainment," he added, with a laugh.

"Those we may give up for lost," answered Stanley, "but I think we may hold that loss cheap enough, if we succeed in surrendering a murderer into the hands of justice."

"But your project?" said Lord Charles, inquiringly. "Do you mean to go and fetch the police?"

"No. As we have commenced the business by ourselves," answered Stanley, "we will have the satisfaction of carrying it out. Listen, Meredith. We have excellent reason to believe that the villain Barney is in that house, and what is more, that he is in the room precisely above that where we were seated, for I was attentive to the sounds of Mother Bambridge's footsteps when she went up with the wine. These are great points gained, and far more than we could have expected as the result of the first night's search. But the first night's search shall be the last, or I am very much mistaken. I see that you do not understand me. Let us turn into this street; it is the one behind the alley from which we have emerged."

"And your reason for letting us be robbed so quietly?" inquired Lord Charles.

"Those bullies were evidently brought in to pounce upon us suddenly when Mother Bambridge hoped to persuade us to go up-stairs to bed. If, an attack being made, we had resisted them, we should have shown ourselves to be sober, and whether conquerors or conquered, the suspicion which our behaviour had already excited would have been confirmed. The wretches would have felt convinced that we had an ulterior object; perhaps they would have supposed that we were looking for Barney, but at all events for security's sake they would quickly have got him off to some

other lurking hole. As it is, all suspicion is completely set at rest; they flatter themselves they had to do with a couple of gentlemen who were really tipsy, and rest assured that having watched us out of the alley, they are lulled into the completest security. Such is the result of our having suffered ourselves to be robbed so quietly, as you express it."

"And what do you think Mother Bambridge went upstairs for to the villain's room? Or how can you tell that it was his room at all?" asked the nobleman.

"Of course I can but surmise," responded Stanley, "and upon this surmise we must act. She doubtless went up to him to bid him be in readiness in case his services should be required to help in dealing with us. When she went out the second time to fetch in the bullies, it was really to the front parlour she proceeded, for I listened to the course that her footsteps took."

"Now, what is your plan?" inquired Lord Charles Meredith.

Captain Stanley rapidly explained it, and his noble friend unhesitatingly agreed to succour him in carrying it out.

The little colloquy that we have described brought them to the extremity of the narrow street which they had entered, and which ran parallel to the alley. A very few minutes' observation showed them that the house which was immediately behind Mother Bambridge's establishment was a small chandlery shop, and Stanley observed to his noble friend, "This is all the better for our purpose, because a money-making tradesman of a mean and peddling description will forgive us for awakening him if we slip a five-pound note into his hand."

"I do verily believe, my dear fellow," answered Lord Charles, "that you have forgotten the little circumstance of our purses being left behind in the adjacent alley."

"No, I have not forgotten it," responded Stanley, and drawing forth his pocketbook from the breast of his under coat, he displayed a roll of bank-notes.

They now knocked at the door of the chandlery shop, and in a few minutes a head with a cotton nightcap on was thrust from an upper window. The owner of the head and the nightcap was about to give vent to his indignation at being knocked up by a couple of rakes, as he thought, out upon their nocturnal frolics, but a few quickly uttered words

from Captain Stanley's lips, and the display of a bank-note, made a prompt change in the man's temper. He drew in his head, shut down the window, and in a couple of minutes appeared at his shop door, having just huddled on a sufficiency of clothing for decency's sake. He admitted the two officers, and then inquired their business.

Captain Stanley, closing the door of the shop, put the five-pound note into the man's hand, and said to him, "Don't be alarmed, and don't ask any unnecessary questions, but we want, in the first place, to peep through one of the back windows of your dwelling."

The chandler, who was an active, bustling, eccentric little man, stared in amazement at this request, and recurring to his former opinion that the whole proceeding was an impudent frolic, he examined the note, expecting to find that it issued from the Bank of Elegance instead of the Bank of England. On discovering, however, that it was really genuine, he became perfectly civil once more, and thinking he had better humour his two customers, whatever their object might be, — if indeed they had any at all, — he conducted them into his little parlour, which was behind the shop. There was an outside shutter to the window, and the prismatic rays of the morning light — for it was the middle of the month of June — penetrated through a heart-shaped hole in that shutter. By means of this hole Stanley was enabled to take his survey of the rear of the chandler's dwelling. There was a little yard separated by a low wall from a larger yard which belonged to Mother Bambridge's establishment; at every one of the back windows of that establishment the blinds were drawn down, and therefore it was reasonable to suppose that the inmates had retired to rest, well contented with their spoil in the shape of handsome watches, massive chains, and well-filled purses.

"Have you got a ladder?" inquired Stanley of the chandler.

The volatile little man made one bound of astonishment at this question so abruptly put, and then he looked dismayed as the idea flashed to his mind that he had to do with two lunatics just escaped from an asylum. The two supposed lunatics could not help smiling at these variations of expression on the chandler's countenance, and Stanley, perceiving the necessity of giving some sort of explanation, addressed him as follows:

"My good fellow, I need not tell you that the place which we see opposite is a den of infamy. I and my companion have just been robbed there, and we mean to get in by some means or another, to compel the wretches to disgorge their plunder. Now will you assist us, or will you not?"

"Ah, that I cheerfully will," exclaimed the little man, "for that Mother Bambridge is the scandal of the neighbourhood, and never spends a single penny at my shop."

The ludicrous connection of indignant morality and mortified selfishness which characterized the chandler's observation provoked another smile on the part of the two officers, but he was now ready to render them his assistance, and that was the essential. He led them forth into his little yard, and showed them a ladder, which Stanley at a glance saw was just high enough for his purpose. The wall separating the two yards was quickly scaled by the captain and Lord Charles, — the chandler not offering to accompany them out of his own premises, for he was not endowed with a large amount of courage. The chief danger to be now apprehended was that their proceedings might be observed from the infamous house, should any of the inmates be still up. Not a single blind, however, was seen to move; no sign was there of aught threatening to disturb them.

The ladder was placed against the window of the room over the parlour to which the two officers had been conducted when in the house, and Captain Stanley, with his right hand in his coat pocket ready to draw forth a pistol, began to ascend the ladder, — Lord Charles Meredith remaining at the foot. On reaching the window, which had a dingy calico blind drawn down inside, the captain immediately perceived that the sashes were not fastened, and this was an immense advantage in favour of the success of the enterprise. As noiselessly as possible did he begin raising the lower sash, and when he had thus lifted it about a foot, he raised the blind in order to peep in. A bed was near the window; a man lay upon it, with his clothes on, and on a chair by the side of that bed was a brace of pistols. The man was sleeping heavily, but a curtain concealed the upper part of his body, so that Captain Stanley could not discern his countenance, and the curtain was beyond the reach of his outstretched arm from the position where he now stood.

He thrust up the sash a little higher, and was now enabled to reach the back of the chair on which the pistols lay. Lifting the chair completely up, he set it gently down again close within the window, and removing the pistols thence consigned them to the pocket of his paletot. Then he beckoned Lord Charles Meredith, who attentively and anxiously watched his proceedings, to ascend the ladder.

The sash was raised yet a little higher, and still the man slept on as if he were under the influence of liquor. Stanley passed into the room, but the cord of the blind getting entangled around his foot made him stumble against the chair. The man sprang up from the bed like a wild beast suddenly awakened from its lair, and the first glimpse of his countenance convinced Stanley that he was now confronted by none other than the terrible Burker himself.

The ruffian glanced toward the chair with the evident intention of snatching up his pistols, and perceiving they were gone, a cry of savage rage, like that of a hyena, burst from his lips. Captain Stanley drew forth a pistol, presented it at the Burker's head, and bade him surrender or he was a dead man. But with the sudden fury of the wild beast unto whose howling cry we just now likened that of the ruffian, he sprang upon Stanley, hurled him upon the floor, seized the pistol from his grasp, and was on the very point of discharging its contents at his head, when his arm was caught in a powerful grasp, the weapon was wrested from him, and he himself in his turn was hurled upon the floor. All this was the work of a few seconds, and we need hardly inform the reader that it was Lord Charles Meredith who, springing into the room, thus saved the life of his adventurous friend.

The very instant that the Burker was thus levelled, Lord Charles Meredith's knee was upon his chest, and the threat was repeated that he must surrender or have his brains blown out. But the two officers had to deal with a man of the most desperate and determined character, — a man, too, who possessed the brute strength and courage of a lion. Hurling Meredith off him, he rose as far as his knees, when he was assailed by Stanley, whom he likewise dashed away, and then snatching up a chair, he hurled it with all his force at the head of Meredith, who was returning to the assault. The nobleman, however, darted sufficiently aside to save his head, and received the blow upon his shoulder, but it

made him stagger, and for an instant he was smitten with the idea that his arm was broken. All this, too, was but the work of a few instants, during which, however, either one of the officers might have shot the ruffian dead; but it was by no means their purpose to save the hangman his duty, unless at the last extremity in defence of their own lives. As for Barney the Burker, he dared not roar out for assistance, for fear of arousing the whole neighbourhood; but by hurling the chair at Meredith, he gained a moment's time to do that which seemed to answer his own purpose equally well, for he seized hold of a cord, which passing through a hole in the ceiling hung against the wall, and a bell sent its clanging sound through the house.

"It is useless for you to resist," exclaimed Stanley, again rushing upon the villain just as he was about to tear open the door, and at the same instant Meredith seized upon him by the other arm, both now clinging to him with a desperate tenacity.

And desperate too were the struggles of the ruffian, diabolically savage was the expression of his features, as he endeavoured to bite his assailants; and were it not that his great clumsy shoes were off, he would undoubtedly have broken their legs with the tremendous kicks that he dealt. And now there were the sounds of numerous persons rushing about the house; the door was burst open, and the four bullies whom the two adventurous officers had already seen beneath that roof rushed in. Lord Charles Meredith and Captain Stanley were in a moment overpowered by numbers, they were made prisoners, and now, as the only chance left of ensuring the capture of the Burker, they both shouted with all their might for assistance. Vainly did they endeavour to release their arms from the grasp of the bullies that they might get at their pistols; they could not.

The instant the Burker was freed, he rushed to the window, but beholding the Chandler in the adjoining yard, he fancied that a trap was set for him in that direction, and he resolved to escape by the front door, for he felt assured that the whole neighbourhood would be quickly aroused. Snatching up his shoes, his cap, and his club, he darted from the room, rushed with the reckless brutal violence of a mad bull through the bevy of half-naked girls who were gathered in a fright on the landing, knocked down Mother Bambridge as

she suddenly emerged from a ground-floor room in which she slept, and, tearing open the front door, darted forth. He ran along the alley with all his might, but just as he reached the front of the public-house, a couple of policemen emerged from a little court that led out from that part of the alley. Their strong arms clutched hold of the Burker, and as he offered a terrible resistance, the bludgeon of one of the officers dealt him a blow which rendered him powerless.

At the same moment Captain Stanley and Lord Charles Meredith, having managed to escape from the bullies with whom we left them in conflict, and at whose hands they had received no small amount of ill-treatment, though fortunately no serious injury, arrived upon the spot where the Burker was thus captured, and they had the gratification of finding that he was safe in the hands of the law's myrmidons after all.

CHAPTER XIX

THE INTERVIEW

CHRISTIAN ASHTON, on being dismissed from the employment which the literary mania of the Earl of Lascelles had furnished him, would have consulted Mr. Redcliffe as to the course which he should now adopt with a view to obtain another situation, but that gentleman was absent from London, relative to the trial of Lettice Rodney. Our young hero visited his sister Christina, and acquainted her with everything that had occurred. He displayed so much grief at this sudden and cruel separation from Isabella Vincent, he spoke so fervidly of the love which he cherished toward her, and declared with such passionate vehemence that his happiness was entirely centred in that beautiful and charming creature, that Christina from her brother's words and manner acquired a somewhat deeper reading into the mysteries of her own heart, and she could now less than ever mistake the feeling which she herself entertained toward Lord Octavian Meredith. But she did her best to console and encourage her brother, and perhaps with this amiable purpose in view, she spoke more cheerfully of the hope which a faithful love might entertain than was perfectly consistent with the misgivings she secretly experienced on behalf of Christian's passion. For she could not help seeing that it was indeed most unlikely the Earl of Lascelles would ever consent to bestow his niece upon an obscure young man totally dependent on his own industry for his bread.

Nevertheless, as we have just observed, Christina — with the kindest of motives — spoke cheeringly to her brother, and he went away from that interview comforted, and with a sense of reviving hope. As he wended his way back toward his lodgings in Kensington, he felt himself gradually falling

into those day-dreams in which youthful lovers are wont to indulge, and his thoughts flowed in something like the following channel:

“ Who can tell what the future may have in store for me? Heaven has often blessed the loves of those whose prospects at the outset were even darker than mine. Ah! if I could but obtain one more interview with Isabella, if we could once more exchange vows and protestations of eternal fidelity, I should feel happier; my mind would become more settled, and I should have a better heart to search after fresh employment. But as it is, I feel at a loss how to act; I can fix my thoughts upon nothing decisive. Oh, yes, to see her once more, to receive from her sweet lips the assurance that under no circumstances of persuasion or coercion will she ever become another's, — this indeed were happiness. Then, inspired with fondest and brightest hope, I could battle with the world, and if industry and integrity ever throve by their own unassisted resources, I would assuredly carve out a position for myself. And who can tell but that the day will come when I may secure a competency, and thus feel myself justified in conducting Isabella to the altar? Our wants would be limited: a neat little rural habitation would suffice, and however humble its aspect, yet the light of love would gild the interior as if it were a splendid saloon, and impart a richer bloom to the flowers festooning outside. And we should be so happy, oh, so happy! and Isabella would never regret her uncle's palatial mansion.”

Such reflections as these — which, as the reader may perceive, were borrowed from the fanciful realms of dream-land — wrapped the soul of the enthusiastic Christian in a species of ecstasy, but the pivot, be it observed, on which the whole vision turned, was the idea of first of all obtaining a parting interview with Isabella. He did not therefore immediately take any step to procure a new situation; nor did he for the present think of leaving his lodging in the vicinage of the earl's mansion. He had plenty of ready money, and as his habits were frugal and inexpensive — his only extravagance consisting in the nicety and almost elegance of his apparel — he could subsist for some time on the resources which he had in hand. But how to obtain the interview with Isabella? This was the difficulty. For several days after he left the earl's employment, he vainly busied himself in

meditations upon the best means to carry out his view. More than once he thought of beseeching Lord Osmond's good offices, for it was evident to Christian that the young nobleman was far from unfavourable to the love-suit which had brought about so disastrous a catastrophe in the summer-house. But yet he applied not to Adolphus.

In the meanwhile the Countess of Lascelles and Lord Osmond had been particularly on their guard, for fear lest the old nobleman's suspicions should be revived. Nevertheless, Ethel continued to occupy those separate apartments which we have on a former occasion described, and on a variety of pretexts she avoided a return to the matrimonial couch.

Lord Osmond deeply deplored Christian's departure from the mansion, as his presence there had caused a diversion in respect to Isabella which had thrown the young nobleman and Ethel constantly together. Now, since that catastrophe in the summer-house, Isabella had been almost constantly with the countess, and Osmond began to despair of again enjoying Ethel's society alone.

As for the earl himself, he had been so bewildered by the incidents which led to Christian's summary dismissal that for several days he knew not how to act or what to think. That his son and his niece were not lovers, as he had all along flattered himself, had suddenly been made apparent; that Christian and Isabella must have been far more together than he had supposed was likewise evident, and that therefore, Osmond must have been the companion of the countess in the evening walks in the garden was a natural deduction from those premises. Thus the old earl was agitated with renewed suspicion, but a feeling of mingled pride and shame prevented him from again touching on the subject with his valet Makepeace, and likewise from taking any decisive step, — such, for instance, as to insist that his son should again become an exile from the house.

At length Lord Osmond was determined to do something to bring about a change in affairs. His mad infatuation toward his youthful and lovely mother-in-law would not permit him to remain any longer so completely on his guard, nor to tolerate the almost complete severance from her which Isabella's presence in her ladyship's apartments necessitated. He spoke to Makepeace, but the valet could

say nothing more than that the earl maintained a strict silence with regard to recent events.

One morning — about ten days after Christian's abrupt dismissal from the house — Lord Osmond paid him a second visit at his lodgings. We have already said that our hero had more than once bethought himself of seeking the young nobleman's good offices toward obtaining an interview with Isabella, but he hesitated, — fearful that he might be taking too great a liberty and trusting too far to the favourable feeling of the earl's son. But now, when Lord Osmond entered his little sitting-room, Christian's countenance suddenly lighted up with mingled hope and joy.

"Still in the same place, and still without employment, my young friend?" said Adolphus, shaking Christian warmly by the hand.

"I cannot tear myself away from this neighbourhood," replied the youth, his cheeks glowing with blushes, "and now the truth is frankly told."

"You entertain some hope?" said Lord Osmond. "Perhaps you wish to see Isabella — But of course you do. It is natural enough."

"Oh, for one parting interview!" exclaimed Christian, enthusiastically, "and you know not, my lord, how deep would be my gratitude."

"Well, we must manage it by some means or another," responded Adolphus. "Have you the courage to enter the grounds stealthily this evening, or to-morrow evening, on receipt of a note or message from me?"

Christian hesitated for a moment; the natural rectitude of his principles recoiled from the idea of thus violating the sanctity of premises whence he had been so pointedly dismissed. But a second thought told him that there was no more harm in entering the earl's grounds against his consent than in seeking an interview with his niece likewise in opposition to his will. Love therefore triumphed over all scruples, and he exclaimed, "Tell me how I can see Miss Vincent, if only for a few minutes, and I will risk everything. But think you, my lord, that she herself will be agreeable —"

"She loves you, Christian, and that assurance ought to be a sufficient answer. Hold yourself in readiness for a communication from me, and trust to my ingenuity to manage the matter. And now one word more ere I take my de-

parture. You must look upon me as a friend, and regard me as such, even to the extent of making me your banker, for that is the proposal I have to offer without offending your delicacy."

Christian expressed his warmest gratitude for the young nobleman's kind consideration, but assured him that he possessed ample resources for the present. Adolphus then took his departure, leaving the youth full of hope and joy at the prospect of so speedily obtaining the object of his enthusiastic wishes.

In the evening the Earl and Countess of Lascelles, Osmond, and Isabella were seated in the drawing-room between eight and nine o'clock partaking of coffee. Isabella was sad and dispirited, though she did her best to conceal what she felt; she was so afraid of angering her uncle. The countess displayed the most amiable demeanour toward her husband, and was completely on her guard not to exchange so much as the most rapidly furtive glance with Adolphus. Lord Osmond chatted with every appearance of ease and gaiety, and as the earl had drunk a few extra glasses of wine, he was in a much better humour than he had been since the adventure of the summer-house.

"Ah! now that I think of it, my dear father," said Lord Osmond, thus abruptly giving a turn to the previous conversation, "when are your memoirs to appear?"

"Why, the fact is, Adolphus," answered the earl, "I have come well-nigh to a full stop for the present, and without any disagreeable allusion," — and he glanced somewhat spitefully at his niece, — "I have lost my right hand, as it were. Dictation was easy enough, but when I sit down to write for myself, I find my ideas rushing on — like what shall I say? — like a troop of wild elephants, but my penmanship can no more keep pace with them than — than — hem! — a lame donkey at a short trot."

"It is a great pity, my dear father," rejoined Adolphus, in an undertone, so that Isabella could not overhear him, "that you have got rid of that very useful young man merely on account of a passing folly —"

"Don't mention it, Adolphus," interrupted the earl sharply; "he shall never enter my house again."

"Oh, no, of course not," responded Lord Osmond, finding that the little feeler he had thrown out experienced such a

rebuff. "But really it is cruel of you to keep the public on the tenter-hooks of suspense awaiting that work of yours, which has already been so extensively advertised. You must permit me to look out for another secretary, or else," added Lord Osmond, in the hope of putting his father into the most amiable of humours, "I must act as your amanuensis for an hour or two every day."

"No! would you, Adolphus?" exclaimed the old earl, catching eagerly at the proposition.

"With the utmost pleasure," was Lord Osmond's ready response. "We will commence to-morrow morning, if you will."

"That we will," exclaimed the earl, forgetting everything else in his joy at the sort of compliment conveyed by his son's supposed anxiety in respect to the forthcoming work. "I will go this minute to the library, and sit down for an hour or two to rack my imagination and invent — I mean arrange the papers in readiness for to-morrow."

"Pray do," said Lord Osmond, "for I am now all eagerness to begin. And perhaps, as it is so sultry indoors and the evening is so beautiful, the ladies would accept my escort for a ramble in the garden?"

The earl made a passing grimace at the proposition, for he retrospected not lovingly upon those evening rambles, but as the thought flashed to his mind that his niece must remain the whole time in companionship with Adolphus and Ethel, he uttered not a syllable of objection, and hastened away to the library, intent upon the concoction of some startling incident for the morrow's lucubrations. The countess and Isabella rang for their shawls, and Lord Osmond, hurrying down-stairs for a moment, sought Makepeace, to whom he made a significant sign, which that individual at once comprehended. The young nobleman then rejoined his mother-in-law and cousin, and they walked forth into the garden together.

As this was the first occasion since the disastrous incident of the summer-house that an evening ramble had been taken, or that the system of guarded conduct had been in the slightest degree deviated from, the countess could not help thinking that Adolphus had some particular project in view, for he had found no opportunity during the day to communicate his intention to her ladyship. Isabella, on the

other hand, was too artless and innocent to entertain the idea of any ulterior purpose, and leaning upon her cousin's arm, she walked by his side in silence, occupied with her own melancholy reflections. To his other arm the countess clung, and as the night was clear and beautiful, she and her lover were now enabled to exchange glances of deep and earnest tenderness.

It becomes necessary to explain that in one of the angles of the walls enclosing the spacious garden grounds, there was a small, private door, but which was seldom or never used. An avenue of evergreens led from this door toward the conservatories at the farther extremity of the garden, and it was in this avenue that Osmond was now walking with the two ladies. At first there was little conversation, for Isabella was altogether silent, while Adolphus and Ethel were too much gratified with the opportunity of thus stealthily bestowing a tender pressure of the hand, or of exchanging a fond look when the starlight penetrated amidst the trees and flooded their path with its argentine lustre, to give utterance to remarks on purely indifferent subjects, for on such subjects alone could they converse in the presence of Isabella, who was altogether unsuspecting of their guilty love.

"You are pensive, my sweet cousin?" said Adolphus, at length breaking a long silence, and now addressing himself to Isabella. "The countess and I are not so dull," he continued, in a good-humoured strain, "as to be unable to comprehend what occupies your thoughts. We both feel for you, my dear cousin —"

"Isabella has already more than once received the assurance of my sympathy," remarked the countess.

"But we should offer her more than sympathy," quickly exclaimed Lord Osmond. "There could be no harm in assisting the progress of this little love-affair, which experiences disfavour only on the part of one, for really Christian Ashton is an admirable young man — You are weeping, dear Isabella."

"The conversation gives her pain," said the countess, in a tone of tenderest sympathy.

"Not for worlds would I wilfully give you pain, my dear cousin," resumed Adolphus. "On the contrary, you shall see whether I have not studied to do something to afford you pleasure."

"What mean you?" inquired the agitated, the astonished, and the bewildered girl, her heart fluttering with suspense.

"I mean, my dear cousin, that here is some one whom you may perhaps be glad to meet."

These last words were spoken just as the little party reached the end of the avenue where the private door stood, and at the same moment a key was heard to turn in the lock of that door. It opened, and a faint cry of mingled surprise and delight burst from Isabella's lips, as she beheld Christian Ashton.

"We will leave you together for half an hour," said Lord Osmond, and he hurried the countess away from the spot.

Isabella, well-nigh overcome by her feelings, sank half-fainting into Christian's arms; he strained her to his breast, breathing the tenderest and most endearing words in her ear. He explained to her how he had earnestly longed for one parting interview, how Lord Osmond had kindly volunteered to procure it, and how a note enclosing a key of the gate, and instructing him in what manner to proceed, had been left a few minutes back at his lodgings. Who the person was that left it, Christian did not know, but we need hardly inform the reader it was the valet Makepeace.

And were not the lovers happy? And did they not feel themselves supremely blest? Was it likely that they should yield to timid apprehensions, and on that account cut short the pure pleasure, the chaste luxury, of this interview? Or need we say that the vows of eternal love which the enraptured youth sought from the lips of the tender maiden were murmuringly whispered, that those vows were reciprocated, and that they were ratified with the purest and holiest kisses?

They walked together in that shady avenue for nearly an hour, Adolphus and Ethel having thus well-nigh doubled the interval to which the young nobleman had in the first instance limited the meeting, and during this space everything was forgotten by the youthful pair except the happiness of being thus together. So rapidly slipped away the time that when Adolphus and Ethel again joined them, it seemed as if the interview had lasted but for five minutes instead of fifty. It was at the extremity of the avenue which was nearest to the conservatories that the youthful lovers were thus rejoined by Lord Osmond and the Countess of Lascelles,

and it was here that they now separated. Isabella, again taking her cousin's arm, accompanied him and the countess back to the mansion in one direction, while our young hero, hastily threading his way along the shady avenue, regained the garden gate, whence he issued, locking it again and taking the key with him. Had not his thoughts been entirely wrapped up in the ecstatic luxury of feeling which this interview had left behind it, he would most probably have been struck by a certain strange rustling amidst the adjacent evergreens, but as it happened, he heard it not.

Meanwhile the Earl of Lascelles had retired to the library to make notes of whatsoever perilous escapes or marvellous adventures he could possibly concoct, and which were worthy of incorporation in those celebrated memoirs that were to throw Baron Munchausen into the shade. He, however, found his imagination more cloudy than he had expected; he rang for wine, but fresh potatoes appeared only to increase his dulness, instead of giving a spur to his inventive ingenuity. Thus an hour elapsed, and he had only got so far as to place himself between the fore paws of a huge African lion, without being enabled to resolve upon the special means of his own extrication and his formidable adversary's defeat. He sat back in his chair, thinking, but gradually with his meditations there became mingled an undercurrent of thoughts which presently absorbed the others. This ramble in the garden assumed a suspicious aspect to his mind. He did not know what it could possibly mean, and yet he could not help thinking it meant something more than a mere stroll for the purpose of courting the evening breeze. Without entering into details in respect to the old nobleman's ideas, we may as well at once state that his misgivings reached such a pitch he tossed down the pen, left himself, so far as his memoirs were concerned, in the grasp of the lion, with a boa-constrictor picturesquely thrown in, and represented as looking down from a tree ready to spring upon them both, and issuing from the library, he stole into the garden, treading noiselessly amongst the evergreens. He drew near that very identical arbour where he had surprised Christian and Isabella, and where he had received so smart a blow upon the nose, but all was silent there. He diverged elsewhere, and now his wandering steps brought him in the immediate vicinage of the private door. Footsteps rapidly

approaching along the avenue fell upon his ear, and just at that spot close by the door, there were no high trees to intercept the starlight. All therefore was clear, and the ancient earl popped down behind a shrub to see who the individual was that now approached the gate. It was Christian Ashton, and in the sudden surprise with which the nobleman was thus smitten, he gave such a start as to rustle the shrub, but Christian heard it not. The earl tarried where he was, crouching down like a frog; he perceived our hero insert the key in the lock, open the gate, pass forth, shut it again, and then the relocking thereof fell on his lordship's ear.

"Well, am I really awake?" asked the earl of himself; "or is this a dream? I have either discovered something extraordinary to a degree, or else I am the silliest young dotard that ever existed."

Bewildered and confused, the earl wended his way back to the library, filled a bumper, tossed it off, and threw himself back in his chair to meditate. Sleep stole upon him, and he was presently awakened by the entrance of Makepeace. His first impulse was to tell the valet everything that had happened; his second thought was to hold his tongue, for the idea slipped into his head that he had drunk too much wine and had been dreaming. He inquired what o'clock it was, and was told it was past eleven. Lord Osmond and the ladies had already retired to their respective chambers, and the earl accordingly went up to his own. On entering his dressing-room, the first thing he did was to glance at a particular nail to which the key of the private garden door was wont to be hung, and there, sure enough, it was. Nor need this be at all astonishing to the reader, inasmuch as Makepeace had during the day procured a counterpart key, in accordance with instructions given by Lord Osmond, who remunerated him liberally for everything he did.

But when the earl thus caught sight of that key, his suspicion was strengthened to the effect that he had dreamed this new incident of the garden, and as nothing would have been more galling to his mean petty vanity than to appear ridiculous in the eyes of his servant, he breathed not a syllable relative to his supposed dream. Yet when Makepeace had retired, the Earl of Lascelles reflected more and more on the occurrence, and he was haunted by the apprehension

that there might be something more in it than a mere dream, especially as it had occurred on the very evening that the garden ramble was renewed.

"The key is certainly here," he said to himself, "and not for a moment would Makepeace remove it from its nail. I know the fellow is fidelity itself; I am too keen and shrewd to be deceived by any man's countenance. No one could have purloined the key, because Makepeace always keeps my dressing-room locked. But it is quite possible for that young scoundrel Ashton to have had a false key made. Perhaps he came of his own accord, hoping to see Isabella. Yes, it must have been so, for Adolphus could not possibly so far forget himself as to connive at such a proceeding. Very good, Master Ashton. So you will persist in looking after my niece, will you? We'll see if we can't put a stop to it. I'm almost sorry I didn't pounce upon him, but perhaps it is all for the best. I'll go to the magistrate in the morning, or I'll set a detective to watch. But no! there's something better than that, and, by Jove! I'll do it."

Whatever this last idea might have been, it certainly seemed to tickle the silly old nobleman's fancy very much, for he rubbed his hands and chuckled, grinning most ludicrously at the same time, and putting on his nightcap with the fringe of false hair, he sought his couch.

On the following day Lord Osmond, emboldened by the success of the previous evening's adventure, called upon Christian to inform him that he might, if he thought fit, have another interview with Isabella, and our hero, who was enthusiastically devoted to the charming girl, was only too willing to accept an offer which he believed to arise from the kindest and most disinterested feeling. During this same day, too, the Earl of Lascelles had a little private conversation with the under-gardener, giving him certain instructions, and charging him to observe the strictest secrecy. This the man faithfully promised, — all the more readily, too, as the earl slipped a couple of guineas into his hand. The old nobleman, when in the presence of the family, suffered not his countenance to betray that there was any secret scheme which he was hatching, but nevertheless he was too full of it to be enabled to settle his mind to dictate to his son, and thus the proffered services of Adolphus were dispensed with. Indeed, so far as the memoirs were concerned, the earl con-

tinued in the grasp of the lion, and the huge boa-constrictor was still coiled around the branch of the tree, waiting to spring.

When the evening came, the earl and countess, Lord Osmond and Isabella, were assembled as usual in the drawing-room to take coffee, and at about half-past eight o'clock, the earl, rising from his seat, said that he should go to the library and prepare for the next day's work, as he was positively determined to proceed with his book on the morrow.

"And as the heat has prevented you from going out all day," said Adolphus to the ladies, "I offer, like a gay gallant, to escort you for a stroll in the grounds."

The proposal was accepted; the bell was rung for the shawls, and the earl, chuckling with inward satisfaction, exclaimed, "Well, the evening is really beautiful, and instead of shutting myself up in the library, I will take a lounge with you."

Adolphus and Ethel were enabled, from a course of dissimulation, to maintain the strictest guard over their looks at this most unexpected and ominous proposal, but Isabella turned pale and trembled. Fortunately, however, her countenance was not at the instant toward her uncle, and he perceived not her emotion. But the countess did notice it, and hastening to assist Isabella with her shawl, she whispered, rapidly, "Fear nothing. Adolphus will make everything right."

The earl gave his arm to the countess, while Lord Osmond escorted his cousin Isabella. They descended the stairs and reached the hall, — Adolphus the while racking his brain for some pretext to speak aside to Makepeace. As fortune would have it, Makepeace himself was at the instant crossing the hall, with a chamber candle in his hand.

"With your permission, Bella," said Lord Osmond, "I will smoke a cigar in the garden. Here, Makepeace, give me a light."

The valet stopped short accordingly; Adolphus approached him, and while stooping toward the candle, he said in a low, rapid whisper, "Hasten around and prevent young Ashton from entering by the gate this evening."

The cigar was lighted, Adolphus gave Isabella his arm again, and the party issued forth. The earl was determined

that Adolphus and Isabella should not wander away from himself and the countess, and therefore, on entering the garden, he kept his son in continued conversation. But Lord Osmond had really no intention of straying; he had provided against the entrance of Christian Ashton, and that was the only thing he cared for. He fancied that there must be some suspicion in his father's mind, but what its precise nature was, he could not conjecture. As for the earl, he was naturally led to imagine that this repetition of the evening walk might be in connection with an expected visit from Christian; and that, after all, Adolphus was really favouring the discarded secretary's suit toward Miss Vincent. The earl, however, chatted gaily, as if there were nothing to disturb his humour, and all the more gaily, too, because he inwardly chuckled at the hope of wreaking a speedy vengeance on the presumptuous youth who dared aspire to the hand of his niece and stealthily intrude upon his grounds.

Meantime Makepeace, in pursuance of Lord Osmond's hint, had issued from the principal entrance of the grounds, and rapidly skirting the wall he reached the private door, against which he planted himself to await the coming of Christian Ashton. While standing there, he caught the sounds of heavy footsteps moving about just inside the garden door; then he heard a strange grating noise, as of some iron mechanism being acted upon, and this was followed by a sharp click, while a voice just audible to the valet's ears muttered, "Botheration take this cursed thing. Ah, that's right at last."

This latter ejaculation was accompanied by another grating metallic noise, and then the footsteps moved away from the neighbourhood of the door. The words were spoken in so low a tone — being merely in a musing strain to the man's own self — that Makepeace could not recognize who he was, and he was totally at a loss to comprehend what the proceeding meant. He had not, however, much time for reflection ere our young hero made his appearance, and on beholding Makepeace planted against the door, he instantaneously fancied there was something wrong.

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Ashton," said the valet; "I am here to befriend you. You must not enter the garden this evening; Lord Osmond bade me come hither to warn you against it."

"For Heaven's sake tell me," exclaimed Christian, "whether anything—" and then he abruptly stopped short, fearing lest the valet was acting as the earl's spy.

"Do not be afraid of me, Mr. Ashton," continued Makepeace; "I am secretly disposed in your favour. The best proof is that it was I who procured the duplicate key for you, and left it with Lord Osmond's note at your lodgings yesterday. I can full well understand the reason you are not to enter the grounds this evening: it is simply because the earl has taken it into his head to join the party in their walk."

"Thank you for this assurance," replied Christian, his mind now infinitely relieved, for his first and very natural misgiving was that Isabella might have become involved in fresh trouble on his account.

He then bade Makepeace "good night," and returned to his lodging, much disappointed, however, at not being enabled to meet Isabella. Makepeace hastily reëntered the grounds, and at once proceeded to the spot just inside the garden gate where he had heard the footsteps, the muttered ejaculations, and the grating metallic sounds, which had so much perplexed him. At first, he could see nothing, but a closer scrutiny showed him a man-trap, with its teethed jaws wide apart, ready to receive and to close upon any unfortunate leg that might step between. Indeed the valet's own leg experienced but a narrow escape from being caught therein, as he was searching about upon the spot.

"This is extraordinary," thought Makepeace to himself, but his knowledge of the earl's character speedily made him aware that it was a device of that nobleman's fertile brain. "It is pretty clear that the old man suspects or knows something, but how the deuce could it have come to his knowledge? At all events I am not suspected, for his lordship was as kind to me to-day as ever, and I know the old bird too well to be deceived by such kindness if it were not perfectly natural. The cunning dog! He thought he would keep this entirely to himself. He expects to catch young Ashton, and he will come here presently to see whether his victim is fast in the trap."

Makepeace was strolling away from the gate, when a mischievous idea struck him.

"Wouldn't he be astonished," thought the valet to him-

self, "if he came and found no trap at all? He would fancy that Christian had been caught, and had climbed over the wall, dragging the trap with him. Capital! I'll hide it."

So Makepeace, carefully lifting the machine in such a way as to avoid getting his arms between its gaping jaws, carried the trap to some little distance, and deposited it amongst a group of shrubs, having done which he reëntered the mansion.

In the meanwhile the Earl of Lascelles and his wife, Adolphus and Isabella, had been rambling about the gardens, but the earl took good care to keep them at a tolerable distance from the private door. Thus an hour passed, and then he proposed to return into the house. But on passing indoors, the old nobleman made some excuse to leave them, and he hastened back into the garden.

"Ah, my young friend," he said within himself, thus apostrophizing Christian Ashton, "I shall find you caught in the trap as sure as a gun, but like a true lover of romance, you have too much pluck to roar out and thus betray everything. Or perhaps you have managed to extricate yourself, — in which case the teeth will show whether they bit home. But I am inclined to think I shall find you pinned fast there, enjoying a miserable martyrdom."

In his haste to ascertain the result of an idea which he conceived to be one of the most brilliant that had ever entered his fertile brain, the Earl of Lascelles did not pursue the tedious meanderings of the gravel-walk which led toward the private door, but he cut across the grass-plot, reached the evergreens, and began working his way manfully amongst them. But all of a sudden a terrific yell rang through the grounds, for, lo and behold! the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles was caught in his own trap.

Nothing could exceed the horrible cries and the piteous lamentations which kept coming from the lips of the wretched old man. Lord Adolphus and some of the men servants rushed forth from the mansion; others followed with lights, and guided by the earl's yells, they speedily reached the spot where he was pinned fast. Lord Adolphus was most painfully afflicted on beholding his father in a plight so unaccountable, but which for any one except a son would have had something so exceedingly ludicrous in it. Indeed, several of the servants turned aside to laugh outright, and Makepeace could scarcely keep his countenance. The old

lord was extricated from the trap and borne into the house, but on arriving there, he would not suffer any one to attend him in his dressing-room except Makepeace. The countess and Isabella, having retired to their own apartments to put off their shawls, had not heard the cries, and when they were informed of what had happened, they sped to the door of the earl's suite of rooms to make inquiries and render any needful assistance. But Makepeace, opening the door a few inches, assured them that his lordship was by no means seriously hurt, that he desired to be left alone, and that they were on no account to send for medical assistance.

It was quite true that the old nobleman was not much injured, for the simple reason that the calf of his leg had been protected by a pretty considerable piece of padding, which was artistically fixed inside his stocking so as to give that appearance of modelled robustness which nature had denied to those spindle shanks. And it was likewise on account of this succedaneous arrangement that the earl would not suffer any one to enter his dressing-room except Makepeace.

CHAPTER XX

A REVELATION

THE incident of the man-trap remained enveloped in a considerable degree of mystery with the generality of the earl's household. His lordship said, as if in a cursory manner, that he supposed one of the gardeners must have set it under the impression that there were nocturnal intruders upon the grounds, and he forbade any inquiries to be instituted. Makepeace of course took very good care not to confess how far he had been instrumental in producing the ignoble catastrophe, nor did he think fit to mention the circumstance even to Lord Osmond. The under-gardener likewise maintained the secret, in pursuance of the instructions he had received from the earl, but the man could not for the life of him conceive how the trap had become moved from its original position.

When, at the expiration of a day or two, the nobleman was enabled to leave his room again, he took an opportunity of questioning the under-gardener, and though the fellow swore lustily he had planted the trap against the private door, the earl could not help thinking the fellow had got drunk and had placed it amongst the shrubs. However, he was content to leave the matter as it stood, for he had no inclination to make a disturbance relative to an incident that was so painfully humiliating for himself. Yet bitter was his lordship's vexation that Christian Ashton should have escaped him, for it was his intention, if the youth had been caught in the trap, to summon the whole household to witness him in that position. The tables had however been turned; it was the earl himself who was caught, — the earl himself likewise whom that household, with but three or four exceptions, had poured forth to see.

The incident produced the most painful impression upon the minds of the countess, Adolphus, and Isabella. Without being at all enabled to account for it, they were nevertheless deeply saddened by the thought that the poor old nobleman had been placed in that cruel predicament. Such a state of feeling brings vividly up into people's minds the wrongs of which they have been guilty, or the duties which they have violated, in respect to the individual who is the object of their compassion. The countess, who had many generous qualities notwithstanding the deep depravity into which an irresistible temptation had led her, was more than ever aroused to the blackness of her turpitude; while Lord Osmond, despite his unabating infatuation for his young and beautiful mother-in-law, could no longer look in his father's face without feeling that his guilt toward that parent was of the darkest and deepest dye. As for Isabella, she, with her feelings far more keenly sensitive, and with her notions of propriety still more exquisitely delicate, was led painfully to reflect that as her uncle stood in the light of a parent, she had proved grievously disobedient to his wishes in stealthily meeting Christian Ashton.

The result of all these remorseful feelings was that the Countess of Lascelles penned a note to Adolphus, beseeching and imploring that on some pretext he would withdraw from the mansion, and that by means of a long separation they might better endeavour to conquer their unhappy passion. She appeared to recover much if not all of that firmness of purpose which had at first stood her in such good stead, and enabled her to struggle for a time against the wiles of temptation. Adolphus — though feeling it was despair, if not death, to sever himself from the adored and worshipped Ethel — was nevertheless led by a sense of duty to make this atonement for his sin, however tardy, and however slight in comparison with the sin itself; and in a note penned in response to that of the countess, he assured her that he would lose no time in stating to his father that he intended to travel upon the Continent.

As for Isabella, she likewise penned a note, and it was to Christian Ashton. In terms of suitable maiden modesty — but still properly tender and affectionate after all that had passed between them — she besought him not to make any further attempts to see her until she could receive his visits

with her uncle's full concurrence. She assured him that never should she prove faithless to the truth that she had pledged, and that if it were written in the book of destiny that they were not born for each other, yet that never would she bestow her hand where her heart was not likewise given. Thus the letter — though containing a fiat of complete severance for the present, and Heaven alone could tell for how long a period — was nevertheless precisely such a one as became a young lady of the strictest purity of principle, and which a right-minded youth such as Christian Ashton could not possibly regard without feeling that it raised her more highly than ever in his estimation.

In pursuance of the solemn promise given to the Countess of Lascelles, and of that sense of duty to which he was awakened, Lord Osmond sought an opportunity of conversing alone with the earl. This was a few days after the incidents related in the previous chapter, and the interview took place in the library.

"My dear father," began Adolphus, "I come to request your permission for my temporary absence from home."

"Well, it's very proper in you to request my permission," responded the earl; "there is nothing like obedience. I think I have often told you that I was a very obedient son. Indeed, it was one of my virtues. I recollect that I never ventured on the ice after my dear father, the late earl, ordered me to keep off it, which, by the bye, was on the occasion when I fell through and was so nearly drowned that I was six hours in a state of suspended animation. But about this absence of yours, — where are you going to?"

"I purpose, my dear father, to travel on the Continent for a year or two —"

"There is certainly nothing like travelling," remarked the earl, "as indeed my book will show when it is published. I question, however, if you will pick up enough in Europe to fill two large volumes, for travels are nothing at all without lions and bears and crocodiles and snakes. Why, would you believe it, the moment Mr. Bentley, the publisher, — he is publisher in ordinary to her Majesty, you know, although I certainly never had the honour of meeting with any book bearing her Majesty's name on the title page — However, as I was about to state, the moment Mr. Bentley advertised 'a forthcoming work of travels by the Right Honourable the

Earl of Lascelles,' — although, by the bye, there was not a line written at the time, — I was waited upon by an old gentleman who offered me his literary assistance. I asked him for his qualifications, and I think he said he had written three voyages to the North Pole, eleven around the world, six travels in China, three into the heart of Africa, four to the Rocky Mountains, and about fifty others to different parts of the earth, including six or seven ascents up Mont Blanc, and about seventeen shipwrecks."

"But my dear father," exclaimed Adolphus, "this man was an impostor. A little calculation would show that a dozen lives would not suffice for so much travelling and voyaging."

"God bless your soul!" cried the earl, "the worthy gentleman had never been out of England in his life, or else how could he possibly have found time to write the books at all? They were all composed at the British Museum, and published under an infinite variety of names and titles. Why, this good gentleman who came to me, as I am telling you, was a colonial bishop, an officer in the East India Company's service, a subaltern unattached, an old naval officer, a Lady of Rank, an Oxonian, an Etonian, a missionary to the South Sea Islands, a trader to Hudson's Bay, and Heaven only knows what! But you will fancy the answer I gave him. Of course I told him that the Earl of Lascelles did not want a hodgepodge dished up for him, but that they were my own personal experiences, adventures, and impressions that I was about to give to the world. I only mention all this to let you see that if you do travel, you could easily have a book confectioned for you on your return."

"But, my dear father, I do not want to write a book," replied Lord Osmond, — "much less to have one written for me."

"Well, well, every one to his taste," said the earl, complacently stroking his wrinkled chin, as much as to imply that it was his taste, and his pride, too, to become an illustrious ornament of the literary world. "However," he continued, "I have not the slightest objection that you should take a tour on the Continent during your honeymoon."

"My honeymoon?" ejaculated Adolphus, in a sort of dismayed amazement, but rather at the unexpected mention of such words than because he was at a loss to comprehend

them, for, on the contrary, he could not help at once suspecting at what the earl was driving.

"To be sure, the honeymoon," repeated his lordship, staring fixedly in the young nobleman's countenance. "And it is a very odd thing that at the moment you entered the library I was about to send for you. But there are strange coincidences at times. I remember once when I was at Eton, I was just going to take up a big stone to shy at a boy's head, when he picked up one and suddenly threw it at me with such force he nearly knocked my eye out. But as I was about to say, I was just on the point of sending for you, Adolphus, to have a very serious conversation with you. In a word, you must marry Isabella offhand, and we'll fix this day week for the nuptials."

"But, my dear father," cried Lord Osmond, "this is impossible."

"Impossible! What — to marry a pretty girl? Egad! I never found it impossible."

"But there is no love subsisting between us," responded Lord Osmond.

"Love will come of its own accord. It's a deuce of a thing for springing up spontaneously."

"But I feel that I shall never entertain any other sentiment than that of friendship for my cousin. Besides," added Adolphus, hesitatingly, "her own affections are already disposed of —"

"What! to that whipper-snapper who had the impertinence to bruise the nose of a peer of England?" exclaimed the earl, rubbing the proboscis thus alluded to, as if it still smarted with the pain; "the impertinent scoundrel on whose account I was caught —" the earl was just on the point of adding "in a trap," but quickly amending the idea, he said, "so nicely at the entry of that summer-house."

"It is perfectly true, my dear father," replied Adolphus, who was too much abstracted to notice the peculiarity with which the earl's last words were uttered, — "it is perfectly true that Christian Ashton is the object of Isabella's affections, and really, with all due deference, you can only blame yourself for having introduced him to your table and thus thrown them so much together. There is no denying that he is a very prepossessing, intellectual, and agreeable young man, and it was not therefore astonishing —"

"Nevertheless," interrupted the earl, somewhat severely, for he by no means liked to be reminded of the unexpected and unintended turn which his previous stratagem had taken when he introduced Christian into the bosom of his family, — "nevertheless, you shall marry Isabella. I have made up my mind upon the point, and when once I am resolved upon a thing, it is as good as done."

"My dear father," answered Lord Osmond, very seriously, "it is impossible I can take as a wife a young lady whose affections are engaged to another. It would be indelicate — cruel —"

"Stuff and nonsense!" interrupted the earl, vehemently. "I tell you it is already as good as settled."

"Not exactly so," rejoined Adolphus, with a firmness that was almost indignant, "for you have yet to obtain the consent of the two principal persons."

"Isabella will yield to my wishes," said the earl; "indeed she must; she is dependent upon me, — that is to say, she believes herself so —"

"And is she not?" inquired Adolphus, with astonishment.

"Never mind," rejoined the earl, tartly. "I tell you she will assent, and I reckon upon your compliance likewise."

"Deceive yourself not for a moment, my dear father," said Adolphus. "I cannot — I will not marry my cousin Isabella."

"And I say you can and you shall," rejoined the earl, and he spoke with a decisiveness that appeared to have something more in it than a mere whim or caprice.

"I see that this interview had better terminate at once," said Adolphus, coldly, and he was rising from his seat, when he was struck by the imperious gesture with which the earl bade him retain it.

"Now, understand me well, Adolphus," continued the old nobleman, "I have set my mind on this match for more reasons than one, and I intend it to take place. You had better yield with a good countenance, or you will compel me to make revelations which will perhaps somewhat startle you."

These ambiguous words instantaneously associated themselves in Lord Osmond's mind with those former ones in reference to Isabella which had struck him as peculiar, and

knowing how for some years — ever since the death of her mother — the earl had kept her in such privacy that neither he nor the countess had the slightest idea where she was until she was suddenly brought home in the manner already described, a painful suspicion in respect to his father's integrity arose in the young nobleman's mind.

"Is it possible," he asked in a low and trembling voice, "that you have acted wrongfully toward that orphan daughter of your deceased sister?"

"What! do you think I have robbed her out of a fortune," ejaculated the earl, sneeringly, "when she never had a penny-piece of her own? Not I indeed. I never robbed anybody in my life, not so much as an umbrella from a friend, and umbrellas, you know, have ever been considered legitimate plunder."

"Then what revelations are these to which you so ambiguously refer?" inquired Adolphus, bewildered what to think.

"You had better not ask me," responded the earl, "but like a good fellow marry Isabella offhand. We'll have a sumptuous wedding, and I tell you what, — yes, I positively will, — I'll have it down at the Bloomfield estate; all the tenantry shall be invited. We'll have jumping in sacks, climbing up greasy poles, eating treacle-biscuits, and catching pigs with soapy tails. Useless indeed you prefer to have the wedding here —"

"My dear father," interrupted Adolphus, "once for all do let me beseech you to explain the grave and important reasons which you seem to have for wishing these nuptials to take place."

"Well, if you are obstinate," said the earl, "the truth must be told," but he screwed up his face with the air of a man who had the prospect of no very agreeable task to perform.

"What on earth can it be?" demanded Adolphus, full of suspense, and yet this suspense was far from being so poignant as it would have been if he had a less frivolous and more stable-minded person to deal with.

"Look you, Adolphus," resumed the earl; "suppose that by any accident all my estates at my death should pass away to your cousin Isabella?"

"But, father, this is supposing an impossibility, unless I

myself were also dead, for of course I am aware that the entail descends upon the females as well as upon the males of the family."

"And why is it supposing an impossibility?" demanded the old earl. "There is nothing impossible, as I fully proved when I rode the wild elephant in Africa."

Adolphus gave vent to an ejaculation of impatience.

"You wilful dog," growled the old earl; "you persevere in forcing me to tell you everything. Suppose, then, only suppose, I say, that some sudden exposure took place, and it became proved that you — But come! marry the girl and have done with it."

"Father, you must speak out," exclaimed Lord Osmond, now much excited, and with a suspense that was really poignant. "For Heaven's sake tell me what you mean!"

"I mean, Adolphus," replied the earl, himself considerably excited and painfully bewildered, "that though I have no doubt you are the son of your father and mother, nevertheless your father isn't your father and your mother wasn't your mother."

Adolphus gazed upon the earl as if he thought he was going mad, and yet even from that strange conglomeration of absurd contradictions and ridiculous paradoxes, there seemed to be a certain idea to be eliminated, — a startling deduction to be made. Adolphus was frightened; a cold shiver, like a presentiment of evil, ran through him; he essayed to speak, but vainly gasped for utterance.

"There is no harm in it if you marry the girl," continued the old nobleman, "and the world need never be the wiser, — at least I hope not. For even if the truth did some day transpire, you could but lose the title; you would have all the estates by right of your wife, to whom they would devolve by entail."

Adolphus sat upon his chair as if he were in the midst of a dream. All the words which the earl had just uttered appeared to confirm the wild, the startling, the almost impossible idea which his former incoherent speech had conjured up. The colour forsook the young man's countenance; he felt as if he were about to faint. There was fortunately a decanter of water upon the table; he filled a glass and drank a long draught.

"You are saying all this to coerce me into a marriage

with my cousin," he exclaimed, clutching with avidity at the thought.

"Isabella is no more your cousin, Adolphus," responded the old nobleman, "than I am your father, and I am not," he added, emphatically.

Adolphus raised his hands to his throbbing brows as if to steady his wildly agitated thoughts; his brain seemed to whirl in confusion. Could it possibly be true? Was he an unwilling impostor? Had he lived thus long an animated lie without knowing it? Had he for twenty-four years passed in the world as a breathing falsehood, though utterly guiltless of wanton deceit? Oh, if it were so, he felt as if he could not survive it, — 'twere a blow too terrible to bear.

The old earl had no such depth of feeling, and though he was to a certain degree excited and distressed, yet it was only to a degree, and not nearly to the same extent as the unhappy, the miserable, the soul-crushed Adolphus. Yet all in a moment there sprang up in the young man's heart a sense of consolation, — yes, consolation in the midst of such overwhelming revelations as these. If he were not the earl's son, his crime in respect to her whom he had hitherto looked upon as his mother-in-law became in a moment many, many shades lighter to contemplate, dark though its hue still remained.

"Tell me how all this happened; explain it," he said, with quick and excited utterance, "for Heaven's sake keep me not another moment in suspense!"

"Listen then," said the earl, speaking with less silliness and flippancy than was his wont. "It was at Bloomfield that I was residing with my first wife when a son and heir was born twenty-four years and a half ago. A few days after that birth, important business hurried me away to the Continent, and the serious embarrassments in which a near relation, who is long since dead, had involved himself at Vienna, detained me there for a period of four months. When I returned to England my wife was in a northern county, on a visit to some relations there, and indeed, as letters had previously informed me, I was assured that it was for the sake of her health that she had removed thither. I rejoined her; the child whom she represented to me as my son was healthy and thriving. Years passed on, and you know with what kindness you were treated by her who

passed as your mother, and indeed from whose bosom you were nourished in your infancy. You are aware likewise that she was of the Catholic persuasion and that she was attended by a priest in her last hours, when a mortal illness overtook her beneath this roof. To that priest she confessed everything, but he dared not give her absolution unless she revealed to me the fraud which had been perpetrated—”

“Go on,” groaned Adolphus, in a half-stiffing voice.

“The revelation was made accordingly,” continued the earl, “but I swore to the countess — your mother of adoption — that I would continue to treat you as my son and never expose the fraud to the world. She died with a conscience much relieved; she died blessing me,” added the old nobleman, now displaying deeper feeling than Adolphus had ever before seen him exhibit.

“And why that fraud?” asked the young man, still profoundly agitated.

“I have already told you that I was abruptly called away from England when my child was three days old. A month afterward that child died. There were circumstances attending its birth, — circumstances so painful to its mother, as to preclude the idea that she could ever again hope to become a parent. She dreaded lest the severance of the tie which that child’s existence constituted betwixt herself and me should alienate my heart from her, and make me look upon her even with aversion as a wife who could give no heir to the haughty name of Lascelles. She knew, moreover, that if anything happened to me, the estates would devolve upon my sister, — Isabella’s mother, — and that she herself (my wife, I mean) would have to retire upon a small jointure, almost excluded as it were from that family of which it was her pride to be one of the heads. All these reasons induced her to practise the cheat which I have described. Opportunities were favourable; I was absent, with a certainty of remaining away for yet some months. She had a surgeon and a nurse accessible to bribery, female dependents who were devoted to her, and I had left her with the illimitable command of funds. You understand the rest, — I need say no more.”

“Yes, there is something more for you to tell me,” answered Adolphus; then, after a pause, he said, and the words appeared to half choke him, “Whose son am I?”

"A poor family's who resided in some midland county which my wife traversed on her way to her friends in the north. This family, being heavily bribed, departed at once for America, — such immediate removal to a foreign clime being the paramount condition of the compact. They have never since been heard of, but still, as I just now said, there is always the possibility, if not the probability, of some of them turning up —"

"And the name of this family?" said Adolphus, quickly.

"I do not know it," replied the earl, "and I can give the most satisfactory reason in the world, — which is, that I never knew it. Even if the late countess intended to mention it, she did not, which is just the same thing as if she had never meant to tell me at all."

The old nobleman, having spoken in a serious and deliberate manner for some time, was now relapsing into his wonted frivolity, which only served to aggravate the bitterness of feelings experienced by the wretched Adolphus. The latter began to pace the library in an agitated manner, and vainly did he essay to collect his thoughts sufficiently for calm deliberation. It was a fearful blow which had struck him, and though the truth had been revealed slowly by his putative father, the effect was nevertheless as if it had smitten him with a most cruel abruptness. As we have already said, the only glimmer of light which penetrated into the darkness of his mind arose from the fact that his amour with Ethel had ceased to wear an incestuous aspect. But on the other hand, in what a position stood he? At any moment an accident might unmask him; some unforeseen circumstance might suddenly transpire to prove to the whole world that instead of being the rightful heir to the earldom and estates of Lascelles, he was in reality an interloper in the family.

"Now I suppose, Adolphus," said the earl, accosting him, "you will consent to marry your cousin Isabel, and I will ring the bell at once to let her know she is to send for the milliner and order the wedding-dress."

"No, no, for Heaven's sake act not thus precipitately!" exclaimed Adolphus. "At least give me four and twenty hours to reflect."

"Four and twenty hours to reflect," ejaculated the old nobleman. "Why, I never reflected for four and twenty hours running in all my life."

"It is impossible to come to an immediate decision," rejoined Adolphus, impatiently. "My feelings are so disturbed, my mind is so cruelly agitated — I beseech you, press me not now, but at this hour to-morrow —"

"Well, well, I see that I must humour you," said the old nobleman, "and it is natural enough you should be annoyed and excited to learn that you are not your father's son. But mind! to-morrow we shall set to work in good earnest to hurry on this bridal."

Adolphus made no response, but hastened from the room. He retired to his own chamber, and there gave way to his reflections. An hour did he thus remain in the companionship of those thoughts, and at the expiration of that interval, his mind appeared to have made up to some particular course. Descending to the drawing-room, he found the countess and Isabella seated together, and the former was at once struck by the strangeness of his looks. He inquired where the earl was, and learned that he had gone out in the carriage for an hour or two. Adolphus then made a sign for the countess to escape from Isabella's society, or get rid of her for a little while, on some pretext, and Ethel was therefore still further convinced that there was something exceedingly wrong. It was by no means difficult for Lady Lascelles to quit the apartment without exciting a suspicion on the part of the unsophisticated Isabella, and Adolphus speedily followed her.

They were now alone together in another sitting-room, and Ethel immediately said, "For Heaven's sake, Adolphus, relieve me from suspense! What has happened? Has the earl discovered everything? Is my deep, deep guilt known to him?"

"No, Ethel," was the young man's response; "and you are not so deeply guilty as you have hitherto believed yourself. A strange and terrible revelation has been made to me — In a word, I am not the earl's son."

It would be impossible to describe the astonishment experienced by Ethel on receiving this announcement, but the first thought that struck her as that feeling of amazement subsided was that the brain of Adolphus had become unsettled. When, however, he circumstantially detailed to her all that had passed between himself and the Earl of Lascelles, she perceived that it was indeed the truth which

he was telling her, and that he spoke rationally and sensibly. She then recollected that the old earl — when, in an exceedingly uxorious mood, instituting comparisons to her face between herself and his former countess, especially too when he was under the influence of wine — had more than once dropped a hint of some strange deception which that deceased wife of his had practised toward him, but from motives of delicacy Ethel had never pressed any inquiry on the point, and the earl himself had never gone beyond the vague hints just alluded to. Now, however, everything was explained, and in those very hints themselves the countess beheld a confirmation of the startling and wonderful tale which Adolphus had just related. She sat gazing upon him with illimitable love and compassion in her looks; the better feelings which had prompted her to write him the note so strenuously urging separation were all absorbed in the profound pity she experienced for him, and the excitement of so much sympathy could not do otherwise than resuscitate all the ardour of her passion. Perhaps, too, the knowledge that this passion had suddenly ceased to wear the doubly dark aspect it had previously borne to her contemplation was another strong reason wherefore her deep and devoted love should thus revive. Yes, she sat gazing upon him with looks of fondness and sympathy, but she spoke not; she knew not what words to say.

“Ethel,” at length said Adolphus, breaking this long silence, “after everything that has taken place between us, I could not settle my mind to any specific course without first consulting you.”

“I know not how to advise you, Adolphus,” answered the countess. “I am as much bewildered as, Heaven knows, you yourself must be!”

“To-morrow at midday,” said the young man, with a species of desperation in his looks, “I must notify my decision to the earl.”

“And that decision,” said Ethel, in a low, soft voice, but with the glitter of anxiety in her eyes, — “what will it be?”

“I see that you yourself feel,” responded Adolphus, “that I have but one course to adopt, — that there is no alternative but to yield to the earl’s wishes.”

A low shriek, or, rather, half-stifled scream burst from the lips of Ethel at these words evidently so altogether un-

expected by her, and Adolphus, with a sudden start, contemplated her in mingled surprise and terror.

"No, never, never, Adolphus," she exclaimed, springing up from her chair, her cheeks flushing and her eyes flashing with an almost frenzied excitement. "What! you marry Isabella? No, no! I could not live to behold you another's. But perhaps you have never loved me?" and as the thought smote her with a sudden anguish, she sank down again upon the chair weeping bitterly.

"Ethel, dearest Ethel," exclaimed the young man, throwing himself at her feet, seizing both her hands, and pressing them in fervour to his lips, "you know that I love you,—dearly, devotedly, madly love you. Wherefore, then, this cruel suspicion? Ah, think you that if I loved you not as much as my lips proclaim, I should have been enabled to stifle all good feelings in my heart at the time when I believed it was my own father's wife—"

"Enough, enough," cried Ethel, hysterically, and then with a sudden solemnity of look and manner, she added, in a low tone, "At all events we are rescued from that deep sense of stupendous guilt."

"Tell me what you would have me do, dearest Ethel," said Adolphus, "and your slightest word shall become the strongest law for me. But remember, dear Ethel, my position is not merely a painful one,—it is absolutely frightful."

"I know—I know it," exclaimed the countess, again speaking with a kind of hysterical frenzy, "and therefore it is impossible for me to advise you. Do what you will, but if your position be frightful, mine is almost desperate, and sooner than behold you compelled to lead another to the altar—"

She stopped short, and Adolphus was terrified by the strange, wild look of mingled frenzy and despair which for a few moments seemed stamped upon her countenance.

"Good heavens! what am I to do?" he exclaimed, starting up from his kneeling position at her feet, and beginning to pace the room with agitated and uneven steps. "I feel as if I were going mad."

"And I," cried the countess, in a thrilling voice, "feel as if I were mad already. Oh, why did I ever love you as I have done? Wherefore do I love you so passionately still?"

"Ethel, let us endeavour to be composed and reasonable," said Adolphus, at length resuming his seat by her side, and taking her hand as he looked with fond earnestness and imploring entreaty in her face. "I tell you that I neither will nor can take any step without your consent, but will you calmly envisage all the difficulties of the position in which I know we are placed?"

"Yes, yes, proceed," said the countess. "I am calm — I am reasonable," and yet she shivered visibly as if with a cold inward desperation.

"Would you, Ethel, that we should fly away together?" asked Adolphus. "No, I am sure you would not, for it would be ruin for us both. The earl in his rage would proclaim everything in respect to myself; I should become an outcast — penniless; and though God knows I shrink not from the idea of poverty on my own account, yet for your sake, Ethel, — oh, I could not endure to behold you, my beloved one, pining away in want."

"Think not of me," answered the countess, "for I could dare everything. But not for worlds would I have your true position proclaimed; not for worlds would I have you stripped of your rank, — scorned and spurned by those who have hitherto been your equals — No, no, I could not; it would kill me."

"You see, Ethel," continued Adolphus, "that what I said is right, and we cannot flee away together. But on the other hand I cannot remain here in the same position as before; the earl insists that I should marry Isabella. Neither can I carry out our original view and go abroad upon the Continent, because there again arises the consideration that the earl insists that I shall espouse Isabella."

"In a word, then," rejoined the countess, speaking in a voice of cold and unnatural calmness, "your position is reduced to these alternatives, — that you must either fly away with me, or remain to espouse Isabella. We have both agreed that the first of these alternatives is impossible, and I see therefore that you are endeavouring to make up your mind to the latter. Is it not so?"

"In the name of Heaven, Ethel, what else can I do?" asked Adolphus, with passionate vehemence.

"And Isabella, who loves Christian Ashton?" said the countess, still in the same voice as before.

"Did you ever for a moment fancy that this childish passion of theirs," exclaimed Adolphus, "would eventually come to anything? It was all very well that you and I availed ourselves of it for our own purposes, but could we in sober seriousness conceive that an earl's niece would be allowed to throw herself away upon this penniless youth?"

"And you could level your mind to the acceptance of a bride whose love you know to be bestowed upon another, and which very love you yourself have helped to fan?"

"Ethel, you are cruel — too cruel. You are goading me to desperation," and again Adolphus started up from his seat in a wild and excited manner. "Will you tell me," he demanded, after two or three rapid paces to and fro, — "will you tell me, Ethel, what course I am to pursue? for as there is a heaven above me, I see but one."

"Pursue it, then," said the countess; "pursue it, Adolphus, and may you be happy. But I — but I —"

"Oh, now you fill me with wretchedness again," and the young man literally wrung his hands in anguish.

"No, no, be not unhappy," responded the countess, and there was still an unnatural coldness in her look. "It is useless, Adolphus, to continue this scene; it is most painful for us both."

"Then, by Heaven," ejaculated the young man, vehemently, "I will not marry Isabella. I will take some step, — indeed I will do the very worst, rather than seal the unhappiness of your life."

"And I, Adolphus, would do the very worst also," rejoined the countess, "rather than live to behold you the husband of another."

Having thus spoken, Ethel abruptly quitted the room, and Adolphus continued to walk to and fro, but no longer in an agitated manner; it was with slow pace, sombre countenance, and downcast looks.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DEED OF A NIGHT

ADOLPHUS and Ethel did not meet again until the evening, and this was at the dinner-table, where the earl and Isabella were present. But it would almost seem as if they had by tacit consent composed their looks in such a manner that not even to each other should there linger the slightest trace to remind them of the painful scene which had occurred a few hours back. The earl, as a matter of course, suspected not for an instant that Adolphus had acquainted Ethel with the astounding revelation in respect to his birth, and it was naturally Ethel's policy and purpose to prevent her husband from surmising that any such revelation had been made to her. It is therefore easy to understand why she compelled herself to converse and smile as gaily as heretofore, and to wear a look as if she were labouring under no restraint. In the same way it was the policy as well as purpose of Adolphus to maintain his usual demeanour, so that the earl might believe him anxious to avoid the risk of showing the ladies by his looks that anything extraordinary had taken place.

As for Isabella, she was inwardly sad at having been compelled by a sense of duty to pen that note to Christian Ashton to which we have already alluded, and not being versed in the arts of dissimulation, she could not outwardly conceal this mournful pensiveness.

The dinner passed away, and when the ladies retired to the drawing-room, the earl accompanied them, — not from any particular motive, but merely because on this occasion he had no inclination to sit over his wine. Adolphus went out to take a short ramble by himself, for he again felt the necessity of giving way to his reflections. Thus the evening

passed without Adolphus and Ethel being left alone together even for a single instant.

We must observe, for the better comprehension of what is to follow, that the Countess of Lascelles still slept apart from her husband, and though the earl was becoming impatient of this separation of chambers, he had not as yet insisted that it should cease.

Night came; silence prevailed throughout the palatial mansion of the Earl of Lascelles. Were all sleeping there? Who can say? When the world retire to rest in the evening they know not what may transpire during the many hours of darkness ere they awaken to the light again. And during those hours what deeds of mystery and horror are often perpetrated. Wherefore to the timid-minded is night more or less terrible, even though their own consciences be without reproach? It is because they know that crime chooses the hour of darkness wherein to achieve its purpose; they know that guilt shrouds itself beneath that sombre veil when creeping stealthily along its path of iniquity. They know that if their intelligence can divest night of its superstitious terrors, yet that nevertheless real objects of horror are stalking abroad, and that the votaries of crime constitute frightful shapes. They know that murder and burglary and violence of every description are fearfully personified during the hours of darkness, and that the breeze which sighs or that the wind which howls around their dwellings may be wafting the last low moan or else the loud cry of the murdered victim's agony. Yes, night has its terrors; it is peopled with fearful shapes, and the dark passions of man accomplish all this.

The night passed, and morning dawned upon the palatial mansion of the Earl of Lascelles. It was a beautiful day to which that night had thus given birth; the beams of the Orient sun shone upon the emerald verdure of the gardens, and made the fruitage glow as if gems were appended to every bough. The birds were carolling in the trees; window after window on the domestics' story was opened to admit the breeze of morn, as the occupants of those rooms rose from their couches to apparel themselves for the work of another day. And now a little later, as eight o'clock approached, the casements of other chambers were opened, — Isabella's here, that of Adolphus there and Ethel's on the ground floor. The draperies fluttered gently to that softly

breathing zephyr, which carried the blithe song of birds upon its wing, and, penetrating to every ear, might have infused serene happiness into every heart.

But, ah! what horrible rumour is this which toward nine o'clock begins to circulate like wildfire throughout the palatial mansion? Has murder been doing its dread work during the darkness of the past night? Or is it some frightful error? No; it is all but too true, and the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles has been made the victim of a foul and mysterious assassination.

It appeared, from the statement of Makepeace, that he went as usual to his master's suite of rooms a little before nine o'clock, and that on entering the bedchamber, he was horrified on beholding the sheet deluged with blood. He approached, and found the earl lying on his back, with his throat literally cut from ear to ear. Seized with a mortal terror, he rushed forth on the landing, and raised that cry of murder, which awaking such terrible echoes, speedily reverberated throughout the mansion. Then the other servants began flocking thither, with ghastly horror depicted on their countenances; Adolphus, the countess, and Isabella, from their own respective chambers, sped with wild distracted looks in the same direction, and that morning of such serene blissfulness out of doors was one fraught with dread confusion, trouble, mystery, and affright within those walls.

Who could have done the deed? Where was the weapon with which it was accomplished? This was not to be found. The nearest surgeon of the neighbourhood, who was quickly sent for, and who was speedily on the spot, declared that the earl must have been dead some hours, and that it was consequently in the depth of the night when the red right arm of Murder bared itself for this tremendous deed. Furthermore, the medical authority affirmed that the fatal wound was inflicted by some very sharp instrument, but that from certain appearances, he was convinced it was not with a razor, — his opinion being that it was a large knife. Whatever the instrument were, death must have been instantaneous; the unfortunate old nobleman must have died almost without a groan. But that instrument, as we have already said, was not to be found, and when the police arrived upon the spot, nothing was discovered to attach suspicion to any particular individual. Every room throughout the

mansion was strictly searched; Adolphus, the countess, and Isabella desiring that theirs might form no exception, as they did not choose to draw a line of demarcation between themselves and the domestics under such circumstances. But in none of the many apartments of that house was there discovered the slightest scintillation of a clue to the assassin. Yet the conviction was strong that the perpetrator of the deed must be an inmate of the mansion. No burglarious entry had been effected; no door had been forced, no window had been found open, when the servants first descended from their own chambers. If therefore the assassin was not a dweller within those walls, could he have been secreted for hours beneath the earl's bed awaiting his opportunity to commit the dreadful crime? But in that case, how did he escape after the deed was done? Certainly not during the night, for, as already stated, no door nor window was found open in the morning, and such assassin could not have slipped forth from the premises after the servants had risen without being perceived by those who were moving about within the walls, or by the gardeners in the grounds. No, it appeared incontestable that the murderer was an inmate of the mansion, but on whom could suspicion alight? There seemed to be no reason to imagine that any one had a motive for such a crime; or at least such was the opinion formed by the police after carefully and minutely inquiring into the case.

But if the author of the deed were thus involved in an obscurity which seemed impenetrable, not less mysterious was the motive itself. Could it have been plunder? There was no evidence in the earl's suite of apartments that a single thing of any value had been removed. His purse, containing some thirty or forty pounds in notes and gold, was on the toilet-table, as were his superb watch and massive chain, his diamond rings, and several other articles of jewelry. A box containing other jewels stood on a chest of drawers, and though unlocked, it had not been rifled. Plunder therefore was assuredly not the assassin's object. Then, what could have been his motive? Private vengeance? No, this idea seemed altogether incompatible with the harmless, frivolous, inoffensive character of the murdered nobleman. The mystery was great; it seemed as if it would remain impenetrable. In ninety-nine cases out of every hundred where a foul crime has been committed, suspicion at once

attaches itself to some individual; the circumstances of the deed present a clue, or there is a known motive which might have influenced the suspected person. But in the present case there was nothing of all this, — no clue left behind by any want of caution on the assassin's part, no visible object which any one had to gain by such a deed, no known motive that might have served as an impulse to any particular individual.

After the discovery of the terrific crime, the Countess of Lascelles was borne in a swoon back to her own chamber, whence she had hurried to the tragic scene, as above described. Isabella, on learning that it was all too true, likewise fell into unconsciousness, and was conveyed to her apartment, — a serious indisposition supervening. Adolphus appeared most profoundly horrified and shocked, and for some hours he was quite incapable of issuing any instructions. Makepeace bewailed the loss of the master who had always been so kind and indulgent to him, and all the other servants of that extensive establishment seemed to be stricken with consternation and grief. Indeed these feelings appeared to be universal within those walls, and yet many doubtless said to themselves, "There must be one accomplished dissembler amongst us, — one being whose hypocrisy is as perfect as his crime is tremendous."

It was therefore a fearful thing for those who were innocent, to be compelled thus to reason within themselves. As one looked upon another, he said to himself, "At this moment I may be gazing on the assassin," and that other was with equal probability saying the same thing within his own heart as he looked in the face of the former. Such a state of things aggravated the horror, the dismay, and the consternation which prevailed throughout the house; yet no one offered to leave it, for such a proceeding, by itself alone, might have at once drawn down suspicion on the head of such person.

There was a coroner's inquest, but nothing transpired to throw the faintest light on this appalling mystery. The proceedings terminated without affixing the remotest suspicion upon any individual. Not a garment had been found bearing a blood-stain in any room, save that where the tragedy itself occurred; no knife, nor weapon of any other description, had been specially pointed at as the one which

had been used by the murderer's hand. The tragedy created an immense sensation out-of-doors; the mystery in which it was enveloped struck with awe the myriad readers of newspapers. Everything appeared to be out of the ordinary course in reference to this foul crime, for not even did the whisper of scandal suggest a single name as that of the probable author of the deed. Conjecture itself was stupefied, — surmise was prostrate. It appeared to be one of those deeds which, terrible in their mystery and inscrutable in their motive, now and then occur upon the theatre of the world as if to prove that things may take place on earth defying the power of man to fathom, and which are to remain entombed in darkness until the finger of Heaven for its own wise purposes shall draw aside the veil and bring all to light.

Throughout the day when the murder was discovered and the two following ones, the Countess of Lascelles kept her chamber, — a physician being in almost constant attendance upon her, as she was in a state of fever, and frequently hysterical. The Earl of Lascelles — as we must now denominate Adolphus, for he refused not to adopt the rank to which the world believed him entitled, and which there seemed nobody to dispute — kept his own room for the greater portion of the first day, but on the second he attended at the inquest, and afterward he assumed the position of head of the establishment. But he appeared deeply to feel the terrific tragedy which had taken place; his countenance bore every indication of profound sorrow, his step was languid and slow, his voice was mournful and subdued; he appeared as if he were merely exerting a little energy for duty's sake, but that it cost him the most painful efforts to do so. As for poor Isabella, she continued seriously indisposed, and we may as well here remark at once that it was not until after the funeral of her deceased uncle that she crossed the threshold of her own apartment.

But it was before that funeral took place — and on the fourth day following the night of the mysterious murder — that Adolphus and Ethel met for the first time since the moment when, on the morning of the foul deed's discovery, they had rushed from their respective chambers to the scene of the crime to ascertain whether the frightful intelligence which had reached them was indeed true. It was in the drawing-room that they now met on this fourth day, as

above stated, and they were alone there together. Ethel had so far recovered that she was enabled to ascend without assistance to that apartment, but she was much changed, — the colour had totally forsaken her cheeks, which were haggard and sunken, and the sable garments which she wore, together with the snowy white cap of widowhood, made her look more ghostlike still. We have already said that Adolphus was changed likewise, and his mourning garb threw out in ghastlier relief the pallor of his own countenance.

Ethel was in that drawing-room first, and she was half-reclining on the sofa when Adolphus — now Earl of Lascelles — slowly opened the door and made his appearance. Strange indeed was the look which these two beings threw upon each other, and these looks were precisely similar in their expression. It was with mingled horror, aversion, and reproach that Ethel looked upon Adolphus; it was with mingled horror, aversion, and reproach that Adolphus looked upon Ethel. But the next instant the aspect of each countenance changed; Ethel looked with surprise upon Adolphus, as if she had expected another species of gaze on his part, and Adolphus looked with surprise on Ethel, as if her own gaze had equally astonished him.

He walked slowly up to her, and fixing his eyes upon her, said, in a low deep voice, "Ethel, you have sold your soul to Satan on my account."

"What, Adolphus," she exclaimed, "is it possible that you dare hurl the terrific weight of your own crime upon me?"

"Ethel," quickly rejoined Adolphus, "this is outrageous — this is horrible."

"Adolphus," retorted the countess, "this is playing the part of unheard-of villainy, to impute your crime to me."

"Good God!" murmured the Earl of Lascelles, staggering back as he pressed his hand to his brow, "do I hear aright? Or am I dreaming?"

"Adolphus," said Ethel, "of what use is this shocking hypocrisy on your part? Methought when you first entered the room that your looks would quail in my presence —"

"Woman, this is intolerable," interrupted Adolphus, fiercely grasping Ethel's arm. "It was I who thought that you would not dare look me in the face."

"Unhand me, murderer," cried the countess, recoiling as if with a strong shudder from his touch.

"Murderess," literally growled Adolphus, with savage ferocity. "Beautiful as you once were, you are now loathsome to my eyes."

"Monster," retorted Ethel, with keenest bitterness, "you are horrible as a fiend in my sight."

There was nearly a minute's silence, during which those two beings gazed upon each other, with the strongest feelings of horror, aversion, and loathing expressed in their countenances. Their eyes appeared to burn; yet they did not shoot forth fitful glances; it was with a steady fire shining from the eyes of one toward the eyes of the other, transfusing mutual abhorrence. Yet neither seemed to dare avert those eyes from the other, lest it should be thought there was quailing and cowardice, for whatever the truth might be, very certain it was that Adolphus chose to affix the crime upon Ethel, while Ethel seemed equally resolute in affixing it upon Adolphus.

"You dare stand before me thus?" said the countess, at length breaking silence; "you dare meet my regards thus steadily, when your own heart tells you that you are a murderer?"

"And you, Ethel," retorted the Earl of Lascelles, "exhibit such a spectacle of brazen female hardihood that fills me with even more astonishment than your capability of committing the crime itself, for your conscience all the while is whispering that you are a murderess."

"Oh," exclaimed Ethel, quivering visibly from head to foot, "that there should be such a power of hypocrisy in man. What earthly purpose does it serve you to deny your crime in my presence, when you know that, considering all the past, I dare not betray you?"

"Come, Ethel," responded Adolphus, "at least let this scene of hideous mockery terminate. Confess your guilt, for you likewise know that I dare not betray you."

"Wretch! coward — thus to treat a woman," cried Ethel.

"Ah! but if that woman, being a murderess," retorted Adolphus, "brings it all upon herself."

"You are driving me to madness," exclaimed the countess, stamping her foot upon the floor. "Does not all evidence brand you with the guilt of this stupendous crime? Were

not your parting words to me, on the day preceding the night of that crime, that sooner than marry Isabella you would do the very worst?"

"Ah! but you, Ethel, echoed those words," retorted Adolphus; "and you declared that sooner than see me lead Isabella to the altar, you would do the very worst. Methought at the time you alluded to suicide —"

"And I did," ejaculated Ethel, vehemently. "But I, on my part, thought at the time that you meant to dare my husband's anger and vengeance even to the uttermost —"

"And I did mean all that," exclaimed Adolphus. "I meant that sooner than wed Isabella after all you had said, I would flee away to the Continent and let the earl expose, repudiate, discard me if he thought fit. Yes, that was my meaning. But yours, Ethel, was very, very different."

"No, Adolphus, as God is my judge," cried the countess, passionately, "I swear —"

"For Heaven's sake add not perjury and blasphemy," interrupted Adolphus, with an air of horror and affright, "to the other stupendous crime! For it is I who swear — I who take God to witness —"

"No, no," almost shrieked forth Ethel, "become not a perjurer; become not a blasphemer."

It was now the Earl of Lascelles who stamped his foot with rage, and he began pacing the room like a lion chafing in his den, while Ethel took shorter but not less agitated walks to and fro on the hearth-rug.

"Adolphus," she at length said, abruptly stopping him, and looking fixedly upon his countenance, "you seem to have forgotten that you told me the tale of that interview with the earl, when he revealed to you that you were not his son. Oh, be not thus obstinate. Remain silent, if you will, but do not — do not persevere in a course as dreadful as it is dastard. Do not, by attributing the crime to me, for an instant entertain the hope that you can make me think it was not your hand which really perpetrated it. Had you not every motive? Were you not trembling at the idea of losing rank, position, fortune? Did you not therefore say to yourself that you would for ever silence the lips that alone could tell the tale, for you knew that mine were already sealed by that guilty love which had subsisted between us."

"If I have listened to you in silence," responded Adolphus,

"it is not that my blood has ceased to boil with indignant impatience. Ethel, Ethel, it is you who thus with a detestable dissimulation persevere in attributing the crime to me, — it is you, I say, who hope to make me fancy that you really did not perpetrate that crime. You speak of motives: you had every motive. Think you that I comprehend not the terrific jealousy which swayed your heart when I spoke of wedding Isabella? Ah, confess that it was through love of me you did this deed, — confess it, Ethel, and I will pardon you, but for Heaven's sake persevere not in ascribing it unto me!"

"I also, Adolphus, have curbed my impatience," answered the countess, "that I might give you a fair chance for retraction, confession, and atonement, but you are obstinate. Now listen. We will not blind our eyes to the fact that the crime rests between us two, for no other living being had a motive in perpetrating it. It was therefore I or you who committed it, and you know, Adolphus, that it was yourself."

"Ah, Ethel, you have indeed said truly," he exclaimed, "that it lies between us two, but you will not look me much longer in the face and with such astounding dissimulation deny that all the guilt was wholly and solely yours!"

The countess literally ground her teeth with rage, and then she muttered, in a voice that was hoarse with the same feeling, "Miscreant, you know that you are a murderer."

"No, fiend in female shape! it is you who are a murderer," and having spoken, the Earl of Lascelles walked abruptly forth from the room.

The countess flung herself upon the sofa, and gave way to bitterest weeping and most convulsing sobs.

CHAPTER XXII

CHRISTINA AND THE AYAH

THREE weeks had elapsed since the visit which Madame Angelique paid to the Princess Indora, and the Oriental lady had not as yet carried her project into execution with regard to Oaklands. The Duke of Marchmont had been suddenly called out of town on some particular business, and thus Madame Angelique had found no opportunity of communicating with him. She had written a note to this effect to the Princess Indora, at the same time that she sent home the European costumes which her Highness had ordered.

Three weeks, too, had elapsed since that visit which Christina paid to Zoe, and when she had every reason to believe that this amiable lady suspected the passion which her husband cherished for our heroine. Christina had been very unhappy since that date, but she had endeavoured to conceal her feelings as much as possible from the princess, though the latter on three or four occasions kindly questioned her whether she had not something which troubled her mind? Christina gave evasive responses, and these tended to confirm Indora's suspicion that her young friend was not altogether happy.

Accordingly, one day when they were seated together in the elegantly furnished drawing-room, the princess said, in a gentle voice, and with a look of the most benevolent sympathy, "I am afraid, my dear Christina, that you have something which is preying upon your mind? If it be so, tell me; hesitate not to make a confidante of me. I am your friend, I love you, and I wish you well."

"I am deeply grateful to your ladyship," answered Christina, "for the many, many kindnesses which I ex-

perience at your hands; I have every reason to be happy beneath your roof —”

“Perhaps you miss the society in which you were wont to mingle when at Lady Octavian Meredith’s? Here it must be dull for you —”

“Oh, no, far from it,” exclaimed Christina, hoping to divert the conversation into some other channel. “I love the life which I am leading here —”

“I know that you always speak with sincerity,” observed the princess, “and therefore my mind is at ease on that point. Indeed,” she added, with a smile, “your time is well occupied, for you make occupation for yourself. It is exceedingly kind of you to take so much pains in teaching Sagoonah to read English accurately, but are you sure that she does not take advantage of your kindness?”

“Oh, no, my lady,” exclaimed the amiable Christina. “Sagoonah is so willing a pupil that I experience the utmost delight in instructing her. I had not been many days in your ladyship’s house, before I saw that Sagoonah was most anxious to make herself thoroughly acquainted with the English language. She had already a very tolerable idea of my native tongue, but she wished to be able to read it, and your ladyship would be surprised, if you now heard her at the progress she has made.”

“I have no doubt of it,” observed Indora, “for she is a young woman of remarkable intelligence.”

At this moment the object of the conversation entered the room to make some announcement to her mistress, and those three females constituted a group which the eye of even an anchorite could not have surveyed with indifference. The Princess Indora, in her superbly picturesque garb, and with her magnificent charms, half-reclining upon the velvet cushions of the sofa, the ayah, with her darker style of loveliness, standing before her in that attitude of respectful attention which she was wont to adopt, and the youthful Christina, invested with that exquisite virginal beauty which rendered her a being so well calculated to excite the tenderest interest, — these three, we repeat, being thus grouped, would have formed an admirable subject for the pencil of the artist.

An hour after that conversation between the princess and Christina, we shall find the latter seated in another room,

in company with Sagoonah, who was engaged in the practice of her English reading. Here was another interesting spectacle, — that Hindu woman, evidently exerting all her powers to render herself proficient in the task which that beautiful English maiden was so willingly superintending. And when Christina bestowed well-deserved praises upon her pupil, the superb dark eyes of the latter lighted up to an almost preternatural lustre, flashing with joy and triumph at the progress which she thus made.

A few hours later the night has come, and Christina is alone in her own chamber at the princess's villa. It was half-past ten o'clock, and the maiden had not long retired thither. She sat down at the toilet-table, while combing out the masses of her raven hair, but gradually she fell into a profound reverie, her hands sank upon her knees, the comb dropped without her perceiving it, and her hair remained floating all dishevelled upon her shoulders and down her back, lower than her waist. There were several topics which thus engaged Christina's profound meditation. She thought of Zoe, — the amiable, the interesting, the kind-hearted lady, who she feared had been making the most dreadful sacrifice of her own feelings rather than suffer her husband to perceive that she had fathomed the secret of the love which he entertained for another. Then Christina thought of this love which Lord Octavian cherished toward herself; she strove to conjure up a feeling which might satisfy her that she was annoyed and indignant at being the object of this love, but she could not thus far do violence to the tender sentiment which existed with a certain degree of reciprocity in her own heart. Then she thought of her brother who a little while previously had lost his situation with the Earl of Lascelles, and had not as yet obtained another, and then her reflections turned, with mingled awe and horror, upon the mysterious death of that unfortunate nobleman.

Christina's reverie thus lasted for a long time, and when she gradually aroused herself from it, and consulted her watch, — which was a gift from the Princess Indora, — she perceived that it was past eleven o'clock. She was hastening to continue her night-toilet, and in another quarter of an hour was ready to retire to rest. But just as she was about to extinguish her candle, she thought she heard the sounds

of footsteps descending the stairs from the floor above that on which her own chamber was situated. They were steps so light and airy that only the keenest sense of hearing could have caught them, and Christina felt convinced that the tread was the stealthy one of a person not wishing to be overheard. A vague terror seized upon her, for she all in a moment remembered that warning letter which Mr. Redcliffe had sent to the princess, and which her Highness had shown her about three weeks back. That letter, as the reader will remember, was to the effect that some evil-disposed persons might probably seek to inveigle Indora or the ayah Sagoonah into a snare, and as the pure-minded Christina was too unsophisticated and inexperienced to be enabled to fathom the real significance of Mr. Redcliffe's allusion, her imagination naturally excited this vague terror which now seized upon her. She drew close toward the door, and listened with suspended breath. Again she caught the sounds of footsteps; they were now descending the lower flight, and in a few moments they ceased. She endeavoured to calm herself with the idea that it might be Sagoonah, or one of the other female servants, descending for some purpose, but if so, wherefore that evidently studied stealthiness of tread? as it was not so very late that the fear of awakening the household need be entertained. Perhaps Christina was rendered somewhat nervous and apprehensive by having reflected on the mysterious murder of the Earl of Lascelles, and this impression being strong on her mind — together with the recollection, so vividly conjured up, of Mr. Redcliffe's warning letter — naturally filled her with vague misgivings and with a dread of some unknown danger.

She opened the door gently, and again listened. All was now still. She thought of retiring to rest, but scarcely had she closed the door again when that mysterious terror came back with renewed force, and she felt that she could not possibly sleep, nor even lie tranquilly in her couch, unless she were reassured in respect to the safety of the premises. She remained at the door to listen if the footsteps would return, but a quarter of an hour passed, and all continued quiet. She thought of going to the princess's chamber and telling her what she had heard, but then she reflected that if her apprehensions should prove groundless, she would feel humiliated and look foolish at having given way to such

terror. But she thought she might at all events ascend to the female servants' chambers to see if they were there, for the conviction was strong in her mind that she had heard footsteps descending, and that they had not ascended again. Enveloping herself in a muslin wrapper, and taking the candle in her hand, she proceeded up-stairs with a tread as light as if she were a spirit gliding. On reaching the landing above, she saw that Sagoonah's chamber door stood open, and on entering, she found that Sagoonah herself was not there. They were therefore the ayah's footsteps that she had heard, but why was she thus long absent? The thought now struck Christina that Sagoonah must be ill, and she went down-stairs, still with the same noiseless tread as before, in order not to disturb the princess. A light was issuing from the boudoir, the door of which stood open. Christina advanced, and looking in, beheld Sagoonah bending over one of the huge volumes of the *Times* newspaper, which were kept in that room. The Hindu woman had her back toward the door; the volume was spread open upon the table, and she was evidently so absorbed in its contents that she did not catch the rustling of Christina's dress.

The first thought which struck our artless young heroine was that the ayah experienced such an ardent longing to render herself proficient in the English tongue that she was even inclined to sacrifice a portion of her night's rest to the prosecution of her studies, but all of a sudden she was startled by the vehement manner in which Sagoonah gave utterance to something in her own native tongue, and which was therefore incomprehensible to the maiden. At the same time Sagoonah stood up from her previously leaning posture, and glancing around, so strange a light flashed from her eyes on beholding Christina that the latter was absolutely terrified. There was an expression of rage too on the ayah's countenance, where the rich red blood mantled through the duskiness of her complexion, but instantaneously composing herself, she placed her finger to her lips of vivid vermilion, to enjoin silence. Then beckoning Christina to enter the boudoir, she gently closed the door.

"What made you seek me, Miss Ashton?" asked the ayah, in a voice which though perfectly respectful, nevertheless displayed a firm resolution to have her query satisfied; then, suddenly recollecting something, she hastened to close

the volume, as if to prevent Christina from seeing what particular part of the huge file she had been reading.

"I heard footsteps descending the stairs," answered Christina; "they did not reascend; I was alarmed. I went up to your room. Not finding you there, I thought you were ill, and with this apprehension I came to see if I could be of any service to you."

While the maiden was thus speaking, Sagoonah's luminous dark eyes were riveted upon her, as if to read into the very depths of her soul, and thus glean whether she were truly explaining her motives. But it was impossible to doubt Christina's sincerity; her looks were artlessness itself, and Sagoonah was satisfied.

"You must do me a favour, Miss Ashton," she said, "and that is, not to mention to the princess that you found me reading one of these great books. Her Highness would be very angry with me, and I am sure you would not wish to draw down her displeasure upon my head."

"I certainly should be sorry to do anything of the kind," answered the maiden, "but I think you must be in error to suppose that your good-hearted mistress would be offended —"

"She would," Sagoonah emphatically responded, as she thus interrupted our heroine.

"Then if you are conscious of an indiscretion," said Christina, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "wherefore did you commit it?"

"Do not ask me, Miss Ashton!" rejoined the Hindu woman, and again there was a sinister flashing in her burning, haunting eyes. "Promise me the favour which I have requested, and you know not with what deep gratitude I shall regard you."

"Rest assured, Sagoonah," replied our heroine, "I shall not travel out of my way to do you an injury. But my pledge is given with the understanding that you do not repeat that which, according to your own words, you know to be an indiscretion."

"I will not repeat it," answered Sagoonah, "and I thank you, Miss Ashton, for your kindness."

They then issued together from the boudoir, and cautiously ascending the stairs, separated to their respective chambers. But Christina could not help thinking it strange that the

Princess Indora was likely to be offended if it came to her knowledge that her Hindu attendant made use of her progress in her English studies to peep into those files of the *Times*.

On the following morning Christina received a note from Zoe, requesting her if possible to call upon her in the course of that day. It was most affectionately worded, but made not the slightest allusion to Lord Octavian. It informed Christina that the health of the writer continued to be very bad, and that the physician had ordered her to go abroad for change of air.

"If Zoe be really acquainted with her husband's unfortunate love for me," said our heroine to herself, "I can scarcely think that she would invite me to the house, unless perfectly confident that Lord Octavian will not be present. Therefore I will go."

In order to do Christina full justice, we must observe that if she had for a moment fancied she would meet Lord Octavian at the house in the Regent's Park, she would not have gone; she would have even preferred the alternative of appearing ungrateful and unkind to Zoe. She showed the letter to the princess, who at once gave her assent, and placed the carriage at Christina's disposal. On reaching her destination, she found Zoe alone in the drawing-room, and the amiable girl was shocked by her friend's appearance. Pale, ill, and languid as she was on the former occasion, she looked infinitely more sickly now. She was reclining upon a sofa, and it was with a visible effort she raised herself up to a sitting posture to greet our heroine.

"My dear Zoe, you are indeed very ill," said Christina, the tears starting from her eyes as she embraced her friend.

"Yes, I suffer much — from indisposition," responded Zoe, in the mild voice of completest resignation, "and as I told you in my letter, I am going abroad. Those whose assent it was necessary to obtain have given it, and I shall depart with as little delay as possible."

Zoe evidently alluded to her father and her husband, but Christina was struck by the manner in which she thus spoke of them, as if she studiously yet delicately avoided the mention of Lord Octavian's name.

"I think I shall go to the south of France or to Italy," continued Zoe, "and perhaps a more genial climate may

restore me, or perhaps," she added, with a mild sadness, "I may find a tomb beneath the sunny sky of the South."

"Good Heaven, Zoe! talk not thus despondingly," exclaimed Christina, the tears now gushing forth from her eyes. "You will recover, — rest assured that you will recover. It is all the effect of that accident. But now you are weeping."

"And are not you weeping, my sweet friend?" asked Zoe, smiling with a soft sadness through her tears. "Come, let us endeavour to cheer each other. I do not think that I shall see you again before I leave England, and it was to bid you farewell that I asked you to visit me to-day. I am rejoiced you have come. I have a little token of my regard for you. Remain here while I go and fetch it."

With these words, Lady Octavian Meredith rose from the sofa, and slowly quitted the room, her every movement indicating languor and lassitude of the frame. Christina was deeply affected by Zoe's appearance, and she had indeed a misgiving lest her health had received a shock which it would never recover. She had remained barely a couple of minutes alone, when the door opened, and Lord Octavian Meredith made his appearance. There was hurry and trouble and wildness in his whole manner, and hastily accosting our heroine, he abruptly exclaimed, "Christina, I am half-mad. That angel wife of mine has no doubt penetrated the secret of the love with which you have inspired me, — that love is consuming me —"

At first Christina was filled with confusion and trepidation at the sudden appearance of Octavian, the next moment she was terrified by his manner; but now she said, in an agitated voice, "My lord, I beseech you not to address me in these terms. It is an insult to that wife of yours who is indeed the angel you declare her to be."

"But you must hear me, Christina," replied Octavian, who was labouring under the most powerful excitement. "To whom else can I address myself on such a subject, if not to you, — you whom she loves, you who are her friend —"

"My lord, for the very reason that your amiable wife regards me as a friend —"

"Christina, it is useless for you to treat me thus. Good heavens, your coldness kills me. Those who love can

recognize love in others, and I know that I am not altogether indifferent to you."

"My lord, I can hear no more," exclaimed our heroine, with burning blushes upon her cheeks, and she moved toward the door.

"Recollect," he said, hastening to intercept her passage, "if you leave the room thus abruptly Zoe will inquire the reason, and you will have to inform her that I have insulted you, that I have outraged your delicacy, and what a dagger will this be to drive deep down into her heart."

"Good heavens, in what a position are you placing me!" murmured Christina, so painfully affected, so bewildered, perplexed, and even anguished, that she knew not what to do.

"Christina, I tell you that I am half-mad," hastily rejoined Lord Octavian Meredith. "That angel in human shape is making every sacrifice of feeling for my sake. She knows that I love another, but she does all she can to prevent me from suspecting that she has that knowledge which is preying upon her very vitals. And now she is going abroad, and she will not allow me to accompany her."

"My lord," interrupted Christina, vehemently, and even with passion, "it would be infamous, it would be abominable on your part, to allow your wife to go alone in search of that health which you yourself have destroyed, and which, alas! alas! she may perhaps never regain."

"I take God to witness," cried Meredith, still labouring under the strongest excitement, "that I have implored and entreated, I have prayed and besought Zoe to permit me to go with her, but she will not. Mild, submissive, and meek in all other respects as she is, she shows herself firm and decided upon this one point. But, oh, the pretexts and excuses which in her magnanimity of soul she invents. She declares that to drag me after her, weak and languid as she is, to have the continued consciousness that I am enchained to an invalid wife, would only render her Continental travel a punishment to herself rather than a means of working a benefit. No, she will not allow me, and she has even succeeded in persuading her father that to regain her health she must go alone."

"My lord," cried Christina, again speaking vehemently

and passionately, "if you do not accompany her ladyship you will be guilty of a cruelty so abhorrent—"

"That it will even make you hate me?" he said, in a voice which was hoarse with the excitement of his harrowed feelings. "By Heaven, it will only require that to impel me to suicide at once."

"My lord!" half-shrieked Christina.

"Oh, yes, I tell you that I am well-nigh mad," ejaculated the young nobleman, and he passionately tossed the rich clusters of his hair away from his throbbing brows. "You know not how much I have suffered since you were here last, — three mortal weeks of one long agony. Heaven can attest that I have striven, oh, I have striven to do my duty toward Zoe, and to banish you from my memory —"

"My lord," cried Christina, "your language as a married man is an offence and an insult to my ears. You know that I dare not leave the room for fear that your angel wife should suspect how you are treating me, and therefore your conduct is cruel, most ungenerous. It amounts to a persecution, and I entreat — no, I command you to be silent."

"Oh, give me your hatred, Christina, if you will," exclaimed the young nobleman, who did indeed appear as if he were going mad, "rather than your cold indifference. Am I to blame because I have no control over my own feelings? No, no, it were monstrous to judge me thus harshly. Christina," he continued, in a milder manner, "I tell you again and again that I have striven to do my duty toward Zoe. I have forced myself to dwell upon all her goodness, her amiability, and, what is more, upon the sublime generosity of her disposition; I have endeavoured to catch the transfusion of that love which she cherishes for me — but in all these have I failed. Now, am I to be blamed for this? No, no, I am to be pitied, and you see before you the most miserable wretch upon the face of the earth."

It were impossible to describe the feelings which agitated the young maiden as she listened to Octavian's speech. It affected her almost to tears, and yet her virgin modesty was offended that he should suffer her, however distantly, to understand that it was his love for her which prevented him from performing his duty to his wife. She could not help pitying him from the very bottom of her soul, at the same time that she felt she ought not to listen to the language he

was uttering. She would have flown from the room, but the strong reason already specified compelled her to remain there. Never was her situation so painful, and she could have thrown herself upon the seat to give vent to her feelings in tears, only that she dreaded lest Zoe should suddenly make her appearance. Ah! but a thought struck her.

"My lord," she hastily said, "Zoe was to be absent but for a minute, and twenty have elapsed since she left the room. She may be ill, and I go to succour her."

"Stay!" cried Octavian, "stay!" and he seized her hand.

"Not another second! Unhand me, my lord!" cried Christina, proudly.

The next instant the door closed behind the agitated girl; but scarcely had she thus passed out upon the landing, when she caught the sounds of rapid footsteps ascending the flight leading to the upper story, — footsteps so light that they were only just audible. A sickening sensation seized upon Christina. What if Zoe had been listening? Rapid as the lightning casts its blaze upon the entire canopy of heaven did the damsel review her own conduct during the wildly agitating scene with Octavian Meredith, and she saw that she had not given utterance to a single word that she could now wish unspoken. On the contrary, every syllable that had issued from her own lips was precisely such as she would have uttered if able at the time deliberately to ponder what she was about to say. With this consciousness of perfect recititude of behaviour, her presence of mind was completely regained, her strength of purpose was recovered, and she ascended to Zoe's chamber.

She found Lady Octavian Meredith seated in an easy chair, with a languid and enfeebled appearance, but otherwise with an air of serene composure.

"It must have been a servant whose footsteps I heard," was the thought which rapidly traversed Christina's brain, "for if Zoe had been listening, she could not possibly thus dissemble."

"Pardon me, my dearest friend," said Lady Octavian, in that sweetly soft plaintive voice which for some time past had been habitual to her, "pardon me for having thus long left you to yourself, but I was seized with such a sense of exhaustion that I was compelled to sit down and rest. Here,

Christina, accept this trifle from one who loves you," and she presented our heroine with a locket of choicest workmanship, and containing some of her own hair.

Christina pressed it to her lips, and then, obeying some strong impulse, she sank upon her knees, took Zoe's hand, and covered it with her kisses and her tears. She sobbed audibly, but spoke not, and yet there was a world of eloquence in the whole proceeding on her part, for not more plainly could the meaning of her almost involuntary conduct have been expressed if she had exclaimed, " Pardon me, dearest Zoe! I know that I am the cause — though Heaven can attest how innocently — of all you suffer."

Yet those words were not spoken, and whether Zoe comprehended the silent eloquence of the weeping and kneeling maiden's proceeding must be left for the reader to conjecture. Certain it is that Lady Octavian wound her arms around Christina's neck, strained her to her bosom, sobbed and wept likewise, and thus were their farewells expressed.

When Christina again found herself in the carriage, as it bore her homeward, she could scarcely recollect how she had reached it after that parting scene with the amiable lady whom she feared that she should never behold again. Profound was the affliction which Christina experienced, and on regaining the villa she hastened up to her own chamber, where she once more gave way to the wild outpouring of her anguish.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE EXPLANATION OF A PLOT

It was evening, and Madame Angelique was seated in her elegantly furnished room, the table well spread with dessert and wine. It was evident she expected somebody, for she frequently consulted her watch, murmuring to herself, "This note specified nine punctually, and it is considerably past."

At length the door opened and a domestic announced the Duke of Marchmont.

"I know it is shameful to keep a lady waiting," said his Grace, with a sort of forced good-humoured jocularly, "but I was detained at the club where I dined."

"Better late than never, my lord," responded Madame Angelique, "and now if your Grace would honour me by taking a glass of wine, I will explain how I have progressed in a certain matter in which your Grace is interested."

"Is it that of the Indian lady?" inquired the duke, as he helped himself to some wine. "By Heaven, I hope your answer will be in the affirmative, though I care not even if it should be to tell me that the hope points toward that ayah of hers, for the magnificent beauty of the one is equalled by the darker glory of the other's."

"Ah, then you have seen them, my lord?" ejaculated Madame Angelique, with a smile of satisfaction.

"You had so piqued my curiosity a few weeks ago, when you renewed the subject one night that I was here —"

"That your Grace went and laid wait at Bayswater to catch a glimpse of them in their carriage, eh, my lord?" said the milliner, with an arch smile.

"Precisely so," responded Marchmont, "and I was so interested that I went a second time. On the first occasion

I beheld the lady and her ayah, and, good heavens, what wondrous beauty on the part of each! The second time I saw the lady with a young English girl, whom, to my astonishment, I at once recognized. She is Miss Ashton, the sister of that very identical young dog who spoils my game in respect to Stanhope and my wife. She was at first with the Merediths, and, to tell you the truth, I had marked her out as my prey."

"And why, my lord, should you not honour her with your favour in her turn?" inquired Madame Angelique. "I have never seen her — at least, not to my knowledge, but if she be worth any trouble —"

"Worth any trouble?" exclaimed Marchmont, "she is worth as much trouble as either the Eastern lady or the ayah. She is of a ravishing beauty, and those three together must form a group such as you, Madame Angelique, never had in the saloon adjoining, beautiful as I admit your hours are. But come, tell me what is this satisfactory intelligence which you have to impart?"

"The Eastern lady, my lord, will be in your power," replied the infamous woman, "whenever you think fit to say the word. I took the business in hand myself, and fortune favoured me. I found the ayah accessible to bribery on the very first occasion when I dropped her a hint that a great nobleman had fallen in love with both herself and her mistress; but she is a strange creature in her way, for she at once declared that her mistress should have the honour of your Grace's preference, and that she herself would be content to assist in the enterprise."

"Is her mistress at all gay?" inquired Marchmont. "Has she been brought over to this country by some wealthy nabob, who by dying or on leaving her has enriched her?"

"Nothing of the sort, my lord," cried Madame Angelique. "She is a paragon of virtue and propriety. This much the ayah assured me, giving me to understand that the astutest artifice and the most unscrupulous force must be employed for the vanquishing of that stubborn virtue of hers."

"Then methinks it is a somewhat difficult task?" said the duke, helping himself to another glass of wine.

"By no means, my lord," rejoined Madame Angelique. "The train for the artifice is laid; it will be for you to use

the violence. I have managed admirably, and success is certain."

"But what, in the name of Heaven," cried the duke, "is the lady doing in this country? Surely you must have learned some particulars."

"The ayah is a woman of few words, speaks only to the point, and is by no means disposed to waste her breath in unnecessary communications. I could obtain nothing more from her," continued Madame Angelique, "than what was absolutely necessary for the carrying out of our aims. Listen, my lord. I ere now informed your Grace that fortune favoured me, and it was so. Assisted by the ayah, I obtained admission to the lady, and the conversation took such a turn — no matter how — that I came away with the thorough understanding that she is to visit Oaklands for a few days —"

"What, have you made her believe she is to be the guest of the duchess and myself?" exclaimed Marchmont, evidently at a loss to comprehend the milliner's proceeding.

"Quite the contrary, my lord. The lady supposes that you and the duchess will not be there at all, but that out of kindness she is to be permitted to make your country-seat her home for a few days; and in her ingenuousness," added Madame Angelique, with a mocking air, "she has been led to fancy that it is quite customary in this country for a nobleman thus to place his mansion at the disposal of a foreigner of distinction, no matter whether male or female."

"Well, but what plan do you suggest?" asked the duke, "for I cannot for the life of me —"

"Listen, my lord. The lady will go alone to Oaklands, of that I am confident; and, what is more, she has provided herself with a quantity of European dresses, so that she may not have an extraordinary appearance. Of course her Grace the Duchess will remain ignorant that the lady is at Oaklands, but what is to prevent your lordship from finding your way there late some evening, and entering stealthily? You find the bird in your own cage, and, what is more, she has flown voluntarily thither. She must succumb, and then it will be for your Grace to convince her of the impossibility of her invoking the law to punish you. For how will the matter stand? Here is a lady, who has lived long enough in England and speaks the language well enough to comprehend

all its customs, proceeding of her own accord to your country-seat, leaving her servants behind her, discarding for the time being her own habitual costume, having English dresses made expressly for the purpose,—why, who on earth would believe her tale if she were to proclaim that she had been inveigled into a snare? Shall not I be ready to stand forward to give my own version of the manner in which the arrangement was effected between herself and me? Shall I not at once boldly affirm that I was a messenger of love from your Grace to her, and that she accepted the overture and went to the appointment? Make her understand all this, my lord, and rest assured that she will rather seek to veil her shame as closely as possible than to expose it uselessly.”

“Yes, the plot is admirable,” exclaimed the duke, “and you are the most accomplished of useful women. But when is the affair to come off?”

“I will write to the lady to-morrow,” responded Madame Angelique, “and I have no doubt that on the day after she will repair to Oaklands. It is for your Grace to despatch a messenger with suitable instructions, so that she may be received by the servants in the light of an honoured guest at whose disposal the entire establishment is to be placed so long as it may suit her to sojourn there.”

“I will send off the necessary instructions the very first thing in the morning,” responded the duke. “And now, to discourse upon another subject, what about Lettice Rodney?”

“Ah, the ungrateful wretch!” cried Madame Angelique, with an indignation that could not possibly have been greater if it were based on the most honest grounds, “to serve me in such a way, after all I had done for her!”

“Well, but what has become of her?” inquired the duke.

“That is exactly what I should like to ascertain, but she has been spirited away, no one knows where. They say she is penitent. Penitence indeed!” and with as much disgust as if it were a heinous crime the bare idea of which thus excited her, Madame Angelique screwed up her countenance into a strange contortion.

“Well, relieve your feelings with a glass of wine,” said the duke.

Madame Angelique followed his Grace’s counsel, and went on to exclaim, “Who would have believed it? Most people, when their girls get into trouble, leave them to get

out again as best they may. But here was I, — with a sense of humanity which no doubt was carried to an extreme, — here was I, my lord, rushing off to Liverpool to see the wretch, and to offer to find her lawyers, and counsel, and all that sort of thing, on condition that she kept my name out of the question; but the prison door was banged in my face, and I was told that Lettice Rodney did not want to see me. Not want to see me, — me, her very best friend! And now I hate her so that I could scratch her eyes out if she came across me.”

“But have you no idea,” inquired Marchmont, “who was at the bottom of all those proceedings on her behalf? The newspapers spoke of influential friends —”

“Yes, and they specially mentioned the name of the Stanleys,” responded Madame Angelique. “Ah, I recollect! I saw something hinted about another person being behind the scenes, but I can’t fancy who it could be.”

“I don’t know why,” said Marchmont, “but it has occurred to me that the same individual who extorted the confession from Lettice of all that business down at Oaklands in the winter — whose voice she thought familiar, if you recollect, but whose face she could not catch a glimpse of — may have been her secret friend throughout this last affair.”

“But now that it is all over,” cried Madame Angelique, “it is scarcely worth while to bewilder oneself with conjecture. Fortunately my name did not transpire at the trial.”

“No, it was fortunate,” observed the duke. “By the bye, have you heard anything about Eveleen O’Brien?”

“Ah! there’s another ungrateful wretch,” exclaimed Madame Angelique, again getting excited over her wrongs. “She too has turned penitent, and I’m sure that if penitence becomes an epidemic, like the cholera or anything of that sort, I shall have to shut up shop. No, not while I have such patrons as your Grace,” cried the infamous woman, thinking it necessary to pay the duke this compliment.

Marchmont rose to take his departure, — previous to doing which, however, he placed a roll of bank-notes in Madame Angelique’s hand, as an earnest of his liberality in respect to her precious machinations with regard to the Princess Indora.

Early on the following morning the duke sent off a message to Oaklands with a letter containing suitable instructions to Purvis, the steward, with regard to the reception that was to be given to the Oriental lady; and so little care had he for the feelings of the duchess that he did not even think it worth while to add a hint to the effect that the circumstance of this visit to be paid to Oaklands by the lady in question was to be for ever withheld from her Grace's knowledge. At the same time that the messenger set off for Oaklands, the infamous Madame Angeliqne forwarded a letter to the post, addressed to the Lady Indora, acquainting her that their Graces the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont had the pleasure of placing their country-seat in Hampshire at her ladyship's disposal for so long a time as it might be agreeable to her to sojourn on that domain. Madame Angeliqne was careful to assure Indora in this letter that the duke and duchess were occupying their town mansion, and had no thought of going into the country for the present, that therefore the Lady Indora would be perfect mistress of Oaklands, and she (Madame Angeliqne) wished her ladyship all possible health to enjoy her rambles about the beautiful scenery of the domain.

We ought perhaps to observe that Sagoonah had remained altogether in ignorance of that warning letter which Mr. Redcliffe had sent to the princess, for Indora had not chosen to terrify her ayah by making her aware that she was the object of any evil design. She had therefore contented herself at the time with issuing precautionary instructions of a general character, the faithful Mark, the major-domo, being the only one of the servants to whom she confided the nature of that letter. Thus it happened that the name of Mr. Redcliffe was never mentioned by Sagoonah to Madame Angeliqne.

The Princess Indora duly received Madame Angeliqne's note, and without communicating its contents to a soul, commenced her preparations for departure. She informed Christina that particular business would take her away for a few days, during which interval she hoped the young maiden would not feel dull nor lonely, and she gave her permission to invite her brother Christian to pass those few days with her at the villa if she thought fit. Her Highness ordered a post-chaise to be in attendance for the ensuing day,

and as she perceived that the faithful Mark — the comptroller of her little household — wore a somewhat anxious countenance as these preparations were going on, she summoned him into her presence, availing herself of an opportunity when she was alone.

“I am well aware, Mark,” she said, “that you entertain a deep interest in my behalf, and you are probably afraid that I am about to fall into some snare which is being set for me. But you need have no such apprehension. The business which takes me hence for a few days is connected with a matter vitally concerning my own interests. I see my way clearly, but I have thought it necessary to tell you this much, in order to relieve your mind from any misgiving.”

“I am truly rejoiced to hear your ladyship speak thus confidently,” answered the steward, “and my mind is indeed more at ease.”

He then bowed and withdrew, the princess not volunteering another syllable of explanation, and Mark had no undue curiosity. It was sufficient for him that Indora seemed to know perfectly well what she was about.

On the following morning the princess apparelled herself, with Christina's assistance, in one of the European costumes which Madame Angelique had sent home. This was the first time that the King of Inderabad's daughter found herself thus dressed, and it would have been difficult for even the most scrupulous critic in respect to female loveliness to decide whether she looked handsomer in the picturesque garb which she was wont to wear, or in this apparel made after the most recent Parisian fashion. The superb figure of Indora, with all its richness of contour and the admirable modelling of its limbs, gave its own shape, as it were, to whatsoever costume she chose to adopt, and hers was a beauty so far transcending all the advantages which feminine charms are wont to derive from the toilet that it indeed mattered but little what fashion or style she followed. The corsage of an English dress could not set off the grandeur of the bust more completely than the Oriental caftan, nor the Parisian bonnet impart additional splendour to the dark glory of her hair.

In her new costume, unattended and alone, the Princess Indora entered the post-chaise; and on leaving the villa, all the instructions she gave to the postilions were that she

was going into Hampshire. Thus no one at that villa, except Sagoonah herself, was aware of the princess's destination; and the princess suspected not that her ayah knew it.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon that the post-chaise entered upon the broad domain of Oaklands, and it presently dashed up to the front of the mansion. Purvis and the other domestics, in obedience to the instructions received from the Duke of Marchmont, were in readiness to afford the princess a suitable welcome, and as she alighted from the post-chaise they were astonished at her extraordinary beauty. They had been told that an Oriental lady of rank, but preserving a strict *incognita*, would arrive at Oaklands; and they had pictured to themselves a dark-skinned female, apparelled in some extraordinary fashion. But when they beheld Indora, whose complexion was only of the most delicate duskiness, not exceeding that of a brunette, and with a fine-grained skin of transparent clearness, apparelled too in a plain but tasteful travelling-costume, such as an English lady might wear, they were all taken by surprise. Yet in this amazement — an amazement which was produced far more by her extraordinary beauty than by any other circumstances — the respectfulness of their demeanour was not for an instant lost, and she was at once conducted by the old steward to the state drawing-room. There she was waited upon by females of the household, who escorted her to the bedchamber prepared for her reception; and now she put off her travelling costume to apparel herself in a richer and more elegant garb. On descending again to the drawing-room, she intimated a wish to be conducted over the mansion, and Purvis was accordingly promptly in attendance. He led her through the various sumptuously furnished apartments, and in due course they reached the picture-gallery. There Indora appeared particularly interested by contemplating the portraits of the Duke of Marchmont's ancestors, and throughout this inspection she conversed with the old steward in the most affable manner.

"I have been made acquainted," she said, still lingering in the gallery, "with that terrible tragedy which is so fearfully connected with the name of Oaklands. Were you here when it occurred?"

Purvis responded in the affirmative, and Indora proceeded

to question the old man on various points connected with that deplorable history. Purvis, who was delighted with the frank amiability of the princess, and also astonished at the fluency with which she spoke in his native tongue, as well as at the superior intelligence which many of her observations indicated, cheerfully satisfied her curiosity, and the tale of the Duchess Eliza and Bertram Vivian was told all over again. Indora listened with a deep and awe-felt interest, and in the course of some remarks which Purvis made at the conclusion, he said, "The very dagger, my lady, with which the dreadful deed was accomplished exists still beneath this roof."

"Is it not strange," said Indora, with a visible shudder, "that the present Duke of Marchmont should have preserved a weapon which every time he beholds it must so frightfully remind him of the foul deed of assassination whereby he lost his uncle?"

"To tell your ladyship the truth," answered Purvis, "his Grace knows not that the weapon is still retained within these walls. It is I who have kept it, and if you were to ask me wherefore, I could not say. Heaven knows that it is through no morbid feeling of curiosity, for seldom indeed do I venture to cast a look upon that terrible weapon. But after the coroner's inquest, I found it lying in the room where that inquiry took place. No orders were issued as to its disposal, and I thrust it away in a lumber-closet. There it remained forgotten for a year or two, until the closet itself was to be pulled down in the course of certain alterations which were made within these walls. Then the dagger again fell into my hand; it was covered with rust, and a cold feeling of horror shot through me at the thought that it was my deceased master's blood which was encrusted there. Your ladyship may think it a strange fancy on my part, but I took that weapon, and with my own hand scoured the blade so that the blood-rust should disappear; and this being done, I thought of burying it in the ground, in order to put it for ever out of human sight. But another strange whim seized upon me, and I thought I would preserve it as a relic of the past, — just as in former times the armour of those who perished in battle was preserved by the families to which they belonged. To be brief, the fatal weapon has been thus preserved; and there are times when I think that in

retaining possession of it I have been actuated by some higher impulse which I cannot rightly understand."

"It is singular — most singular," said Indora, in a musing tone, "for it was not, as you have declared, through mere morbid curiosity." Then after a few minutes' pause, during which she reflected profoundly, she added, "The horrible has its own mysterious fascinations as well as the pleasing and the beautiful, for the human heart is so constituted as to be susceptible of them. Yes, I will see that dagger. You have already told me, when reciting the narrative of the tragedy, that it came from North America and is of peculiar workmanship."

"It was brought from North America, together with other curiosities," responded Purvis, "by Bertram Vivian. If your ladyship will come this way, I will show it to you."

The old steward conducted the Princess Indora to a superbly furnished saloon, where marble pillars and splendid draperies gave a grandeur to the scene, and where, too, there were some beautiful specimens of sculpture. At the extremity of this saloon there was a small cabinet, containing a variety of curiosities, amongst which were those that Bertram Vivian had brought over with him from the United States. The old steward touched a secret spring in a rose-wood cupboard of curious workmanship; a door flew open, revealing a single drawer, and thence he took forth the fatal dagger of which so much had just been said. With a visible tremor shooting through her entire form, the Princess Indora took it in her hand, and examined it attentively for upwards of a minute, at the expiration of which she returned it to Purvis, who consigned it back again to the place whence he had taken it. Shutting the drawer, he closed the little door of the closet; and Indora said, "In the country to which I belong, we have articles of furniture with secret springs, but I do not understand the working of this one."

The old steward at once gave her the explanation she seemed to desire, and they then issued forth from the cabinet. It was now announced to her that dinner was served up, and she was conducted to the dining-room, where an elegant repast appeared upon the table. The liveried lackeys were in attendance just as if it were the duchess herself who was thus being waited upon and indeed all possible respect was shown toward the princess.

The repast being over, and there being still two more hours of daylight, Indora resumed her wanderings through the mansion, but on this occasion dispensing with the attendance of Purvis. She revisited the picture-gallery, and thence proceeded to the chamber where, as she had been told, the Duchess Eliza took leave of her weeping servants when about to go forth alone from that mansion, where so much misery had overtaken her. In this chamber the princess sat down and gave way to a train of most mournful reflections, tears even trickling down her cheeks. Then she repaired to the room which was occupied by Bertram Vivian when he was staying at Oaklands, and there again did the princess linger in profound and painful meditation. Wherefore was she thus deeply interested in every circumstance and every scene at all associated with that tragedy of nearly nineteen years back?

From that apartment the Princess Indora roamed to the magnificent saloon where the marble columns and the rich draperies imparted an air of truly ducal grandeur, and where there were such exquisite specimens of the sculptor's art to be contemplated. But all these Indora appeared not now to notice; she seemed bent upon some purpose which absorbed every other thought and feeling. A strange light was burning in the luminous depths of her magnificent dark eyes, her lips were compressed with the decisiveness of that profound purpose of her soul, and her feet bore her straight toward the cabinet whither Purvis had previously conducted her. And now she looked around as if to assure herself that no one was by to observe her movements or watch her proceedings, and, satisfied on this point, she entered the cabinet. Unhesitatingly was her taper finger pressed upon the secret spring, the little door flew open, and the next moment the dagger was in her hand. Wherefore did the Indian princess thus again grasp that weapon with which so frightful a deed was associated? What strange feeling thus impelled her to gaze once more on the dagger that had drunk so deep of human blood?

But now a strange scene ensued. Closing the little door with its secret spring, and still retaining possession of the dagger, Indora came forth from the cabinet. Intently were her luminous dark eyes fixed upon the blade which the whimsical or else more deeply mysterious care of Purvis

had kept brightly polished, and all of a sudden the princess raised those eyes upwards, exclaiming, "It is for thee, O Lord, in thine own good time, to show whose hand did really wield this weapon to perpetrate the tragedy of that foul night!"

And it was the eye of that Deity alone to whom the Eastern lady thus solemnly appealed that beheld her as she stood there, in the midst of that sumptuously furnished saloon, with the air of a pythoness, one arm stretched forth, and the hand grasping the handle of the dagger, and her countenance wearing an expression of awe-felt solemnity and adjuring entreaty that was in unison with her words. How strikingly grand she looked, her hair, dark as night, floating in luxuriant masses down her back, her superb bosom upheaved, her posture replete with tragic majesty, and her red lips apart, displaying two rows of pearls within. Wherefore did Indora send up that adjuring prayer to Heaven? Why did she seem to think that there was any doubt in respect to the author of a crime which all the world had so unhesitatingly affixed to the hand of Bertram Vivian?

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DAGGER

ON the following day, soon after breakfast, the Princess Indora issued forth to ramble over the domain and its neighbourhood. She had desired Purvis to accompany her, and the old man pointed out all the various features of interest; but somehow or another he found himself led on to speak again of the tragedy so intimately connected with Oaklands. The Princess Indora made him describe to her the exact personal appearance of the Duchess Eliza, that of the old duke her husband, and that of Bertram Vivian. Purvis, naturally garrulous, was never wearied of conversing on a topic which constituted the main incident in his own experiences of life; and thus, if the Eastern lady had any secret purpose of her own, or if she were merely impelled by an irresistible feeling of curiosity to seek information on these points, she could not possibly have addressed herself to a person more competent or more willing to afford it.

Her wanderings with Purvis brought her toward the pond by the side of which the corpse of the murdered duke was discovered, and there for a few minutes she lingered, gazing upon the very spot where, as Purvis informed her, he and Leachley, the late duke's valet, had found their lifeless, murdered master.

While retracing their way toward the mansion, the discourse still continued on the same topic; and Indora seemed as willing to hear as the old steward was to impart all details, even the very minutest, in connection with the topic which appeared to have so profound an interest for them both. Yet the princess so shaped her questions and so phrased her remarks that Purvis entertained not the remotest suspicion that she might possibly be impelled by some feeling stronger

than mere curiosity. It was about two o'clock when they reached the mansion, and Indora, having partaken of refreshment, walked forth again into the grounds, but this time unattended by the old steward, who was wearied with his ramble of the forenoon. The princess walked as far as the village, and passed the little inn where Bertram Vivian had his last interview with his brother, — then Lord Clandon. The very room had been notified by Purvis, in the minuteness of the details which he had given the princess, and her eyes were riveted for a minute upon the window of that room. When she pursued her way, tears were trickling from those eyes. Perchance, in the natural generosity and kindness of her disposition, she was melted by the thought that within that very room a fellow creature had endured the most excruciating anguish which the human mind could know.

In the evening the Princess Indora again had an opportunity of conversing with the old steward, and she inquired relative to the other servants who were at Oaklands at the time the tragedy took place. He gave her the same information which he had given to Christian Ashton at the time the youth was at the mansion, namely, that Leachley, the late duke's valet, was thriving as a farmer about a dozen miles off; that Jane, the Duchess Eliza's favourite maid, had gone mad after the tragic occurrence, and that he alone, of all the domestics who were at Oaklands on the occasion of the duke's murder, now remained there. After he had given some other particulars respecting a few of those servants who had risen in the world, he said, "And there is the present duke's valet, too, he likewise has risen, and in order to conceal his humble origin he has taken another name."

"Under what circumstances?" asked Indora.

"He has grown rich, my lady," responded Purvis. "His proper name is Travers, his assumed one is Armytage, and his daughter has married a nobleman, Lord Octavian Meredith."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Indora, "the names of Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith are not unfamiliar to me. And that Mr. Armytage, you tell me, was originally the present duke's valet?"

"Certainly he was, my lady. When the present duke succeeded to the title after his uncle's death, he appointed Travers to the post of bailiff; and a little time after that,

Travers, it was said, inherited a considerable sum of money. So, in due course, he left Oaklands, and it was many a long year before I heard anything of him again. At length Farmer Leachley went up to London on some business, and on his return into Hampshire, he came across to see me. He told me that when in London he went to pay his respects to his Grace in Belgrave Square, and that as he was issuing forth from the mansion again he saw a splendid equipage stop at the door, and a well-dressed gentleman alight. He thought that the face was not unfamiliar to him, and though fourteen or fifteen years had elapsed since he last saw Travers, and of course his appearance was altered by time, yet Leachley speedily remembered where he had seen that countenance before, for the well-dressed gentleman descending from his chariot was none other than Travers. The recognition was mutual, but Travers, evidently much confused, attempted to pass hastily by Leachley. Leachley, however, was not the man to be cut in this style. He grasped the other's arm, addressing him by the name of Travers. 'Hush, my good friend!' was the response, 'that is no longer my name. I have risen in the world, as you perceive, and you must call me Mr. Armytage. There is no harm, I fancy, in a man choosing to conceal his plebeian origin when he moves in the highest society and is the companion of the best of the aristocracy. I shall take it as a kindness, for old friendship's sake, if you will keep the little matter as secret as possible.' Leachley assured him that he had no wish to injure or annoy him any in way, but that, on the contrary, he was glad to find he had such good reason for a change of name. This made Mr. Armytage, as he chooses to call himself, very civil indeed, and he invited Leachley to his house in the Regent's Park; but as Leachley was coming back into Hampshire that very day, he could not avail himself of Mr. Armytage's kindness."

"But it appears that this Mr. Leachley, of whom you are speaking," said the princess, "failed not to communicate the secret to you?"

"Oh, there was no harm in his telling me, my lady," replied Purvis, "as I never go up to London, and therefore have no opportunity of betraying him, even if I had the inclination, — which of course I have not; for there is no harm in his having changed his name, but, on the contrary,

everything to his credit that he should have got on so well as to have such good ground for doing it."

By the time this conversation was ended the princess and the old steward had completed their ramble, and the mansion was reached. As Indora entered the hall, she perceived a certain bustle amongst the domestics, who were hurrying to and fro, and one of them, stepping up to Purvis, hastily whispered something in his ear. Indora took no visible notice of it, but ascending to her chamber, put off her walking attire, and then repaired to the drawing-room. As she entered, a tall, aristocratic-looking individual rose from a sofa on which he was seated, and advancing toward her, bowed with courteous respect. For a moment — and only for a moment — there was a strange and ominous glitter in the dark eyes of Indora, but the duke perceived it not, for it was gone by the time he raised his looks to her countenance again.

"Permit me to announce myself as the Duke of Marchmont," he said. "The duchess and I, after mature reflection, came to the conclusion that it would be discourteous if we presented not ourselves here during at least a portion of the period of your ladyship's sojourn, to do the hospitalities of Oaklands."

"I am exceedingly flattered by this kindness on the part of your lordship and her Grace," responded Indora, and then she looked around as if in search of the Duchess of Marchmont.

"Her Grace has charged me to offer your ladyship a thousand apologies," the duke hastened to say, "that she is not enabled to present herself this evening. Her Grace is in very delicate health. The journey from London in such sultry weather has indisposed her, and on the very moment of our arrival, a quarter of an hour back, she was forced to retire to her apartment."

"And it is on my account," exclaimed Indora, with an air of vexation, "that her Grace undertook a journey which has thus indisposed her!"

"Her Grace will be completely recovered by the morning," replied Marchmont. Then thinking that he might now venture upon a little compliment, in the hope of breaking the ceremonious formality of the discourse, he added, "And the pleasure which her Grace cannot fail to share with

me in being honoured by your ladyship's presence here will amply compensate for her indisposition of this evening."

Indora turned aside for a moment to take a seat, and again did that glitter, so strange and so ominous, appear in her eyes, but again, too, did Marchmont fail to observe it.

"I hope," he said, "that during the short time your ladyship has already sojourned beneath this roof you have experienced every attention —"

"I ought, perhaps," interrupted Indora, "at the very first moment when your Grace announced yourself, to have expressed my gratitude for your kindness and that of the duchess in placing Oaklands at my disposal. I can assure your lordship I have been much interested."

"I am truly charmed to hear your ladyship thus speak," exclaimed the duke. "Perhaps you will forgive me for saying that in addition to the desire to render the hospitalities of Oaklands as acceptable to your ladyship as possible, I was anxious to hasten hither, — and of course the duchess likewise, — to form the acquaintance of a lady of whom Madame Angeliq̄ue spoke in such rapturous terms."

"I cannot feel otherwise than flattered," answered Indora, with every appearance of the most courteous affability, "by the kind mention which Madame Angeliq̄ue must evidently have made of me."

"As Madame Angeliq̄ue is a truth-speaking woman," rejoined the duke, "she could not do otherwise than mention your ladyship in the terms which alone are appropriate. Might I be excused for expressing my surprise that a lady who is a native of a far distant clime should be so conversant with the English tongue? Perhaps your ladyship has seen much of the English in India. But if so, how was it," he asked, with a smile, "that none was fortunate enough to win a hand which a monarch might rejoice to possess?"

"I saw very little of the English in India," answered Indora, not choosing to have even the appearance of noticing the compliment with which the duke's speech wound up.

"Perhaps, then," he continued, as if with the good-humoured familiarity which a host felt himself justified in using toward his guest, "your ladyship has visited England with a determination of subduing all hearts, and eventually bestowing the prize on the one that may seem most devoted?"

"Indeed your lordship is uselessly bewildering yourself

with conjectures which are remote enough from the actual fact," and though Indora spoke somewhat gravely, yet her manner continued perfectly courteous. "And now," she added, "as I am exceedingly fatigued with my day's rambles, I must beg your Grace to forgive me if I retire to rest."

She rose from her seat, and Marchmont, first flying to ring the bell, next hastened to open the door. As the princess passed, he proffered his hand, but she either did not really see it, or else affected not to perceive it, and with a courteous inclination of the head she quitted the room. On reaching her own chamber she was attended upon by two of the female servants of the establishment, and she remarked as if quite in a casual way, "So you have the duchess here now?"

"Yes, my lady," replied one of the women, at the same time exchanging a rapidly significant look with her fellow servant.

"I hope that her Grace's indisposition is only slight?" resumed the princess.

"There is little doubt," was the answer, "that her Grace will be quite well in the morning."

"It is to be sincerely hoped so," said Indora, "and the more so by me inasmuch as I am assured by the duke it was entirely on my account her Grace undertook a journey which has thus rendered her indisposed."

Again did the two servants exchange quick looks of meaning, but Indora appeared to notice them not. They assisted her throughout her night toilet, and when she was prepared for rest, they withdrew.

The reader will scarcely require to be informed that the Duchess of Marchmont was not at Oaklands at all. This portion of the duke's stratagem was an afterthought, and an improvement (as he considered it) upon the plan of proceedings originally laid down by Madame Angelique. He had reasoned to himself that as he was perfectly unacquainted with Indora, except by sight, it would be expedient for him to have at least an hour's interview with her ere he carried his plot into execution, so that he might be enabled to form a better estimate of her disposition and character than he could do from Madame Angelique's description. He was, moreover, impatient to find himself in the presence of that Eastern lady whose superb charms had made such an im-

pression upon him on the two occasions that he had caught a glimpse of her at a distance. Thus he had come down to Oaklands for the purpose of introducing himself to Indora; and immediately on his arrival he had issued positive instructions to the domestics to the effect that they were to support his tale of the duchess being likewise beneath that roof. This was the hint that was whispered to Purvis by one of the footmen, as the old steward entered the hall after attending Indora in her evening ramble.

And what were the Duke of Marchmont's feelings when he did find himself in the presence of the princess? If he had admired her from a distance, how infinite became that admiration on beholding her close! The grandeur of her beauty exceeded even what he had expected to find it; the glory of her charms excited all his most fervid passions. It was indeed with difficulty that he could conceal the joy of anticipated triumph when conversing with her in the drawing-room. In all respects she seemed faultless in his eyes, — a being whom he would give half his fortune to possess. Marriage had consigned a charming creature to his arms; the gold of that luxurious patrician had purchased the rarest beauties of every clime, until he had grown sated with pleasure, and, like the Persian monarch, craved for a new one. In the Princess Indora he beheld everything calculated to ravish, to dazzle, to excite, and to fascinate; he thought there would be a world of frenzied bliss in achieving this conquest, even though it were by force. He had devoured her with his eyes even while rendering the expression of his looks most courteously respectful; and when, on her retiring, he was left alone in the drawing-room, he sat feasting his imagination with the pleasure that he conceived to be in store for himself.

But let us return to Indora. When the two female servants had retired, and even while the door was yet closing behind them, that strange glitter appeared in her eyes, and her rich red lips were wreathed with an expression of ineffable scorn. She turned toward one of the boxes she had brought with her, unlocked it, and took thence something, which she thrust under the pillow of the couch. Then she was on the point of enveloping herself in an elegant muslin wrapper, when her ear caught a gentle tap at the door, and as her glances were flung in that direction, she beheld a piece of paper

thrust underneath. She hastened to pick it up, and read therein these lines:

"Lady, beware! A foul treachery is intended. The duchess is not here; the duke came alone. Burn this. You can guess from whom it comes, and be upon your guard."

Indora comprehended that this was an instance of the generous kindness and the honourable feeling of the old steward. She hastened to apply the paper to the wax light, and when it had caught the flame, she tossed it into the fire-place. Then, just as she was again about to put on the wrapper, — evidently with the air of one who knew what was about to happen, and meant to be in all modest decency prepared to meet the emergency, — the door opened, and the duke hastily entered.

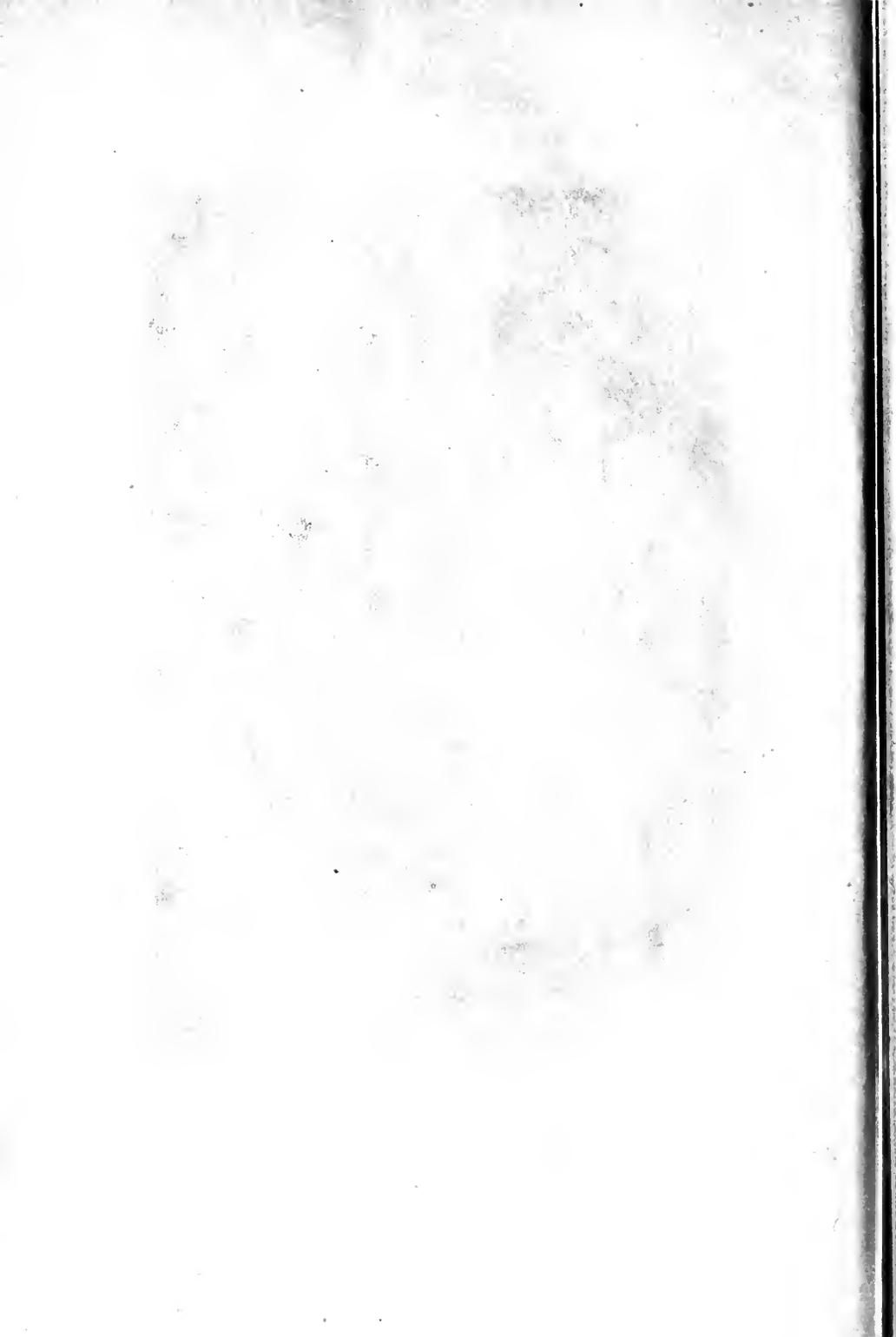
"Ah!" ejaculated Indora, and springing to the head of the couch, she snatched from beneath the pillow the dagger which she had placed there; then, as she raised it in her right hand, her left lifting the night drapery over her bosom, she said, in a voice of resolute sternness, "You know this weapon well; it shall drink your heart's blood if you dare approach me."

Language has no power to convey an idea of the ghastly horror which seized upon the Duke of Marchmont as he caught sight of that dagger; his countenance became livid, he started back and then staggered as if smitten a sudden blow.

"Begone!" exclaimed Indora; and whatever were the power which she wielded at the moment, — whether it were by the mingled scorn, indignation, and defiance of her looks, whether it were by the menacing air she had assumed, or by the terrible recollections which the sight of the dagger vividly conjured up in the mind of the duke, — certain it is that he at once obeyed her, and still pale as death, trembling in every limb, and like a conscience-stricken being, he dragged himself from the room.

Immediately afterward the Princess Indora rang her bell violently, and then hastened to lock up the dagger again in the box where she had previously secured it. The summons was speedily answered by one of the maids who had previously attended upon her, and Indora said, in a calm, firm voice, "I choose not to sleep here alone; you must remain with me for the rest of the night."





Having thus spoken, she locked the door of the chamber, and placing the key under the pillow, lay down on the couch, bidding the maid undress herself and share it with her. The young woman ventured not a single question, nor even a word of comment. She comprehended full well that the duke had experienced an indignant repulse, and in her heart she was far from sorry, for even in the short time that Indora had been beneath that roof her amiable manners had made a certain impression on all the domestics who had happened to come in contact with her.

Thus the night was passed by the virtuous and well-principled Indora in fullest security, but it was not as a guarantee for such security that she had insisted upon the companionship of the servant-woman. She had no fear that the duke would renew his infamous attempt; it was in order that not the slightest breath of suspicion might tarnish her fair fame, that no whisper of scandal might have even the faintest ground to asperse her honour, that she had rung thus violently for the dependent, and commanded that dependent to remain with her throughout the night.

But how was this night passed by the Duke of Marchmont? We cannot tell. The eye of Heaven alone beheld him in the solitude of his own chamber, to which — baffled, defeated, ghastly, and trembling — he retired. But to judge by his appearance when he issued from that chamber at an early hour in the morning, the night must have been a terrible one for him. He looked as if his limbs had not been once stretched upon his couch, as if his eyelids had not for a single moment closed in slumber; so haggard and careworn was he that he appeared as if a preternatural hand had seized upon him and hurled him in a moment a dozen years onward along the pathway of time.

On issuing from that chamber between six and seven in the morning, he bore a letter in his hand; and summoning a female domestic, bade her take the letter to the Eastern lady's apartment, and bring him back the response. Its contents were limited to a few lines, declaring that dazzled by her beauty, and infatuated to a degree that overpowered his reason, he had obeyed an impulse which was irresistible, that in the humblest terms he craved her forgiveness, and that he besought her to grant him a five minutes' interview before he took his departure, which he would do the moment

that interview was over. The response which the servant brought back was a verbal one, to the effect that the Eastern lady would grant the duke a five minutes' interview, for the purpose of receiving the renewed expression of his contrition, in the drawing-room, and in about half an hour.

And during that half-hour the wretched Marchmont paced to and fro in the drawing-room, the most restless anxiety gleaming in his eyes, and displaying itself in the quivering of his ashy lips. At length the door opened, and the princess made her appearance. She was apparelled in a plain but neat travelling-costume, the dress reaching up to her throat, but fitting tightly to the form, and thus displaying the superb contours of that grandly symmetrical shape. There was a certain coldness in her looks, which covered any other deeper feeling; and as she advanced into the room she said, in a voice that was as glacially emotionless as her aspect, "You wish to speak to me, my lord?"

"For Heaven's sake, lady," exclaimed the miserable duke, "tell me what I am to expect at your hands? I know the outrage was abominable —"

"But the Duke of Marchmont is capable of anything," interrupted the princess, "where his evil passions are concerned."

"But that scene last night," ejaculated the duke, "appeared to have — Perdition!" he vehemently cried. "I know not what to say. I mean that it had a significancy."

"Assuredly so," answered Indora. "It had the significancy belonging to the fixed determination of a virtuous woman to defend her honour, even though she stretched its assailant dead at her feet."

"But wherefore, lady, wherefore," asked the duke, trembling nervously from head to foot, "did you arm yourself with that — that dagger?"

"It is the custom of my country," was Indora's cold response, "for a woman when in a strange place to surround herself with all suitable defences."

"Then you picked up that weapon somewhere by accident — only by accident?" cried the duke.

"Yes — by accident," was Indora's answer, still glacially given.

"But where? where?" demanded the duke, and his scrutinizing regards were fixed keenly upon the lady's

countenance, as if to penetrate whether any ulterior thought or feeling, motive or significancy, lay hidden beneath that icily dignified aspect.

"Where did I find the dagger?" she said. "It was in one of the rooms of the mansion. But why question me thus? Methought, my lord, that I was to hear the humblest apology — Yet no!" she indignantly exclaimed, and now her eyes flashed fire. "No language in the world has power to convey an excuse for such villainy as yours. I will tell you frankly, my lord, that I read your purpose. I was not deceived by the miserably shallow artifice so flimsily wrapped up in the tale of your wife's arrival and indisposition. Consequently I was prepared, and you know how well."

"But will you not pardon me? Will you not pronounce the word forgiveness?" cried the duke, who was evidently bewildered, indeed half-frenzied by the thoughts that were agitating in his whirling brain.

"Forgiveness? No!" and Indora at once turned to leave the drawing-room.

"For Heaven's sake, stop!" cried the duke, hastening toward her in a supplicating manner. "If you will not grant me your pardon, at all events give me the assurance that you will do me no injury."

"I have triumphed so effectually in the circumstances to which you allude," replied Indora, "that I need scarcely hesitate to promise that it is my purpose to keep silent in respect to your infamy. But understand me well, — that if you dare breathe a single syllable prejudicial to my honour, if it come to my knowledge that when heated with wine, and in that boasting mood which at times takes possession of all libertines, you have proclaimed the fact that I was a visitress here, in a word, my lord, if you have the hardihood to make an allusion to me in the least way disrespectful, that moment shall I be absolved from my pledge, I will go before a magistrate, I will acquaint him with all that occurred, not even omitting," — and Indora's dark eyes were fixed penetratingly upon the duke, — "not even omitting, I say, the circumstance how I defended myself with that selfsame dagger which dealt death to the uncle whose title and fortune you inherited."

Having thus spoken, the Princess Indora issued from the drawing-room; and the duke, closing the door behind her,

threw himself upon a sofa and gave way to his agitated reflections. In a few minutes a domestic entered, saying, "The Lady Indora has ordered your Grace's plain carriage to be immediately gotten in readiness, to take her to the nearest post-town, and she will leave Oaklands in less than half an hour."

The duke gave no answer, and the domestic withdrew. Marchmont comprehended wherefore the message had been sent: it was to give him to understand that as Indora was on the point of taking her departure, it was not necessary for him to fulfil the pledge given her in his hastily written note that he would quit the mansion immediately after the interview which he had besought her to grant.

The carriage was soon in readiness and the princess departed from Oaklands, having left in the hands of Purvis a liberal sum of money to be divided amongst the domestics, although the generality of them little deserved this bounty at her hands, inasmuch as they had been prepared to follow their master's instructions in respect to supporting the tale of the duchess being beneath that roof. We may observe that munificent indeed was the present which Indora made to the steward for his own special behoof, and she had found an opportunity of expressing her thanks for the well-meant note which he had thrust under her door. But she said nothing to him in respect to the dagger.

The Duke of Marchmont beheld Indora's departure from the drawing-room window, and the instant the carriage drove away, he sped up-stairs to the room which she had occupied. He searched everywhere for that dagger, but he discovered it not; it was nowhere in the chamber. Returning to the drawing-room, he was on the point of ringing the bell with a view of putting certain questions to Purvis, but he thought better of it, and repaired to the breakfast-parlour. He had no appetite, but he was sore athirst; his throat felt as if he had been swallowing ashes. He ordered wine, — some choice specimen of the light and cooling vintage of the Rhine; and when he had partaken copiously thereof he proceeded to his dressing-room to make some improvement in his toilet. Afterward he wandered out upon his domain, and for hours he reflected upon all that had occurred, — or we should rather say that he continued to be harassed and agitated by a variety of the most painful thoughts.

On returning to the mansion as the dinner-hour approached, he again felt an inclination to put certain inquiries to Purvis, and again was he by a second thought prevented. The dinner passed, — that dinner to which he sat down all alone; and when it was over he again went wandering about like an unsettled spirit. When the dusk was closing in, he reëntered the mansion, and as he repaired to the drawing-room, one of the domestics preceded him with wax lights. Then, as if his mind was suddenly made up in respect to a point on which he had so often hesitated throughout this agitated day, the duke said, "Bid Purvis come hither."

In a few minutes the old steward entered the apartment, but even still the duke felt disinclined to approach the particular topic. At length, however, he said, "Purvis, something so strange occurred last night that I have made up my mind to speak to you on the subject — and yet it is so painful a one that you will not wonder I have throughout this day dreaded to approach it."

The old steward was utterly at a loss to conjecture what could have thus occurred, though, on the other hand, he was scarcely at a loss to comprehend what the painful topic must be; for whenever such an allusion was made beneath that roof, it was always at once taken for granted that it referred to the tragedy of nineteen years back.

"The fact is, Purvis," continued the duke, "I had some little design in respect to that lady; but of course that's my own affair, and nothing to do with any of my servants. I was misled as to her character. I thought she was inclined to be gay, whereas I found the very reverse to be the case. However, the point on which I desired to speak with you may be explained in a few words. Last night, Purvis, I found that lady armed with a weapon of defence, and the weapon was — you know what I mean. It was the same identical one which my wretched brother used —"

"That dagger, my lord?" cried the old steward, in mingled astonishment and dismay.

"Yes, and I see that you know something about it," exclaimed the duke. "Come, tell me. Think you that it is a pleasant thing for me to have paraded before my eyes that memorial of the terrible past?"

"My lord, I am deeply sorry," said Purvis, "but I begin to understand —"

"Explain yourself. Hasten to explain yourself. Tell me the whole truth, whatever it may be," and Marchmont was labouring under the violent excitement of suspense.

"My lord," rejoined Purvis, "I have done nothing that I can hesitate to explain. I conducted the lady over the mansion, and amongst other places I showed her the cabinet in which divers family relics and various curiosities are kept —"

"Yes, yes, the one opening from the grand saloon," ejaculated the duke. "But about that dagger?"

"It has been kept in that cabinet, my lord, for many, many years past —"

"And wherefore was it kept? Who gave you such an order?"

"No one, my lord," answered the steward, "and I cannot define the feeling which has thus prompted me to keep it. It was always secured and placed out of sight in a secret drawer. I showed it to the lady for curiosity's sake, and I remember perfectly well that she questioned me as to the mode of opening that secret drawer. I saw no harm in giving her the explanation she sought —"

"Well, well," cried the duke, stamping his foot impatiently, "it was through your folly that the weapon thus fell into her hands. But come, let us see whether she has restored it to its place, or whether she has taken it away with her."

"Taken it away, my lord?" cried Purvis, "she would not do such a thing as that. Indeed, I wonder that one so well-behaved —"

"Cease your prating, and come," ejaculated the duke. Then snatching up one of the wax candles, he hurried from the room.

Purvis followed him close, and they proceeded toward the saloon with the marble pillars, the costly draperies, and the exquisite specimens of sculpture. At the very moment the Duke of Marchmont burst in with the feverish haste which inspired him, he stopped short, and something like an ejaculation of terror burst from his lips, while his eyes were riveted in a particular direction.

"What is it, my lord?" inquired Purvis, catching the infection of the duke's terror, but yet not comprehending the cause.

"Did you not perceive how the drapery at that end — I

mean close by the door of the cabinet — was suddenly and strongly agitated?" and the duke's countenance was very pale as he spoke.

"No, my lord," answered Purvis, "I did not notice it. It must either have been your Grace's fancy, or else it was the wind."

"Yes, it was doubtless a draught caused by the sudden opening of this door," and the duke advanced into the saloon, still carrying the wax light in his hand.

As they drew near the cabinet, Marchmont's looks were thrown upon the drapery which he had either seen or fancied to have seen for an instant swaying to and fro, but it was now completely still. Still there was a certain vague terror in Marchmont's soul, and he would have looked behind those hangings were it not that he was ashamed to display his fears in the presence of the steward.

"Open the cabinet, Purvis," he said, and the order was at once obeyed. "Now let us see whether the dagger be here."

Marchmont remained standing upon the threshold in such a way that the door, as it now stood open, was between himself and the drapery which a few moments back had excited his apprehension. Purvis touched the secret spring, opened the drawer, and said, "Yes, look, my lord, the weapon is there."

At that very instant the wax light was dashed from Marchmont's hand, and the saloon was enveloped in total darkness. The duke, with a loud moan, fell heavily upon the carpet, and Purvis was seized with so awful a terror that he felt as if his senses were abandoning him.

"My lord, my lord!" he at length murmured, and in the utter darkness of the place he felt his way to the duke, who lay stretched upon the floor. Still under the influence of the direst, most awful terror, the old steward entertained the horrible apprehension that some assassin blow had been dealt at his master. He swept his hands over the prostrate form, inanimate too as well as prostrate, but they encountered no weapon or oozing blood. Then Purvis ran out into the corridor, but with his hair almost standing on end as he traversed the spacious saloon, for the frightful thought was racking his mind that amidst the total darkness which prevailed a mischief might be done by unseen hands upon himself. However, he passed without molestation into the

corridor, and thence he took a lamp which was burning there. As he reëntered the saloon with the light, his glances were flung in quick, nervous anxiety around, but he beheld no one except the prostrate form of his ducal master stretched near the threshold of the cabinet. On approaching nearer, he perceived that Marchmont was now recovering, and that there was no appearance about his person of any injury sustained. A long, gasping moan came slowly from his lips, and raising himself partially up, he looked with wild, haggard eyes around him; then as his regards settled upon the steward, he said, "Good heavens, Purvis! what could that have been? What followed when I sank down in unconsciousness?"

"Get up, my lord," cried the old steward, in a state of feverish excitement. "Let us alarm the household; there must be robbers in the place."

"No, no, be quiet!" said the duke, now rising up to his feet, and Purvis recoiled in actual dismay from the ghastly horror which was depicted on Marchmont's countenance. "Tell me," continued the duke, speaking in a deep, hollow voice, "what did you hear? What sound did you catch? Were any words spoken?"

"I know not, my lord — I cannot recollect. My ideas are still all in confusion," and Purvis looked around him in a species of bewildered consternation.

"But you must recollect," exclaimed the duke, impatiently; "you did not lose your consciousness."

"But I well-nigh lost my senses, my lord," was the steward's remark, which under less grave and fearful circumstances would have appeared ludicrous enough. "I tell your Grace there must be robbers in the mansion. Let us raise an alarm."

"No, I command you to remain here, and to be quiet," said the duke, sternly, and he appeared now to have almost regained his wonted self-possession. "Here, give me that lamp."

"The dagger is safe," ejaculated Purvis, as his eyes, plunging into the cabinet, fell upon the weapon which lay in the drawer that was open, and its bright blade reflected the beams of the lamp.

"Why did you say that?" demanded the duke, turning so sharply around upon the old man that he shrank back in affright.

"I merely thought, my lord, that some evil-disposed person might possibly have clutched at the weapon —"

"Silence," exclaimed the duke sternly, and with the lamp in his hand, he proceeded to examine behind all the flowing draperies which hung between the marble pillars on one side of the saloon.

But no one was to be seen, and Marchmont, again accosting Purvis, said to him, "Recollect, gather your ideas together, reflect well. Did you hear no footsteps? Was there no sound of any one beating a retreat immediately after that candle was dashed from my hand? Or did you catch a glimpse of any one, for you were looking toward me at the moment? Did you behold no person suddenly emerge from behind the door the instant previous to this strange occurrence?"

The steward raised his hand to his forehead, as if to steady the thoughts that were still agitating with some degree of confusion in his brain, and at the expiration of a minute, he said, "Yes, my lord; it does seem to me that I caught a glimpse of something —"

"And that something?" demanded the duke, quickly.

"Stop, my lord! If your Grace hurries me, I shall lose the ideas which now seem to be coming back into my mind," and Purvis still kept his hand up to his forehead, as he slowly and deliberately gave utterance to those words. "Yes, I certainly did see something, now that I recollect. It was like a tall dark form, but I saw no face —"

"Are you sure, Purvis, that you saw anything at all?" inquired the duke, with a strange expression of countenance, "or are these mere imaginings, — the result of consternation and terror?"

"No, my lord," replied the old steward, in a tone of confidence; "now that I can collect my thoughts, I seem to have a perfect recollection that I did behold a tall, dark form suddenly appear behind your Grace, as you stood in the doorway with your back toward the saloon and your face toward the cabinet; then the next instant the candle was dashed from your hand, and all was utter darkness. I think I heard footsteps, but of that I am not so sure, for it was then that I was seized with such a fearful terror —"

"Let us examine the carpet," suddenly ejaculated the duke.

With these words, he held the lamp low down, and carefully scrutinized the carpet behind the door and likewise behind the drapery, but there were no marks of footsteps, and the steward said, "Your Grace will perceive that the pile of the carpet, although so thick, rises up again into an even surface wherever it has been trodden upon. Our own steps leave no marks."

"True," cried the duke, and desisting from the examination, he said, in a solemn voice, "Reflect well, Purvis; examine well your recollections. Can you speak confidently as to the sounds of footsteps?"

Again the old steward raised his hand to his forehead, and after a minute's deep reflection, he said, "No, my lord, I cannot for the life of me speak with any degree of certainty upon this point. But what does it matter? Does your Grace think," asked the old man, ingenuously, yet with a half-appalled air of consternation, "that if there were no sounds of footsteps, it must have been an apparition?"

"Lock up that drawer and follow me," said the duke, in a low, deep voice, and again did Purvis shrink back in dismay from the ghastly pallor of his countenance.

The old steward closed the drawer containing the dagger, shut the door with the secret spring, and closing the cabinet door likewise, he followed the duke, who paced slowly and thoughtfully toward the farther extremity of the saloon.

"Purvis," he said, stopping short as he reached the door leading into the passage with which the saloon communicated, "this strange and incomprehensible occurrence — No, not incomprehensible," he abruptly ejaculated, "for, as you yourself have suggested, it must have been some evil-disposed person who was concealed there, and who adopted that stratagem to make his escape in the darkness — But as I was about to say, we must keep this incident a secret. We should only be laughed at if we were to relate what has occurred. Do you understand me? I will not have all the gossips of the neighbourhood telling their idle tales about Oaklands, — the result of which would be that we should not get a servant to live with us, and as for visitors coming here again, it would be out of the question. So, mark me well! It is my will that what has occurred be kept secret. Compose your looks before you go amongst the servants again this evening."

"I will attend to all your Grace's instructions," replied Purvis, who was in most instances accustomed to pay implicit obedience to the mandates of his master.

The duke then returned to the drawing-room, while the steward repaired to his own apartment, for he felt that his countenance still wore a sufficient degree of trouble to excite the suspicions of his fellow servants if he went amongst them at once.

By eleven o'clock the entire household had withdrawn to their respective apartments, and silence reigned throughout the spacious mansion.

CHAPTER XXV

A NIGHT AT OAKLANDS

It was past midnight, and the old steward was just sinking into that state of dreamy repose which precedes a deeper slumber, — for he had been lying awake, thinking of the incidents in the saloon, — when all of a sudden he was startled by his door opening, and a cry of terror was nearly bursting from his lips as his looks fell upon what appeared to be the countenance of a corpse. But in an instant he recognized the Duke of Marchmont, the ghastly pallor of whose face looked ghastlier still as the light of the candle which he carried streamed upon it. He had thrown his dressing-gown over his shoulders, — thus having evidently quitted his chamber in a haste too precipitate to enable him to put it on properly. The wildest horror was in his looks, and with staggering steps he advanced into the room. Closing the door behind him, he placed the candlestick on the chest of drawers, and threw himself on a seat, his whole manner and appearance giving him the aspect of one who had just seen some hideous spectacle or passed through a phase of appalling terror.

“Good heavens, my lord, what is the matter?” asked Purvis, all at once smitten with the conviction that something fresh and of a very dreadful character had occurred; “what is the matter, my lord? for Heaven’s sake, speak!”

But the duke could not give utterance to a syllable, and still he continued to stare in wildest, ghastliest horror upon the old steward, who himself was quivering throughout every nerve and fibre.

“My lord, for Heaven’s sake, speak! What is it? What is it?” he again shudderingly asked.

“I know not, it must have been a dream,” replied March-

mont, but in a voice so deep and hollow that as it smote upon the ears of Purvis it sent forth dismay to the innermost recesses of his soul.

"A dream, my lord," he said; "what dream could have possibly produced this astounding effect? Perhaps, after all, it was the result—"

"Yes, it must have been," rejoined Marchmont, but evidently with the air of one who sought to force upon himself a belief that was in antagonism with his own deeply settled conviction.

Purvis continued to regard his ducal master, whose countenance still denoted the unutterable horror and consternation which he had been experiencing. His eyes sank beneath the looks of the old steward; a profound sigh, or perhaps more correctly speaking, a low, long moan expressive of deepest inward agony issued from his lips.

"But what was this dream, my lord?" asked Purvis.

The duke did not immediately answer; he was evidently uncertain whether to give an explanation or not, until at length yielding to some irresistible impulse, he said, "Listen, and I will tell you."

"Shall I procure your Grace some wine? Or will your lordship take a glass of water?" inquired the old steward, for Marchmont appeared as if he were about to suffocate.

"I will help myself," was his response, and rising from his seat, he moved to where there was a decanter of water.

Filling a tumbler with hands which trembled so that the decanter and the glass jarred against each other, he raised the refreshing beverage to his lips, and it is scarcely a figure of speech to say that the water went hissing down his parched throat as if it were pouring over hot iron. Then he resumed the chair whence he had risen, but Purvis noticed that his countenance was almost as ghastly pale, though perhaps less convulsed than at first.

"Sleep was stealing upon me," he thus commenced his explanation in the same low deep voice as before, "when I felt as if gradually awakening for some reason that I could not comprehend. I cannot remember now, — indeed I knew not at the time whether it was a sound in the room, or whether a hand touched me, or whether a voice addressed me, but certain it is that I was thus unaccountably awakened from my slumber — And yet," ejaculated the duke, sud-

denly interrupting himself, at the same time that he started up from the chair, "it could only have been mere fancy, and nothing else. It is useless thus to enter upon the explanation of an idle dream."

"Yes, useless, my lord," remarked Purvis, "if the subject be painful."

"Why did you say that?" demanded the duke, turning abruptly toward the old man as he sat up in his bed.

"My lord — my lord," stammered Purvis, who really had meant nothing more than his words had conveyed, "I — I — beg your Grace's pardon, but — but — I really —"

"Well, well," interrupted the duke, "you see that all these things naturally render me nervous and excited, — I mean that those mysterious incidents which occurred ere we went to bed —"

"They naturally made a certain impression, my lord," replied the steward. "For myself, I candidly confess that I was thinking of them until the very moment that sleep came upon my eyes."

"You said nothing about it to the servants, Purvis?" asked the duke, quickly.

"Certainly not, my lord; it was your Grace's order to the contrary."

"To be sure. It were needless to frighten them," and the duke lingered in the steward's chamber with every appearance of one who was afraid to return to his own. "About this dream of mine," he continued, after a pause, during which he first sat down, then rose up, and then sat down again, in a nervous, restless manner; "about this dream of mine, Purvis. I have a great mind to go on telling you what it was."

But Marchmont once more stopped short, he evidently did not want to continue on the same topic, and yet his mind was irresistibly led by some strong influence to hover around it, painful though it were.

"I was telling you that I had fallen asleep, when something awoke me. The night-lamp was burning as usual in the room, and I looked about me, but I saw nothing. The lamp was visibly growing fainter and fainter; there was a wax candle on the night-table upon one side of the bed, and I lighted it, but as I turned around I beheld on the other side what seemed to me to be the tall form of a man enveloped

in a cloak, and holding the cloak in such a way up to his countenance as to veil it completely from my view."

Here the duke again stopped short, leaving Purvis in a species of awful suspense.

"And what did your Grace do?" he at length asked as the duke continued silent.

"To confess the truth, Purvis," was the response, "I was seized — or rather fancied I was, — for of course it was all a dream, — but it appeared to me in this dream that I was seized with so sudden a terror I lay like one paralyzed. It was that sort of petrification of the frame, though the senses were all keenly alive, which takes possession of one when under the influence of a nightmare. Then that dark shape seemed to bend down over me. Is it not extraordinary, Purvis? But if I were to tell you all, you would agree with me that it cannot be anything else than mere fancy?"

But the Duke of Marchmont was still in such a state of trembling nervousness that his condition, both physical and mental, proved how impossible it was to beguile himself into the belief that it was a dream, for again he rose from his seat, again he paced to and fro in an agitated manner, and then he sat down once more.

"A form bent, I say," he continued, still irresistibly impelled to hover around the subject, like a moth fluttering about a candle, — "it bent over me, — of course in my dream, you understand? — and it spoke a few words in such a deep, unearthly voice that the blood ran cold in my veins. No matter what it said; I forget — I did not hear — I could not for worlds repeat it. Perdition seize upon me! I am losing my senses."

The duke stamped his foot violently upon the floor as he gave vent to that imprecation, and again springing up from the chair, he paced nervously to and fro. The old steward was seriously alarmed, for he began to suspect that his master's intellects had received a shock and were somewhat deranged. He had not failed to notice the extraordinary and incongruous expressions which had fallen from his lips in regard to the words breathed in his ear by the tall cloaked form that either in imagination or in reality had bent over him. And now too Marchmont's face was ghastly pale and as convulsed as it was when he first entered the chamber, and the old steward tremblingly asked whether he

should arouse the household and send off for medical assistance.

"Not for worlds," ejaculated the duke, with strange vehemence; then he immediately added, "You would not have me render myself ridiculous in the presence of all the servants? It is enough that I have thus found my way to your chamber. But you will not breathe a syllable of all this? You will keep it inviolably secret? Tell me, Purvis, tell me —"

"Yes, my lord; rest assured that I will do what you command. But about the dream?" added Purvis, hesitatingly, and his curiosity was poignantly excited.

"Ah! about the dream?" repeated the duke; "you wish to know the rest?" and in a sort of half-bewildered manner he sank down upon the chair again. "I tell you, Purvis, that the form bent over me, — I mean, you understand that it appeared to do so, — and it said some words, and it breathed a name, and that name was its own, for thus did it announce itself — And the name —"

"And the name, my lord?" repeated the steward, in the low, half-hushed tone of an awe-felt suspense, as if he expected to hear that it was the name of one from the grave which had thus been spoken.

"The name?" said the duke, gazing in a species of vacant horror and dismay upon the old man; "that name was — Bertram Vivian."

The steward started in such a way that the whole bed shook under him, and Marchmont likewise started as if that sound itself had galvanized him with a new terror.

"Yes, it was my brother's name," he continued, in a low, hollow voice, "and therefore it must have been a dream. For if it were not, then was it a shape from the other world—"

"Yes, my lord," rejoined the steward, in solemn tones, "for if your brother were alive, he would not revisit the seat of his crime."

Marchmont looked in an appalled vacant horror around, and for upwards of a minute there was a profound silence in that room.

"And what followed, my lord?" at length asked the steward, who was evidently under the influence of an awe-inspiring, superstitious terror.

"I hardly know," responded Marchmont, wildly, "whether I fainted, whether I lay petrified and bathed in a cold perspiration, whether the object vanished suddenly, or whether I saw that dark shape issue from the chamber, opening and closing the door just as the living man would do, — I cannot tell. All my thoughts are in confusion when I endeavour to concentrate them on that point. In a word, I cannot rightly remember anything more until the instant that I found myself here, in your room."

"All this is most extraordinary," said Purvis, who was wrapped in a kind of solemnly superstitious bewilderment. "If your Grace's brother be no more, wherefore should his spirit come to haunt your Grace's slumbers? But if he be alive —"

"No, no, Purvis; it was all a dream. Tell me you were sure it was nought but a dream?" and it was in a paroxysm of indescribable anguish and horror, with a countenance ghastly pale, that the duke, hastily approaching the bed, clutched the old steward forcibly by the wrist.

"Yes, it must have been a dream, my lord," responded Purvis.

"I shall go up to London at once," said Marchmont, with strange abruptness.

"What, my lord? Leave in the middle of the night?"

"Yes, to be sure. And why not?" cried the duke, almost fiercely. "Do I not pay hosts of servants to do my bidding? Let some of the lazy dogs rise and get the carriage in readiness."

"But, my lord," Purvis ventured to suggest, "possibly strange things may be said, if your Grace does this. I should be questioned, and what could I say?"

"True," ejaculated Marchmont, who was evidently bewildered how to act.

"I know, my lord," continued the well-meaning old man, "that it must be a very painful thing for your Grace to have the recollection of long-past occurrences so cruelly revived, for I have not forgotten how dear your brother was to your lordship, and how you loved your poor uncle also —"

"Enough, Purvis," interrupted the duke, quickly. "I will not leave to-night. But I charge you, my faithful friend — I charge you, Purvis, not to breathe a single syllable —"

" Oh, no, my lord, not for worlds. Does your Grace feel better now? "

" Yes, yes; the effect is passing off. I am almost sorry — But tell me, Purvis, do you not think I am very foolish — very weak-minded to have yielded — "

" No, my lord, not at all," answered the steward; " it was natural enough — "

The Duke of Marchmont drank another tumbler of water, and, taking up the wax candle, bade the steward good night. But as his fingers rested upon the handle of the door, he again turned toward the old man, and enjoined him to the strictest secrecy, — an injunction which Purvis for the fifth or sixth time promised to obey. Then the duke went forth, and if any one had seen him as he moved along the passages and descended the stairs leading to his own apartment, there would have been no cause to envy the lordly owner of the proud domain of Oaklands. His looks were thrown nervously about; the sounds of his own footsteps, his own shadow upon the wall, appeared to smite his very soul with a mortal terror. At length he regained his chamber, and then locking the door, he looked under the bed, behind the curtains, behind the window draperies also; he passed into his dressing-room, — into every nook and corner did he tremblingly and nervously peer, as if afraid to trust himself again to his couch unless previously assured that there was no one in his suite of apartments.

And thus, let the reader rest assured, it often and often is with the patrician dwellers in splendid mansions and in marble palaces. Their lordly titles constitute no patent to guarantee them against the same feelings, the same sensations, to which all the rest of the world are liable. Rank and riches may elevate them to the loftiest pedestals, but their souls move in the same sphere as those of the commonest herd of human beings. They belong to the same earth; they breathe the same atmosphere. Strip them of their robes, and who shall be enabled to single them out as the members of a privileged order? All these circumstances prove the hideous mockery of raising one set of persons high above their fellows. In the aristocratic heaven they may blaze like meteors, but if they fall down upon the earth they prove to be merely stones. In the eyes of man only does the distinction exist: in the eyes of Heaven all are equal.

The same atmosphere which is breathed by the most wretched mendicant passes through the nostrils of a king; the same breeze which ruffles the rags of the crawling beggar pours its tide into the saloon of beauty and fashion, and the same air also which wafts the plaintive cry of poverty bears upon its wing the dulcet tones of melody in the drawing-rooms of the high-born and the opulent.

But to continue our tale. When the old steward was once more alone, — his chamber being left in total darkness, — he pondered on all that he had heard with a kind of superstitious awe. He could scarcely think that it was all a dream on his ducal master's part. He had said that such was his impression, because he would have said almost anything to allay Marchmont's terrors, and to prevent himself from catching their infection. But he knew the duke well enough to be certain that he was not thus to be moved by ordinary and fanciful incidents. The conviction was strong within him that he had seen a tall, dark shape in the saloon whence the cabinet opened, and that this was no effect of the imagination. Might it not be the same shape which the duke had likewise seen? But if so, was this shape a real living being? Or was it one from another world? If it were the broad daylight, Purvis would no doubt have concluded in favour of the first alternative, but as it was night, he was enveloped in darkness, and still under the influence of that spectacle of horror and dismay which his master had presented to his view, he was far more prone to decide on behalf of the latter.

An hour passed, and slumber was again coming gradually over the eyes of the steward, when he was startled by hearing the handle of the door turn. It opened, and some one entered.

"Hush," said the individual, in a low, deep voice. "Fear not; it is no enemy who seeks you."

The hair of Purvis had at first stood on end, and now, though his consternation was somewhat mitigated, he was nevertheless unable to give utterance to a word. Through the darkness of the room he beheld a form, darker than that darkness, move toward the side of his couch, and the perspiration stood cold upon his brow.

"You are Purvis?" said that same low, deep voice, speaking in a tone of inquiry.

"Yes, I am he," answered the steward, shudderingly. "But in the name of Heaven, who are you?"

"Your master who has been hither has doubtless told you," was the slowly given and solemn response.

"Good God, is it possible?" exclaimed the steward, starting up in his couch. "Mr. Bertram Vivian, or, rather, Lord Clandon, I should say?"

"Yes, I am that unhappy being," was the rejoinder. "But compose yourself —"

"Oh, what am I to do? What am I to do?" murmured the bewildered steward, for he knew not whether to bid the long lost one avaunt as a blood-stained murderer, or whether to speak to him kindly as one who had perhaps bitterly expiated the past, for that he was innocent the old man dared not think, or else wherefore should he come thus stealthily like a robber in the dead of the night?

"Purvis," said Lord Clandon, for such was the denomination to which Bertram Vivian was entitled, "I can judge what is passing in your mind. But if I were guilty, it would be useless to declare that long years of penitence have gone far to atone for my crime, because this much you would doubtless comprehend. On the other hand, if I be innocent, the time is not yet come when I can stand in that light before the world. Is it possible, Purvis, that you can so far forget the past — or else suspend your judgment altogether — as to bear with me a few minutes for the present?"

"Yes, yes, my lord," answered the old steward, both bewildered and affected. "What would you with me? Why come so stealthily hither? Why terrify your brother as you have done? Oh, my lord, speak, speak!"

"You must not question me, Purvis," answered Bertram, still speaking in that same low, deep tone as before; while in respect to his form, it was scarcely perceptible amidst the obscurity that prevailed, and as for his countenance, no glimpse of it could the old man catch.

"Yes, my lord, there is one question that I must put," cried Purvis, vehemently, and he quivered with suspense. "That unhappy lady — the Duchess Eliza —"

"Purvis, not a syllable in respect to the past," interrupted Lord Clandon, almost sternly. "Suffer me to question you, and answer me as if you were testifying your compassion

toward a man who for many long years has drunk so deeply of the cup of bitterness — ”

“ My lord,” sobbed the old steward, “ I am moved as if I were a child,” — for his generous heart was touched by the ineffable mournfulness of the long lost one’s tone. “ Question me as you choose, and I will answer. But, oh, if you could only breathe a single word to make me fancy — ”

“ Purvis, I always knew that you possessed a good heart,” interrupted Lord Clandon, “ and by everything sacred I adjure you to suspend your judgment concerning me. When to-morrow comes, look upon this visit which I have paid to your chamber, as if it were a dream. But if the conviction rest in your mind that it was a reality, then with equal solemnity do I adjure you to keep upon your lips the seal of an inviolable silence. The time may come — it must come, and shortly too — when that seal shall be lifted, and perhaps, Purvis, you may then rejoice that you have borne patiently and kindly with one who has known unhappiness as dire and bitter as mine.”

“ Ah, my lord,” sobbed the old steward, “ when I look back over a number of years and think of what you were when last I saw you, — young, handsome, and elegant — ”

“ Enough, Purvis,” again interrupted Bertram, and now his hand, seeking that of the old steward, pressed it warmly for an instant, and Purvis himself did not shudderingly withdraw that hand of his as if from the grasp of a murderer.

There was a pause of a few moments, and then Bertram said, “ You will be surprised at the subject on which I am about to question you. But it is needful; it is of importance — ”

“ Proceed, my lord, proceed,” cried the old man, who was under an influence which strangely attracted him toward the long lost one.

“ There was a lady staying beneath this roof,” continued Bertram, “ and though unseen myself, I beheld you walking with her.”

“ Yes, my lord, it was an Eastern lady,” answered Purvis, “ and I regret to add that it was for no honourable motive she was somehow or another led to come hither.”

“ But she experienced no outrage at my brother’s hands?” said Bertram, quickly.

The old steward hesitated for a few moments, and then

he answered, "I warned her, my lord, — yes, I warned her; I considered it to be my duty. She defended herself, and it was —"

But he stopped short, for he was just upon the point of adding something the bare idea of which struck him as fearful to a degree, considering the person to whom he was thus speaking.

"Finish your sentence, and deal with me frankly," said Bertram. "I have particular reasons for the questions which I am now putting, and for those which I may yet have to put."

"No, my lord, I cannot, I cannot," murmured the old man.

"Purvis, I beseech you, — nay, I implore and entreat, by all the misery I have endured —"

"Well, my lord, it was with a certain weapon — Ah! for Heaven's sake do tell me — do, for God's sake justify the wild hope which thrills in my heart. Say the one word which shall make me believe that it was not your hand —"

"Purvis, give not thus way to your feelings," interrupted Lord Clandon, "but for Heaven's sake be calm and collected. I understand you. That Eastern lady defended herself with a certain weapon. But how came it in her hand? Tell me, Purvis, I conjure you, tell me everything."

Purvis proceeded to explain, but with many self-interruptions and impassioned ejaculations, as various thoughts were excited in his mind in rapid succession, — how Indora had arrived at Oaklands, how he had escorted her over the mansion and through the grounds, how she had questioned him much in respect to the long-past tragedy, how he had shown her the fatal weapon, which he had preserved, how she had so mysteriously and stealthily possessed herself of it, how ere her departure she had restored it to the place where it was kept, how the Duke of Marchmont had questioned him on the subject, and how they had gone together to the cabinet to ascertain whether it was there, when the wax light was so suddenly dashed from his Grace's hand. During this recital, Bertram was frequently compelled to encourage the old man to proceed, to soothe his excited feelings, to check him when he sought to become the questioner, and to induce him to extend his explanations to those details of Indora's ramble to particular spots which

specially related to the tragedy of a bygone year. For upwards of an hour did Lord Clandon and the steward thus remain in conversation in the deep darkness of that chamber, until at length the mysterious visitor was about to take his departure.

"Purvis," he said, "you have rendered me a service the extent of which you may some day comprehend. But by everything sacred do I again conjure you to treat this visit of mine as if it had never taken place. Not a syllable to your master, not a word to your fellow servants. Remember, Purvis," continued Bertram, in a tone of the deepest solemnity, "for the present I am under the ban of the law, and I need but hint at what would be my fate if through any indiscretion on your part —"

"My lord," interrupted the old man, sobbing violently, "I would not do such a thing. No I could not, even if I did not entertain that wild hope —"

"Enough," ejaculated Bertram, and again the steward's hand was for an instant pressed in his own.

The next moment there was the sound of a door cautiously opening and shutting; all was then silent in the chamber. Sleep presently fell upon the steward's eyes, and when he awoke in the morning, he was at a loss to conjecture whether the main incidents of the past night were a reality, or whether it were all a wild and fanciful dream.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DUKE

It was evening, — the evening of the day which followed the incidents of the memorable night depicted in the previous chapter, and Madame Angelique was seated as usual in her elegantly furnished apartment, when the Duke of Marchmont was announced. She had little expected to see him so soon, but she rose from her seat with the conviction that she might congratulate him on his success with the Oriental lady, when she stopped short on beholding the extraordinary expression of his countenance. It was pale and careworn; there was a restless trouble in the eyes, and it was also evident that he had been drinking.

“What in Heaven’s name is the matter, my lord?” she asked, seized with consternation lest she herself should become involved in some dilemma with respect to the machinations which she had now no doubt had resulted in failure.

“Perdition take me, and everybody as well as everything else,” said the duke, flinging himself upon a seat. “Give me a glass of wine. No, a tumbler. Fill it up to the brim; spare not your champagne.”

“But, my lord, do tell me,” said Madame Angelique, her countenance turning so deadly pale that the rouge sat like plastered patches upon it, “do tell me — ”

“The wine, I say,” ejaculated Marchmont, fiercely.

With trembling hands Madame Angelique filled a tumbler with champagne, and the duke tossed it off at a draught.

“There,” he said, endeavouring to force himself to laugh with an air of gaiety, “now I am cheered. It is astonishing what admirable effects are produced by wine — delicious wine.”

"Pray tell me, my lord, what has occurred?" and the infamous woman was still quivering with suspense.

"All your precious schemes resulted in nothing," responded Marchmont, "or in something much worse than nothing, for my discomfiture was complete, my failure signal, — perdition take it!"

"And will there be any evil consequences? Does she threaten law?" demanded Madame Angelique, quickly.

"No, no; we are safe enough upon that score," rejoined the duke.

"Then wherefore look so wild? Why appear thus troubled? Your Grace has frightened me so —"

"I scarcely know what is the matter with me," answered the duke. "I too have been frightened — But no, no, that is all nonsense on my part. In a word, I don't know what I am saying. Give me more wine."

"Pardon me, my lord," said Madame Angelique, "but I really think you have taken enough."

"Why, you old wretch," he exclaimed angrily; "it is wine bought with my money, I'll be bound."

"Well, well, my lord, pray do not get out of temper," and she filled him a tumbler accordingly.

"This is the elixir that makes man forget his cares and drowns thought," cried the duke, affecting a hilarious mood, but it was a feeble and sickly endeavour. "There," he added, "that cheers me, — that inspires me," and yet an almost ghastly expression of care and anguish swept over his features.

Madame Angelique gazed upon him with mingled terror and astonishment. She knew not what to think. In spite of the assurance he had given her, she still laboured under the apprehension that some trouble would arise from their defeated projects in respect to Indora.

"What ails your Grace?" she asked, in an agony of suspense; "there is something unnatural in all this."

"If you said that there was something extraordinary and incomprehensible in the Eastern lady's conduct, you would be right enough," responded Marchmont. "Instead of finding one who was to be easily vanquished —"

"I never told your Grace that the conquest would be an easy one," interrupted Madame Angelique. "I warned you that she was a paragon of virtue —"

"A dragon you might have said," replied Marchmont, bitterly, "for when I found my way to her chamber, she brandished a dagger in my face," and again did an expression of ghastly horror sweep over his countenance.

"Well, my lord," said Madame Angelique, almost contemptuously, "and were you not prepared for resistance? What! you, a man, to be frightened at a dagger in the hands of a woman?"

"Perdition take you, old beldame," vociferated the duke, fiercely; "how dare you make your insolent remarks upon my conduct?"

"I crave your Grace's pardon," cried Madame Angelique, with an air of frightened humility. "I only fancied that I had prepared your Grace sufficiently to expect some degree of resistance —"

"Silence, and listen," interrupted the duke, sharply; then with another attempt to affect a gay and hilarious mood, he burst out into a laugh, saying, "Come, my dear madam, I was only jesting. I did not mean to offend you, but your good wine has put me into such spirits, ha, ha!" and there was sickliness and febleness in his forced merriment.

"Well, my lord, the scheme failed, no matter how. But why — why," asked Madame Angelique, urgently, "has it affected you thus?"

"There is a mystery which must be cleared up," was the duke's response, "and you alone can undertake the task. Indora had some ulterior motive which you never penetrated. She is not the credulous, inexperienced creature you take her for. She had some design in going to Oaklands, and what that design was you must discover. A thousand guineas if you succeed, but if you fail, you shall never again see me cross your threshold. This is plain English; do you comprehend it?"

"I do, my lord, but I am perplexed and bewildered," and the woman's looks justified her words. "What earthly motive could the lady have had —"

"That, I tell you," exclaimed the duke, passionately, "is what you must find out. While this lady was at Oaklands, she was asking a thousand questions, prying into all sorts of things, troubling herself with matters which one would have fancied to be scarcely known to her at all, —

in short, Madame Angelique, she had some deep design, of that I am convinced."

The infamous woman reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute, and then she said, "The only way in which I can possibly learn anything is through the ayah Sagoonah, but as I have previously informed your Grace, she is a woman of a few words —"

"Lavish gold upon her, and it will loosen her tongue," ejaculated Marchmont. "You have brought me into all these perplexities, and it is for you to extricate me, — perdition take them!"

"I really am at a loss to comprehend your Grace," said Madame Angelique, with an air of the most unfeigned surprise. "So long as this Eastern lady does not threaten us with law proceedings, or seek to punish us for anything that has taken place, what earthly reason has your lordship to apprehend that her visit to Oaklands can involve you in any peril?"

"No matter," exclaimed the duke; "there is something sinister in that lady's proceedings, and I cannot get it out of my mind that so far from being your dupe, she made a tool of you. Pray try and recollect the precise terms in which the subject of that visit to Oaklands was first introduced."

Madame Angelique again reflected for a brief space, and then she said, "Well, I do remember that it was of her own accord she remarked that she had heard of your beautiful seat at Oaklands and should like much to see it. I had just mentioned your Grace's name as if quite accidentally, when she made that observation —"

"It is as clear as daylight," exclaimed the duke, angrily; "you have been outwitted, and I am the victim!"

"The victim, my lord. But how? Your Grace really makes me half-inclined to think that there is something more than you suffer me to know, and unless you give me the fullest explanation, it is impossible for me to fathom this mystery."

"You have got nothing to do," returned Marchmont, "but to learn that lady's motive for wishing to pay a visit to Oaklands. It was not through mere curiosity, — of that I am well convinced. There are hundreds of beautiful country-seats, and wherefore should she thus have pitched upon mine? Besides, I tell you that I saw enough of her to

convince me that so far from being inexperienced in our habits, manners, and customs, she is in every way as civilized and accomplished a woman as any English lady in the land."

"Well, my lord," said Madame Angelique, "I will lose no time in seeing what Sagoonah the ayah can do for me."

"Be it so," responded the duke, and having quaffed another tumbler of wine, he took his departure.

On returning to his mansion in Belgrave Square, the Duke of Marchmont learned that Mr. Armytage was waiting to see him. An expression of annoyance passed over his countenance, but he repaired to the room where Zoe's father was seated. Composing his looks in as amiable a manner as he possibly could, he gave Armytage his hand, saying, "Well, what brings you hither at half-past ten o'clock at night?"

"I regret to say," replied Armytage, "that I am compelled to beg a boon —"

"What! another?" ejaculated the duke, utterly unable to repress his anger and annoyance. "But of course," he added, hastily, "it is not of a pecuniary character?"

"Indeed, my lord," responded Mr. Armytage, "I am sorry to say —"

"But what the deuce is coming over you, my good fellow?" exclaimed Marchmont. "You who for years were so prosperous have of late appeared to be going altogether in the contrary direction."

"I hope and trust, my lord," responded Armytage, "that it is merely a temporary inconvenience which I am suffering. I shall put myself right shortly."

"Ah! so you told me six or seven months ago, when I lent you fifty thousand pounds, which, I need not remind you, have never been repaid."

"It is perfectly true, my lord," answered Zoe's father, growing more and more doggedly decisive in his tone, "but it is not the less certain that if I do not have twenty-five thousand pounds to-morrow by midday, I shall be a ruined man."

"Twenty-five thousand pounds, Travers," ejaculated the duke.

"Hush, my lord! that name!" said Armytage, hastily.

"Perdition take the name," cried Marchmont, as if driven almost to desperation.

"And yet methinks," said Armytage, coldly, "it was

not altogether without your Grace's concurrence — and in some sense by your counsel — that I abandoned it.”

“ Well, well, but about this money which you require? ” rejoined the duke, petulantly. “ It is altogether out of the question — I cannot afford it — I — ”

“ And I, my lord, ” answered the other decisively, “ cannot afford to be ruined. ”

“ But how is all this? ” demanded the duke.

“ When I applied to your Grace for the fifty thousand pounds, ” responded Armytage, “ I informed you that I had suffered materially by that scoundrel Preston, who committed forgeries to such a large amount. During the past six months I have been endeavouring to retrieve my losses, but somehow or another fortune has set in steadily against me, and I have only incurred fresh ones. ”

“ And what chance have you of improving your position? ” demanded the duke. “ I thought you told me when I lent you the former amount that you had numerous sums to receive from noblemen and gentlemen in the course of a short time? ”

“ And so I had, my lord, ” replied Mr Armytage, “ but — ”

“ But what? Has that money all gone likewise? ”

“ There is no use denying the truth, ” rejoined Armytage; “ the fact is, I have been exceedingly unlucky, and if I do not pay this sum of twenty-five thousand into my banker's hand to-morrow to meet certain bills that will be due, I shall be a ruined man. On the other hand, if your Grace will assist me, I can immediately procure fresh pecuniary accommodation — ”

“ Then you will have to borrow in order to be enabled to go on? ” exclaimed the duke.

“ Yes, but fortune is sure to take a turn. In a word, my lord, I am deeply interested in a splendid speculation which only requires money to float it on to complete success. ”

“ Then you, a money-lender, ” cried the duke, “ are now in the hands of money-lenders? ”

“ It is a highly respectable solicitor who is assisting me, ” rejoined Armytage, — “ a Mr. Coleman, of Bedford Row, Holborn. The fact is, he has advanced me this twenty-five thousand pounds which I have got to pay to-morrow, and if my bills be all taken up, I can go to him with the certainty of obtaining fifty thousand. ”

"But out of that fifty thousand," said the duke, "would you pay me back the twenty-five you wish me to advance?"

Armytage hesitated for a moment, and then said, "Yes, my lord, I will," but it was in a way as if he thought to himself that if he did repay the sum he could speedily have it back again in case of need.

"I do not think, Travers, that you would deceive me —"

"Pray, my lord, be careful about that name. I don't know how it is, but of late your Grace has frequently dropped it inadvertently."

"Yes, I am afraid I have," answered the duke, in an abstracted manner. "Well, come to me at ten o'clock tomorrow morning, and you shall have the amount. But remember, it is to be repaid in the course of a few days, for if not, it would put me to a serious inconvenience. And pray, Armytage, mind what you are about, or you will ruin yourself. Do your daughter and her husband know of these difficulties?"

"Heaven forbid, my lord!" replied Armytage. "Zoe has gone abroad."

"Gone abroad?" ejaculated Marchmont. "Of course her husband has accompanied her —"

"No, she has gone alone, — that is to say, with only two female servants."

"And what is the meaning of this?" cried the duke; "you don't intend me to understand that she is separated from her husband?"

"Nothing of the sort, my lord," returned Armytage. "Meredith was most anxious to accompany her, but she begged and implored that she might go alone. Her health has been failing for some little time past, and the physicians ordered her to visit a more genial clime. Meredith and I were compelled to let her have her own way, for if we had refused it would only have agitated her and rendered her worse. I think that she is the least thing inclined to be fanciful, — not exactly hypochondriacal, — but she has got it into her head that a few months' complete seclusion in the south of France or in Italy will put her completely to rights."

"Then, in that case," observed the duke, "it was much better to let her have her own way."

"This is what I represented to Meredith," said Mr. Armytage, "but I had a great deal of trouble in persuading him

to consent. He is dotingly fond of Zoe; she assures me that nothing can exceed his love for her, and she would be completely happy were it not for this nervous illness of hers."

After a little more conversation, Mr. Armytage took his leave, and when he was gone, the duke, on examining his banker's book, experienced the most bitter vexation on finding that the cheque which he had promised to give on the morrow would considerably overdraw his account. The duke's credit was however good, and consequently there was no difficulty in the way of his compliance with Mr. Armytage's exorbitant demand.

On the following day, at about eleven in the forenoon, Madame Angelique, apparelled in her plainest garb, proceeded to Bayswater, and walked about in the neighbourhood of the princess's villa. She presently saw Mark, the faithful intendant or majordomo of the household, issue from the dwelling; she pretended to be walking toward the main road, with the air of a person who had a settled and legitimate object in view, and thus she watched him until he entered an omnibus. When the vehicle was out of sight, she retraced her steps toward the neighbourhood of the villa, and in a few minutes she beheld Sagoonah in the garden. Approaching the fence, she gave a peculiar cough, which at once reached the ayah's keen ear, and the latter proceeded toward a spot where, shrouded from the view of the windows of the dwelling, she could converse with Madame Angelique.

"Your mistress has returned," she said to the ayah, "has she not?"

"Yes, she came back the day before yesterday," replied Sagoonah. "What was done?"

"Not that which we anticipated," rejoined Madame Angelique. "Your mistress possessed herself of a dagger, and so terrified the duke that he fled away from her presence."

"Then your duke," answered Sagoonah, her superb eyes flashing fire and her vermilion lips wreathing with ineffable scorn, "was a poor, paltry coward. Why do you seek me again?" she demanded, almost fiercely.

"Has the Lady Indora said nothing to you in order to account for her absence?" inquired Madame Angelique.

"Nothing," replied the ayah. "It is not probable that a great lady such as she is would enter into familiar discourse with her slave on a subject she would of course rather avoid."

"And is it impossible for you to draw her into conversation?" inquired Madame Angelique.

"Impossible on that point, I feel convinced," answered Sagoonah. "But can you think I shall attempt to serve you further when you throw away such golden opportunities?" and there was so sinister a light shining in the depths of her lustrous eyes that the wily Frenchwoman was strangely struck thereby.

"Sagoonah," she said, as a suspicion arose in her mind, "I think that it was not for the sake of the gold alone you undertook to serve my purpose?"

"And wherefore do you think that?" asked the ayah, coldly.

"Because there is a visible feeling of annoyance on your part at the failure of the enterprise. You wished your mistress to succumb to the Duke of Marchmont?" and Madame Angelique fixed her eyes keenly upon the countenance of the ayah.

"Explain yourself more fully," said Sagoonah, still with a cold and unruffled demeanour.

"Perhaps you have reason to dislike your mistress?" suggested Madame Angelique, "and you therefore aided in a scheme which was to effect her ruin. In a word, you were inspired by a hope of vengeance?"

"No, not vengeance," murmured the ayah, now all in an instant becoming profoundly agitated. "My mistress has ever been kind to me, but there is something here" — and she laid her hand upon her heart — "which seems to be an evil spirit prompting me to dreadful things."

"It is as I have said," resumed Madame Angelique: "you have some bitter feeling in respect to your mistress, and therefore you aided in the hope of working her ruin?"

"Woman," replied Sagoonah, fiercely, "the evil spirit has thrown you as a temptress in my way. Would that I had never seen you, or else that your plans had been effectually carried out. For now I have all the remorse of an evil deed, without the satisfaction of knowing that it was accomplished."

"Do not reproach me," said Madame Angelique, in that voice of cajolery which she knew so well how to assume, "but let us converse reasonably together. Ah!" she ejaculated, as another suspicion struck her, "perhaps you

wish to be introduced to one of those fine gentlemen of whom I have spoken to you, but you are afraid to fall unless your mistress has first set you the example? "

"Dare you think," asked Sagoonah, her eyes again flashing fire, "that impure thoughts harbour in this bosom of mine?" and with a mechanical gesture she partially drew aside the snow-white drapery from her swelling bust. "No, no; and if for a single instant I suffered you to imagine that I was merely yielding a preference to my mistress in respect to your vile purposes, it was simply because I did not then choose to enter into the slightest explanation with you. But rest assured that if I were brought into the presence of any one of the fine gentlemen to whom you have alluded — and if it were for an improper purpose — I would not be content with the mere brandishing of a dagger, as you say my mistress was, but I would plunge it deep down into the villain's heart."

As the ayah thus spoke, her eyes kept flashing continuous fires, her nostrils dilated, her bosom swelled, and she drew that bayadere form of hers up with so queenlike an air that her whole demeanour astonished and terrified Madame Angelique.

"There is some strange mystery in all this," thought the infamous woman to herself, and she was bewildered how to act. At length she said, "My dear Sagoonah, you treat me most singularly — most unkindly. Are we not to act together?"

"In what way?" demanded the ayah, who had all in a moment become calm and collected again. "If I still sought the ruin of my mistress, there is no means of effecting it, for the chance to which I helped you has been flung away in the most dastard manner."

"Can you not possibly ascertain the real motive which induced the Lady Indora to visit Oaklands? That is all I now require," continued Madame Angelique, "and I will lavish gold upon you if you succour me in my aim."

"Do you fancy, then," asked Sagoonah, fixing her dark eyes penetratingly upon Madame Angelique, "that the Lady Indora made use of you as an instrument to further her own views, instead of herself becoming your dupe and your victim?"

"Yes," exclaimed Madame Angelique, "that is the very

opinion which the Duke of Marchmont himself expressed, and which I now hold."

Sagoonah reflected profoundly for several minutes, during which so fixed was her gaze downward — so grave and unruffled was her countenance — that Madame Angelique could not form the slightest conjecture as to what things she was revolving in her mind. At length the ayah slowly raised her head, and again fixing her looks with an earnest but unfathomable expression upon the Frenchwoman, she said, "Then the Duke of Marchmont is afraid?"

"The conduct of the Lady Indora," replied Madame Angelique, "was of a character to engender vague and mysterious apprehensions —"

"Of what?" asked Sagoonah, quickly.

"I know not," responded Madame Angelique, really bewildered by the question. "Perhaps the duke imagines that a lady visiting his country-seat under such extraordinary circumstances, and conducting herself so singularly as she did, must have some hidden motive which is full of vague and ominous portent."

"And it is," rejoined Sagoonah; then again fixing her luminous dark eyes with a strange significancy on Madame Angelique, she added, "Rest assured that if the Duke of Marchmont do not most effectually ruin the Lady Indora, she will prove the ruin of him. Let this warning suffice, and now I charge you that you come hither to seek me no more."

"One word, Sagoonah, and only one word," exclaimed Madame Angelique, terrified by the ayah's solemnly given warning, for at the moment she could think of no ruin which might overtake the duke without involving herself at the same time, because she could not fancy that whatsoever mischief which Indora had it in her power to achieve was in any way apart from an invocation of the law's vengeance on those who had endeavoured to beguile her to her destruction.

Sagoonah was hastily turning away when she had given utterance to her words of warning, but at that entreaty of Madame Angelique's she stopped short, saying, "What would you yet with me?"

"You have told me," responded the Frenchwoman, "that ruin will overtake the duke if Indora herself be not ruined. In case of need, may I again rely upon your services?"

Sagoonah reflected deeply for a few instants, and then said, "To-morrow, at this same hour, I will be here."

Having thus spoken, she passed hastily away, and her white raiment was lost to Madame Angelique's view amongst the dense foliage of the garden.

CHAPTER XXVII

MR. SHADBOLT

BETWEEN nine and ten o'clock in the evening, we shall again find the Duke of Marchmont and Madame Angelique closeted together in the luxuriously furnished sitting-room which the latter was wont to occupy. The infamous woman had explained to the duke all which passed between herself and Sagoonah, and Marchmont was deeply agitated thereby. Madame Angelique had not as yet questioned him as to the particular cause of this trouble, for she thought that she more or less knew it, and that it concerned herself as much as him, but she presently said, "How was it that your Grace assured me last evening that we had nothing to apprehend in the shape of exposure or law proceedings?"

"I scarcely know what I said," he answered. "You saw that I was excited and bewildered —"

"But what can she do?" demanded Madame Angelique, nervously.

"If she were to lay an information before a magistrate," returned the duke, "you would at once be arrested, and though the privilege of the peerage would save me from the same extent of ignominy that would overtake you, yet the exposure would be terrific for me likewise."

"And yet," cried Madame Angelique, as a remembrance smote her, "the ayah never told me that the princess meditated my ruin. And then, too, I cannot understand why Indora should have gone prying and peering into the affairs at Oaklands, as your Grace last night informed me she had done. After all, my lord," added the woman, clinging to the hope which had thus sprung up within her, "I think that it is your Grace who somehow or another has alone cause for apprehension."

"You think so?" said the duke, and a strange expression passed over his countenance. "Listen, Madame Angelique," he continued to observe, "you do not know these Eastern women, — it is impossible to fathom their designs. They are stealthy and treacherous as the serpents which belong to their native clime. Sagoonah's warning is not to be neglected. Rest assured that the Princess Indora is terribly vindictive —"

At this moment a domestic entered, and whispered something in the ear of Madame Angelique.

"Very good," said the woman; "I will come in a moment."

"What is it," asked the duke, when the servant had withdrawn.

"A gentleman who has just entered the saloon from Monsieur Bertin's house," was the response.

"Then pray get rid of your patron, whoever he is, as soon as possible," said Marchmont, in a tone of visible ill-humour, "for our conversation is of much greater moment just at present than any visits in the way of business."

"I will not be many minutes absent," responded the Frenchwoman. "It is doubtless a stranger — one of neighbour Bertin's recommendation — and I am bound to be courteous and civil toward him."

Having thus spoken, Madame Angelique issued from her private apartment, leaving the duke by himself there, and she proceeded to that saloon which on former occasions we have described. None of the young ladies were there at the moment, but she saw that the individual who had just been introduced thither was carefully examining the mirror-contrived door. He was handsomely dressed, but the keen, experienced eye of Madame Angelique at once detected that he was not a gentleman, in the common acceptance of the term. Indeed, there was something vulgar in his appearance, and he did not seem accustomed to the elegant apparel which he had on. A suspicion of evil flashed to the mind of the infamous proprietress of the establishment, but putting on a smiling countenance, she accosted the visitor, who had been so absorbed in examining the mirror-contrived door that he had not in the first instance noticed her entrance from the opposite side of the room.

"You are Madame Angelique?" he said.

"I am," was the response, and she affected to smile with the utmost affability.

"Well, ma'am," rejoined the man, "and I am a detective officer."

A faint scream burst from the guilty woman's lips, and she felt as if she were about to faint, for in that announcement there was something terrible to her ears and fraught with direst apprehension to her soul.

"But do not alarm yourself," he almost immediately resumed, "for I come in quite a friendly manner."

Infinite was the relief produced by this second announcement, and Madame Angelique instantaneously began to overwhelm her visitor with attentions. She made him sit down at the table, she produced wine and other refreshments from the amply supplied sideboard, and her visitor appeared well inclined to do justice to them.

"You are an amiable woman, Madame Angelique," he said, having tossed off his second bumper, "and I could not find it in my heart to hurt you. My name, ma'am, is Shadbolt. Perhaps you may have heard it before?"

"I cannot say I recollect it," answered Madame Angelique. "But do explain what brought you hither, — for I am still so agitated and excited —"

"Calm yourself, ma'am," interrupted Mr. Shadbolt; "you have no reason to be afraid. The truth is," he continued, making an inroad into a sponge cake by means of a silver knife, and then immediately applying the same instrument to a melon, out of which he cut a huge slice, — "the truth is, ma'am, certain information has been given to the police —"

"By whom?" asked Madame Angelique, eagerly, and she was trembling from head to foot.

"Ah! that's more than I can tell," replied Shadbolt. "All I know is that by some means or another an intimation was conveyed to the commissioners of police this very day that your establishment was of such and such a description, — of course, ma'am, I don't like to make indelicate allusions. By goles, this sherry's first-rate, and the port's stunning!"

"The commissioners of police," murmured the wretched Madame Angelique; "what will become of me?"

"Nothing unpleasant, if you only listen to me," answered Mr. Shadbolt. "It was lucky for you, ma'am, that I was

appointed to look into the little matter, for if it had been any other of the detectives, you would have found yourself in Queer Street, and no mistake. But, I, my dear madam, am an exception to the rule; I know what gentility is, and I wouldn't think of acting harsh toward a lady of your —" he was about to say "respectability," but he thought he had better use the word "generosity," and he substituted it accordingly.

"I cannot be too grateful to you," exclaimed Madame Angelique, to whose mind an immense relief was imparted by the praises which Mr. Shadbolt sang of himself.

"You see, ma'am," continued this individual, who was most impartially dispensing his attention to all the wines, fruits, and cakes upon the table, "the information which was sent to the commissioners described how your neighbour, the French tailor, has a pleasant little understanding with you, and how a well-dressed person, by whispering a word in Monsieur Bertin's ear, to the effect that he has got an appointment with a lady in your house, could at once obtain admission, and I must do you the justice, ma'am, to observe that of all the neat, compact, and useful contrivances I ever saw, that looking-glass door beats them all into fits."

"Good Heaven, then, the secret is known to the commissioners?" gasped Madame Angelique.

"You ought to console yourself," replied Mr. Shadbolt, "by the reflection that it is a wonder it should have been kept a secret so long."

"And what will you do to help me? How will you serve me as a friend?" asked the Frenchwoman, eagerly.

"It all depends, ma'am," was the response. "Everything has its price. No reflections, ma'am, but you have your price for the pleasant little accommodation you furnish here, and without being more personal than is absolutely necessary, I may add that I, Isaac Shadbolt, — or honest Ike, as I am generally called, — have my price also."

"Anything, everything, if you will only shield me," said Madame Angelique, in a flutter of mingled hope and suspense.

"Come, ma'am, fifty guineas won't hurt you?"

"A hundred," exclaimed Madame Angelique, her generosity becoming lavish in proportion to the amount of peril that was to be averted.

"I think I said a hundred," observed Shadbolt, coolly, "but at all events we'll make it so."

Out came Madame Angelique's purse; with a nervous hand she counted down what she conceived to be five bank-notes for twenty pounds each, but one happened to be for fifty, though when Mr. Shadbolt reckoned them over with an air of easy indifference, he did not consider it necessary to draw her attention to the little oversight.

"And now, ma'am," he said, "I tell you what must be done. I shall make my report to-morrow, and it will be to the effect that though there certainly is that looking-glass door of communication, yet that you have given up the business, and you are now devoting yourself altogether to the millinery line. I shall add too that I contrived to learn that the looking-glass door is to be walled up —"

"And so it shall be," cried Madame Angelique. "Anything — anything —"

"Don't be foolish, ma'am," interrupted Mr. Shadbolt, having tossed off his ninth or tenth bumper; "you needn't do anything of the sort. Only be more careful in future; don't let that French tailor suffer a soul to pass through his house unless he knows he is all right, pay me a cool hundred every year, and you may go on driving as roaring a trade as ever."

"Then you do really think that for the present there is no danger?" said Madame Angelique.

"Not an atom of it, if you follow my advice. Honest Ike Shadbolt is not the man to deceive a lady of your respect—generosity, I mean. And now, ma'am, I'll be wishing you good night."

Mr. Shadbolt, having consigned the bank-notes to his pocket, lingered to drink one more glass of wine to the lady's health, then just one more to his own, then a last one to the highly philanthropic sentiment of "Here's better luck!" He was then advancing toward the mirror-contrived door with a somewhat unsteady pace, when Madame Angelique said, "Have you really no idea who gave the information to the police? Do you think it was a lady?"

Mr. Shadbolt had in reality no more idea than the man in the moon, but under the influence of the wine and the circumstances, he thought it necessary to appear knowing, and he therefore said, "Well, ma'am, betwixt you and me and the post, you are not very far wrong."

" Ah, I see you know more than you have chosen to tell me," exclaimed Madame Angelique. " Pray be candid — "

" Well, you see, ma'am, it would not exactly do for us secret officers to tell everything we do know."

" It was a lady, then," cried Madame Angelique. " Was it — was it a lady at — at — Bayswater? "

" Well, if you push me into a corner," answered Shadbolt, with a look of tipsy knowingness, " it was," — but let the reader understand well that the fellow was in reality in entire ignorance respecting the source of that information which had been sent to the commissioners of police.

He took his departure, and Madame Angelique hastened back to the room where she had left the Duke of Marchmont. Although the matter had ended satisfactorily to a certain extent, and even more so than she had at first dared hope when the terrible term " detective officer " smote upon her ears, yet she was still labouring under a considerable degree of agitation, and the Duke of Marchmont was instantaneously struck by her appearance.

" Something new? " he exclaimed, petulantly. " Misfortunes never come alone; they strike us blow upon blow. But what is it? "

Madame Angelique explained everything that had taken place, not forgetting to add how she had wormed out (as she really believed she had done) the admission from Isaac Shadbolt that it was a lady at Bayswater who had given the information to the police commissioners. This piece of intelligence astonished Marchmont. Indora had given him to understand, when at Oaklands, that there would be no exposure, and this assurance he had considered to include an equal exception of Madame Angelique from the wreaking of vengeance. In fact, he had not really dreaded law proceedings or any such signs of Indora's wrath at all, though on this evening of which we are writing, he had suffered Madame Angelique to believe the contrary, simply because he sought to work upon her fears, bend her to his purpose, and induce her to combine with him in some plot against the Eastern lady. But from the intelligence he had just received, it appeared to be unquestionable that Indora was positively setting herself to work to inflict chastisement upon Madame Angelique.

" But how on earth," he exclaimed, " could Indora have

obtained an insight into the mysteries of your establishment?"

"That is what puzzles and bewilders me," responded the infamous woman. "Oh, I wish — I wish I had never had anything to do with those Orientals!"

"You see, my worthy friend," answered the duke, bitterly, "that we are both of us involved in the most alarming perplexities. Just now you were flattering yourself that Indora did not mean to include you in her vengeance —"

"She has already begun," said Madame Angelique, "and I tremble lest it should not end there."

"End there?" exclaimed Marchmont; "it would be preposterous to indulge in such a hope. I tell you that these Eastern women are as vindictive as tigresses and as cunning as serpents. We have become the objects of this vengeance and this subtlety —"

"What is to be done?" cried Madame Angelique, literally shaking herself in her mingled spite and despair.

The duke looked her hard in the face, and said, "Did you not ask Sagoonah whether she would again serve you? Did she not confess that she has some feeling, no matter what, that prompts her to yearn for the ruin of her mistress? And has she not consented to meet you in the forenoon of tomorrow?"

"Yes, yes; this is true enough," replied Madame Angelique. "But what can we do?"

"What idea had you in your head," inquired Marchmont, "when you asked if she would again assist you?"

"I had no fixed idea. I had not thought of anything; I was perplexed and bewildered at the time, — frightened too —"

"And yet," rejoined Marchmont, still eyeing the Frenchwoman significantly, "you did think of making some use of Sagoonah?"

"I see that your lordship has an idea in your head," said Madame Angelique, hastily. "Tell me, what is it? I would do anything, — yes, anything, anything, to rid ourselves of that enemy."

"Anything, did you say?" asked the duke, and he drew his chair more closely to that which the woman occupied.

"Good heavens, how strange your Grace is looking at me!" she cried, and then in a faltering voice she added,

“What — what do you mean, my lord? What would you have done? What — what would you do?”

“Indora,” answered Marchmont, hovering as it were around the point to which he longed to come, but on which he dared not too abruptly seek to settle the Frenchwoman’s mind, — “Indora is an obstacle or an eyesore, for some reason or another, in Sagoonah’s path?”

“Yes, my lord. Well?” and Madame Angelique held her breath half-hushed.

“Well,” continued the duke, and he drew his chair closer still toward the milliner, who sat just opposite to him, “if Sagoonah were to remove that obstacle or eyesore, it were all the better for us?”

“Yes, my lord, if Sagoonah would,” said Madame Angelique, in a low, deep voice. “But — ”

“But what?” asked the duke; then after a pause, during which he gazed significantly upon the milliner, he added, “Sagoonah is to meet you to-morrow, and the slightest hint, if backed by gold — ”

“Yes, a hint, my lord,” whispered Madame Angelique, at the same time that she glanced furtively to the right and left as if to assure herself that there was no listener.

“And it is for you to give this hint,” replied Marchmont, slowly and deliberately accentuating his words.

Then those two — that unscrupulous aristocrat and that infamous woman — exchanged prolonged looks of intelligence; their meaning was now beyond disguise, and if it were not, these looks would have transfused it. There was a pause of several minutes, and at length Marchmont, laying his hand upon the milliner’s arm, said, “Is it to be done?”

“Yes, it is to be done,” she responded, and a long-drawn breath followed that answer.

Marchmont rose from his seat, filled two glasses with wine, handed one to Madame Angelique, and tossed the contents of the other down his throat. It was as if these two unprincipled creatures were ratifying in blood-red wine the compact of blood which was settled between them.

There was a little more conversation, and then the Duke of Marchmont took his departure.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SAGOONAH

ON the following day, punctual to the hour of appointment, Madame Angelique was at the spot where she was to meet Sagoonah. She was not kept many moments waiting before the ayah made her appearance, and the latter at once said, "Whatsoever you may have to tell me, be brief, for Mark is about the premises."

"Sagoonah," replied Madame Angelique, at once coming to the point, for the interview of the previous day had given her a deeper insight into the Hindu woman's character than she had ever obtained before, — "Sagoonah, have you a particular feeling to appease or gratify, and yet dare not follow its bent?"

"What would you have me do?" asked the ayah, her dark, lustrous eyes fixed searchingly upon the milliner's countenance.

"I know not what feeling inspires you toward your mistress," was Madame Angelique's quick rejoinder, "but this I do know, that if I entertained hate or jealousy in respect to another, I would not scruple to obey the impulse."

"I told you that you were a temptress in my path," replied Sagoonah, "and it is so," but she lingered at the fence, and her eyes wandered slowly over the Frenchwoman's countenance, while the white drapery rose and sank with the heavings of her bosom.

"I have been told," continued the milliner, "that the Hindu women are armed with a terrible fortitude, that they are courageous under all circumstances, that they are strong and firm, resolute and decided, in avenging the wrongs they have sustained, in appeasing the hatred excited within them,

and in removing the objects of their jealousy from their path. Again I say that I know not which of all these feelings animates you, but very certain am I that you have all that courage, all that resolution, all that strength of purpose — ”

“ What words are these,” said Sagoonah, in a deep voice, “ which you are breathing in my ear? And wherefore do they thus sink down into those recesses of my heart where the evil spirit lurks? ”

She pressed both her hands upon her left bosom as if to subdue the heavings which sprang from the agitation of the heart beneath; she moaned in spirit; she seemed to shudder with the thought that was thrilling through her brain.

“ There is a way,” continued Madame Angelique, protruding her head over the fence in such a manner that she could speak in a whisper almost close to Sagoonah’s ear, — “ there is a way by which vengeance, jealousy, or hatred may be gratified, and yet no risk run. What, for instance, if a dagger were planted in the heart of an enemy, and the right hand of that enemy were so placed as to seem as if it had just fallen from the hilt after dealing the blow? Or it might be the same with a knife — ”

Indescribable was the fiendlike look which Sagoonah slowly bent upon the execrable woman who was thus tempting her, — a look in which malicious satisfaction, fierce resolution, burning hope, and other strong feelings as well as dark passions concentrated all their power.

“ Here is a heavy purse, full of golden guineas,” said Madame Angelique, and she passed the purse over the fence.

If the look which Sagoonah had just bent upon her was indescribable, equally impossible of description was the air of blended hauteur, disgust, and indignation with which Sagoonah took that purse and tossed it into the field where Madame Angelique was standing. At the same time her eyes sent forth vivid fires, and her ivory teeth glistened between the thin scarlet lips.

“ No, not for a bribe,” said Sagoonah, in a voice expressive of scorn and loathing, “ but for that other reason, — yes, yes.”

Madame Angelique gazed upon her with a sensation of terror, — a sort of feeling as if she shuddered lest the Hindu woman was not what she seemed, but that all in an instant she might burst forth into another form, and perhaps with

a savage yell spring upon her in the shape of a tigress, or in the twinkling of an eye twist the huge coils of a snake around her, — so dread was the fascination, so wildly strange yet likewise awe-inspiring the expression of Sagoonah's eyes.

“Go,” said the ayah. “I do not ask why you have prompted me to this deed, nor who first of all urged you on to prompt me. Go; it shall be done, and perhaps to-morrow the intelligence will reach your ears that this house” — and she pointed toward it — “has become the scene of a fearful deed.”

With these words the ayah turned abruptly away from the fence, and Madame Angelique, picking up the indignantly discarded purse, betook herself across the field toward the main road.

It was night, and Christina Ashton could not sleep. The weather was exceedingly sultry, indeed most oppressively so; she had been slightly indisposed the whole day; she was restless, uneasy, and feverish. It was twelve o'clock, and she vainly endeavoured to close her eyes. It may be easily supposed that her thoughts were actively engaged, for when are the thoughts ever more active than while the head is pressing a sleepless pillow? She knew that Zoe had taken her departure from London; a paragraph amongst the fashionable intelligence in a morning newspaper had told her this much. Too well, too well could poor Christina conjecture the cause of her amiable friend's prolonged indisposition, and bitterly, bitterly at times did she blame herself for having been more or less mixed up with that cause. And yet, as the reader knows full well, she was innocent; the snows on the highest peaks of the Alpine mountains were not purer than Christina's thoughts.

She could not sleep, and it was twelve o'clock. Silence prevailed throughout the habitation; silence was outside too, for the air was stagnant in its heaviness, and not a single leaf in the garden was ruffled. But presently that silence which reigned inside the dwelling was broken — no, not broken — gently and slightly and almost imperceptibly intruded upon by the softest sound of a step upon the stair. Yet Christina heard it, and with suspended breath she listened. Again she heard it, and the thought flashed to her mind that Sagoonah was violating the pledge she had

given not to descend again at night to study the huge files of the *Times*.

"This is wrong of Sagoonah," said Christina to herself; "it is doubly wrong, — in the first place because no one ought to be moving about the house with a candle at this time of night, and secondly because she herself admitted that for some particular reason the princess would be angry with her if she looked into those files."

Having thus mused to herself, Christina sat up in bed and again listened. All was profoundly silent, and with suspended breath did our young heroine continue to await the slightest, faintest sound that might next fall upon her ear. And it came; it was another footstep, so light, so airy, indeed so barely perceptible that a doubt even lingered in Christina's mind whether she had caught it. Still she was resolved to assure herself on the point, but yet to do so in such a way that in case of being mistaken, she herself might not incur the risk of disturbing any other sleeper. It was therefore with the utmost caution she rose and opened the door, — a caution so great that neither the turning of the handle nor the moving of the door upon its hinges raised a sound half so audible as the footstep she had heard.

But, ah! as she looked forth upon the landing, she beheld a light glimmering from the princess's chamber, the door of which evidently stood open. Now the first thought that struck her was that Indora had been seized with indisposition, and yet she heard no sounds of voices, no one moving in the chamber of her Highness. She hastened along the passage, — her naked feet raising not the slightest sound, but yet her night-dress swept for an instant against the wall, and the next moment Sagoonah issued forth from the chamber of the princess. She had a light in one hand, and she appeared as if she had just thrust something with the other amidst the folds of her dress, for she was apparelled in her day costume. An ejaculation was about to issue from Christina's lips, an anxious inquiry whether the princess was indisposed, when Sagoonah made her a vehement sign to hold her peace; and Christina was now struck by the strange expression of the ayah's countenance and the fearful light that was burning in her eyes. An unknown terror for an instant seized upon the young maiden, transfixing, petrifying her. During this momentary interval Sagoonah noise-

lessly closed the door of the princess's chamber, and then making a sign for Christina to retreat into her own, she followed her thither.

Closing the door with an unabated caution, Sagoonah placed her candle upon the drawers, and taking Christina's hand, made her sit down by her side upon an ottoman which was at the foot of the bed, for the chamber which our heroine occupied was as elegantly and as sumptuously furnished as all the rest.

"You are surprised, Miss Ashton," said Sagoonah, in a low, whispering voice, but with an air of perfect calmness, contrasting strangely with the sinister expression her countenance had worn a few moments back, — "you are surprised, Miss Ashton, to have thus found me in the chamber of my mistress."

"I cannot say that I am still surprised," responded Christina, "because I have no doubt you will give a satisfactory explanation. I feared that the Lady Indora was ill, but this, thank Heaven, does not seem to be the case, or you would not have left her, and moreover you would have permitted me to render my assistance."

"Listen to me, Miss Ashton," continued Sagoonah. "You know that I am devoted to my beloved mistress —"

"I know that you have indeed every reason to love her," said our amiable heroine, "for I, who have only known her for a few short weeks, love her much, and you have known her from your infancy. But tell me, Sagoonah, why did you look so strange when issuing from the chamber? You terrified me."

"Listen, Miss Ashton," continued the ayah, with the calmest self-possession. "I have no doubt that with your English notions — and you call them the effects of your high civilization — you will be startled and astonished, perhaps you will even survey me with pity and contempt, when I tell you of the belief which I entertain. The conviction is firm in my mind that evil spirits walk abroad at night, and that they have not merely the power to haunt and scare those whose bedsides they visit, but likewise to wreak upon them a physical mischief. Do you comprehend me, Miss Ashton?"

We should here observe that we are not recording the precise language of which Sagoonah made use, nor do we

ever when describing her discourse. She was not quite so proficient in the English tongue as to speak it with that degree of accuracy which our mode of shaping her language would appear to represent. Therefore it was not astonishing that she should ask Christina if she succeeded in making herself understood.

"Yes, I comprehend you perfectly," replied our heroine, "but I deeply regret, Sagoonah, to learn that you abandon yourself to these superstitions."

"Bear with me, my dear Miss Ashton," returned the ayah, gravely; "remember that from my very infancy I was brought up in this faith."

"And yet the Lady Indora has not the same superstitions," observed Christina, mildly.

"True, Miss Ashton," rejoined Sagoonah, "but the Lady Indora may be as wrong in rejecting them as I may be in clinging to them."

"We will not discuss the argument itself," replied Christina, "but you have yet to inform me —"

"Why I entered the bedchamber of my mistress," added the ayah. "Can you not conjecture after all I have said?" she continued, fixing her dark eyes upon our heroine; "can you not comprehend how, loving her as I do, I often and often feel anxious on her account? To-night I could not rest —"

"You had not sought your couch, Sagoonah," interrupted Miss Ashton, glancing at the ayah's attire.

"No, because I knew full well that I could not sleep," was the Hindu woman's response; "I had that feeling which told me how useless it would be to seek a bed on which I should only be tossing restlessly. I was full of vague terrors — I can scarcely explain them — I cannot account for them. But certain it is that under their influence I sought the chamber of my mistress to assure myself that she was safe, that no evil spirits were haunting her couch nor working her a mischief —"

"Sagoonah, Sagoonah," exclaimed Miss Ashton, surveying the ayah with a painful suspicion, "I know not what to think of this explanation of yours. It is hard to doubt you if the truth be issuing from your lips, and yet — and yet —"

"You do not believe me?" said the ayah, in a tone of plaintive distress. "Ah! this is indeed a source of sorrow

and regret for me, because I love you, Miss Ashton, and to lose your confidence — ”

Here the wily Sagoonah stopped short, and the tears trickled slowly from her lustrous eyes, glistening like diamonds upon her dark but smooth and polished cheeks. And then to the long ebon fringes of each upper lid did other tears hang quivering and sparkling, and her bosom seemed convulsed with stifling sobs, and her looks were bent so plaintively, so appealingly upon Christina, that the generous heart of the young maiden was profoundly touched.

“ If for a moment I have wronged you, Sagoonah,” she said, taking the ayah’s hand, — “ if with my English notions I have too harshly and suspiciously estimated your conduct, or, rather, if I have not known how to interpret it at all, but yet have fancied that you were not truthfully nor frankly explaining it, I beseech you to pardon me.”

“ Oh, now your kindness touches me even more than that transient suspicion on your part wounded me,” and as Sagoonah thus spoke, she took Christina’s hand, pressed it first to her bosom, and then carried it to her lips. “ Yes, my dear Miss Ashton,” she continued, “ it was nought but the truth, — the sincere, the honest, the genuine truth that I was telling you. I am superstitious; can I be blamed for this weakness, if a weakness it be? ”

“ No, no, not blamed. But I must enlighten you, my poor Sagoonah,” said the amiable heroine of our tale. “ You need not apprehend that evil spirits will haunt one so good as your noble-hearted mistress. If there be evil spirits, the wicked alone have cause to tremble at them. It is not well, Sagoonah, to wander about in the dead of night as you are doing; others who know less of you than I — or, rather, who understand your disposition less — would conceive that you were troubled with a guilty conscience. Night is the time when the good sleep, or at least, when they remain in their beds, and it is the season when guilt walks abroad. The fancy is irresistibly led to associate frightful and hideous deeds with midnight wanderings — ”

“ Miss Ashton, Miss Ashton, you terrify me,” murmured the ayah, who was indeed conscience-stricken by the words which our heroine was thus addressing to her in a tone of mild and gentle solemnity.

“ There is nought to terrify you in what I say,” answered

Christina, "and very far from my object is it to make such an impression upon your mind. I merely wish you to comprehend that these midnight wanderings are not suitable nor becoming, and that henceforth you must exercise more strength of mind than to yield to superstitious fears. Have you not read, Sagoonah," continued Christina, "that night is the season for the wanderings of those who are guilty in deed or those who are equally sinful in purpose, — the season too, Sagoonah," added Christina, with a deepening impressiveness, "when Murder stalks abroad —"

"Hush, Miss Ashton, hush," said Sagoonah, with a visible terror depicted upon her countenance. "You frighten me; you strike terror into the depths of my soul. Rest assured that I will wander about the house no more. Believe me," continued the ayah, in a tone of mingled entreaty and persuasion, — "believe me that you have made a deep impression upon me. I see that you are right. I will henceforth follow your advice in all things, but may I hope that you will keep silent as to this occurrence of to-night?"

Christian reflected for a few moments, and then she said, "It will be the second time, Sagoonah, that I shall have consented to shield you from the displeasure of your mistress, but remember that it is the last. You have solemnly pledged yourself that you will not repeat these nocturnal wanderings, and I believe you. But if in this or any other way you transgress for the future, I shall feel it my duty to speak with frankness to the Lady Indora. Recollect that I eat her bread as well as you do, and I am bound to care for her interests."

"My sweet Miss Ashton," said the ayah, taking Christina's small white hand and pressing it to her lips, "you shall never again have cause to be angry with me. And now good night."

Sagoonah glided noiselessly from Christina's chamber, and ascended to her own. When there — and when she had closed the door behind her — she took from beneath the folds of her garment a long dagger with a ghastly gleaming blade and a handle of curious Oriental workmanship, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. As she consigned it to her trunk, her eyes flashed sinister fires, and she murmured to herself in her own native tongue, "Fool that I was to yield even for a moment to the influence of that English girl's language.

But when she spoke of Murder stalking abroad, it did indeed send a thrill through me like that of a remorse."

The ayah sat down and reflected deeply for some minutes. There was evidently a struggle within her bosom; those better feelings which Christina's language had partially excited were in conflict with others of a dark and deadly nature, and, alas! the latter prevailed, for at the end of her meditation, Sagoonah's splendidly handsome countenance assumed an expression of the firmest decision, and with another sinister flashing of her luminous dark eyes, she ejaculated, "Yes, it shall be done."

Throughout the following day Madame Angelique was kept in trembling nervous suspense, — every moment expecting to hear the intelligence, from some source or another, that a frightful deed of suicide had been perpetrated during the past night in the district of Bayswater. But hour after hour passed and no such tidings came. In the afternoon the vile woman proceeded into the neighbourhood of Bayswater, and entered a shop with the air of one whose sole and legitimate object was to make some little purchase, for she thought to herself that if the deed had been really accomplished, she should be certain to hear of it there. No, not a syllable, and the shopwoman who served her merely remarked on the fineness of the weather, but alluded not to any incident of horrible interest. Madame Angelique returned to her house in London, and sent out for the evening papers, but still without having her frightful curiosity gratified. It was evident therefore that the deed had not been done. Marchmont called in the evening, and it was determined that if on the morrow the intelligence so anxiously awaited did not reach the vile woman's ears, she should repair to Bayswater and obtain another interview with Sagoonah.

It was an almost sleepless night which Madame Angelique passed, for she felt assured, considering all circumstances, that the Lady Indora was bent upon her ruin, and in order therefore that her own safety might be secured (as she fancied) it was necessary that the Eastern lady should perish. She rose in the morning ill with feverish anxiety, but all the forenoon passed without the wished-for intelligence reaching her. Again, in the afternoon, she repaired to Bayswater; she entered another shop, but no unusual excitement marked

the looks or the discourse of serving-men or customers: it was only too clear that the deed still remained undone.

Madame Angelique proceeded into the neighbourhood of the Princess Indora's villa, and she watched until she saw Mark, the faithful majordomo, issue forth from the premises. Then, so soon as he was out of sight, she hastened toward the fence, and in a few minutes Sagoonah made her appearance.

"I thought you would have come yesterday," said the ayah, immediately upon reaching the fence. "I fancied that you would be only too anxious to learn whether it was done, and if not, why it was left undone."

"My dear Sagoonah," answered Madame Angelique, quivering with suspense, "I felt so certain that your courage would not fail you — I was so convinced that you were endowed with such an indomitable fortitude —"

"Cease these idle flatteries," interrupted the ayah with impatience. "I have but a minute to tarry here. Listen! There is an English girl beneath this roof —"

"I know it," said Madame Angelique: "Christina Ashton."

"And so long as that girl is here," continued Sagoonah, with rapid utterance, "my arm is paralyzed. I need say no more. It is not in my power to devise or execute any scheme to get rid of her; this must be a task for you to undertake and to accomplish."

"But how?" exclaimed Madame Angelique, stricken aghast by the announcement. "It may take days and days to put some stratagem into execution —"

"If you, then, are so deficient in means for a small undertaking," interrupted Sagoonah, coldly, "how can you possibly fancy that I shall incur every risk and make every sacrifice for a great undertaking? Understand me well. Rid me of that girl, and the deed shall be done, but so long as she remains there, I will not make another effort toward its accomplishment."

Having thus spoken, Sagoonah turned abruptly away. Madame Angelique called after her, but she would not stop, neither did she even look back. She seemed as if she heard not the vile woman's words, and her tall bayadere form, clothed in its white drapery, was speedily lost amidst the trees to the view of Madame Angelique.

CHAPTER XXIX

MR. SYCAMORE

WHILE this scene was passing between three or four o'clock in the afternoon at Bayswater, Christian Ashton was pursuing his way along Piccadilly. In a few minutes he entered a fashionable hotel, and inquired of the waiter if the Honourable Mr. Talbot Sycamore was within. The response was in the affirmative, and our young hero was conducted upstairs to an apartment where the object of his visit lay stretched upon the sofa smoking a cigar.

Nothing could exceed the freedom and ease or the luxurious languor of that state of abandonment which characterized Mr. Talbot Sycamore's posture. His head reposed upon the cushion at one end of the sofa, his feet reclined upon the high part of the sofa at the other extremity; one morocco-slipper had fallen off, the other just hung on to the tips of his toes. His elegant flowered silk dressing-gown was all flowing open, and he inhaled the fragrance of his cigar with the comfort of one who appeared not to have a single care in the whole world.

The Honourable Mr. Talbot Sycamore was a little past thirty years of age. He had auburn hair, which he wore very long, and which seemed to curl naturally, large whiskers of a somewhat redder tint, blue eyes, and a tolerable good-looking countenance. He was tall, slender, and well made, but had a rakish, dissipated, devil-may-care appearance, which was visible enough even beneath that easy fashionable languor that now as it were invested him. The waiter withdrew, and Christian remained alone with this gentleman.

Mr. Sycamore, taking his cigar from his mouth, waved it with a sort of graceful negligence in the direction of a chair, —

at the same time suffering a long whiff of smoke to exhale slowly from his lips. Our hero took the chair, and said, "I have called, sir, in consequence of the letter which I received from you by this morning's post."

"Ah, I see," observed Mr. Sycamore, speaking with that sort of drawing-room drawl which impresses one with the idea that it requires a very great effort indeed to make use of that faculty of speech which is one of the main distinctions between its possessor and the lower animals. "You are the young man who advertised for the post of private secretary, with all sorts of qualifications?"

"And you, sir, I presume," answered Christian, "are the gentleman who wrote to inform me that you required precisely such an assistant as I announced myself to be."

Mr. Sycamore slowly turned himself half-around upon the sofa, and gave a good long stare at our young hero, whose speech he evidently fancied had a sort of covert irony or rebuke in it. And such was indeed the case, for Christian, though perfectly free from undue pride, was somewhat incensed at being called "a young man," and the term "all sorts of qualifications" had struck him as being more or less supercilious. He, however, endured the staring process with a becoming composure, firmly without hardihood, and with a suitable dignity that was devoid of disrespect as it was totally apart from insolence.

"Well, it is perfectly true," resumed the Honourable Mr. Talbot Sycamore, "that I am in want of a private secretary. You see, I am a man of large acquaintance, but select, Mr. Ashton — all select. Damme, nothing vulgar! Dukes, marquises, earls, and those sort of people, — these are my friends. Now, this acquaintance — so extensive and yet so choice — involves me in a devil's own mass of correspondence, and it's more than I can manage for myself. That's why I require a secretary," he lazily added.

Christian remarked that he considered that there was nothing very onerous or difficult in the duties which he would have to fulfil, and we may observe that he was too anxious to obtain another situation to suffer himself to be disheartened or disgusted by any peculiarities in Mr. Sycamore's conversation or manners.

"You have no objection to travel?" resumed this gentleman; "I don't mean travelling all over the world, but

simply on a trip to Brighton, or Cheltenham, or Ramsgate, or Dover, just as the fancy takes me. You see, I am a bachelor, and have to kill time to the best of my ability."

Christian assured Mr. Sycamore that he had no objection to accompany him on such little journeys as those to which he had alluded.

"You will see the world and amuse yourself," continued Mr. Sycamore, "and I have no doubt your place will be an easy and agreeable one. At all events I can tell you this, you will never see any low people visiting me. I never in my life spoke to a person that did not keep his carriage. If any friend of mine puts down his carriage for the sake of economy, damme, I cut him instantly. So now you see what sort of a person I am."

Christian did see it, and with infinite disgust too, but he was careful not to betray what he felt, for it was not his business to quarrel with Mr. Sycamore's peculiar fastidiousness, nor was it his interest to throw away the chance of obtaining a good situation simply because he had to do with a coxcomb or a boaster. Mr. Sycamore continued to talk in the same style for another quarter of an hour, and then he asked for testimonials. Christian produced those which he had received from the Duke of Marchmont and the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, wherewith Mr. Sycamore was pleased to express his satisfaction, observing that they were at least not "low people," and that he had no doubt Christian would suit him very well.

"I am going out of town the first thing to-morrow morning," said Mr. Sycamore, "and you must accompany me. You had therefore better be here as soon after breakfast as you can."

"I will be here, sir," answered Christian, with ingenuous readiness, "at nine o'clock, or earlier if you wish it."

Mr. Sycamore gave a sort of despairing groan, and then surveyed our hero with wonderment and dismay. Christian saw that he had said or done something that was most outrageous, but for the life of him he could not conjecture what it was.

"At nine o'clock in the morning?" at length said Mr. Sycamore, in a faint voice, as if his nerves had been dreadfully shocked. "What I call the first thing in the morning, is about half an hour past noon. Pray don't entertain such

low ideas as to confound night with morning. It's all very well for people who have to get up to black boots, or take down shutters, or open their shops, but a gentleman's morning," continued Mr. Sycamore, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "begins a little after noonday, and it is just allowable for him to begin his breakfast at one o'clock. So if you are here at half-past two to-morrow, it will be a very convenient hour in the morning indeed. You will of course come with your luggage, as we shall start off at once for Ramsgate, which I am told is getting rather a fashionable place since I began to patronize it last year."

Christian promised to be punctual at half-past two on the following day, and he issued forth from Mr. Sycamore's presence. Descending the stairs, he was passing through the hall of the hotel, when he perceived a very handsomely dressed groom — who was a nice-looking dapper little man about five and twenty, but bow-legged, as indeed all approved and veritable grooms ought to be — engaged in some little altercation with another man who had the air as well as the odour of a hostler from a livery-stable.

"Now, look you, Jeames," said the hostler to the dapper groom, "it's no use talking. My guvner says as how the cab sha'n't be sent never no more unless the bill's paid, or a good reference gived. You and me, Jeames, know what's what, and it is rayther hard that your guvner should run up a tick of forty-five pound for the hire of a cab and never so much as pay a scurrick on account. It isn't the cheese, Jeames, no, blow me tight if it is."

"Nonsense, Tom, it's all right," answered the dapper groom, whose Christian name appeared to be James. "My master's a gentleman of fortune, which has his own peculiar ways —"

Christian heard no more; indeed he had not purposely lingered to catch any of the conversation at all, but he could not help overhearing the little which we have recorded, as he passed through the hall. He thought nothing of it at the time, and it speedily slipped out of his memory. He was glad that he had obtained a new situation, and he at once set off to Bayswater, to communicate the circumstance to his sister, who he well knew would be delighted with the intelligence. He found Christina at home, and when it was announced to the princess that he was to leave London on the

morrow, she bade him remain and pass the evening with Christina.

At half-past two o'clock on the following day, Christian alighted from a cab at the door of the hotel in Piccadilly, and his boxes were deposited in the hall. He inquired of the waiter for Mr. Sycamore, and at the same instant the dapper-looking groom stepped forward, inquiring, "Are you Mr. Ashton?"

"Yes," answered Christian, and an unpleasant suspicion at once smote him.

"Master will be ready in half an hour," rejoined James; "he was up rather late this morning. If you will step into the coffee-room, Mr. Ashton, you can sit there till we are ready to start."

Our hero followed this recommendation, and as there happened to be no one else in the coffee-room at the time, he thought he should like to have a few minutes' conversation with one of the waiters. He did not exactly admire the discovery he had just made, — that his new employer was the master of the dapper groom, and consequently the object of the somewhat peculiar discourse he had overheard on the previous day between the dapper groom aforesaid and the hostler from the livery-stable. If there were anything at all suspicious in respect to Mr. Sycamore's character, it was not too late for our hero to resign the situation he had accepted, for he assuredly had no inclination to go travelling about in the service of one who contracted debts without the means of paying them. He accordingly rang the bell, so that under the pretext of ordering some little refreshment, he might draw the waiter into discourse.

"Ah, sir, I see, sir," said this individual, when a few remarks had been exchanged, "you are the young gentleman who has taken the situation of private secretary to Mr. Sycamore?" and then with a great show of tidiness, he briskly wiped away some imaginary crumbs from an adjacent table.

"I suppose Mr. Sycamore is highly respectable and very well off?" observed Christian, inquiringly.

"He has paid all his bills, sir, this morning," responded the waiter, "and so there is no complaint to make. All gentlemen as pays their bills is respectable, sir," and the waiter affected to be exceedingly busy in conveying the supplement

of the *Times* from one table to another, and then bringing it back to the place whence he had removed it.

Christian saw by these little manœuvres that the waiter purposely lingered with a view of being drawn into conversation, but that he did not like to speak too fast, nor too confidentially in the first instance.

"What have I to pay?" asked our hero, taking out his purse.

"Pay, sir? Tell you directly, sir. Sandwiches, one and six, half-pint of sherry, one and three; two and nine, if you please, sir."

Christian handed the waiter five shillings, whereupon that functionary instantaneously began to fumble in his breeches pocket, holding himself much on one side as he did so, and delaying as long as he could to produce the change, because he more than half-suspected that he was to keep the balance for himself. And this was what Christian did mean, for he saw plainly enough that the waiter required to be lured rather than drawn into confidential discourse.

"Keep that for yourself," said Christian.

"Very much obliged to you, sir," answered the waiter with a bow, and having with his napkin brushed away a few more imaginary crumbs from the corner of the table, and moved the mustard-pot to the other side of the saltcellar, he said, "I think you may find Mr. Sycamore an agreeable gentleman enough, but he is very fast and very racketsy."

"He has a great many visitors, has he not?" inquired Christian.

"Yes, sir, a great many," answered the waiter; then after a pause, he added, "But he is always denied to them, sir, always."

"Denied to them?" ejaculated our hero, in amazement.

"Oh, yes, sir! Tailors, bootmakers, jewelers, livery-stable-keepers, — in fact, sir," added the waiter, with a significant look, "Mr. Sycamore is very high and mighty indeed, and does not like low people," having said which, the waiter again stared in a meaning manner upon Christian's countenance.

"Do you intend me to understand," demanded our hero, "that Mr. Sycamore is not a respectable person? You can speak frankly. I do not ask through impertinent curiosity, and I shall not repeat anything you may tell me."

"Well, sir," said the waiter, "I'll tell you exactly all I know of Mr. Sycamore. He has been three months at the hotel, and he never paid his bill till to-day. He gets up at about noon, and comes home to bed at three or four in the morning. He hired a cabriolet from the livery-stables, and never paid for that till this morning. But all his bills he has settled, and now you know as much of him as I do."

"He keeps one servant, I suppose?" said Christian.

"Yes, the groom that you have seen, sir," and then, after glancing toward the door and looking out of the window, the waiter added, "And that groom, sir, is as downy a little fellow as ever you could wish to see in a day's walk."

"I do not precisely comprehend you," remarked Christian.

"Why, sir, I mean that he is up to all sorts of snuffs, and down to all kinds of dodges. He knows a thing or two; he is as artful a cove as here and there one. He gets up uncommon early in the morning; no one gets up earlier. He is wide-awake, and can't be done."

At this moment a couple of gentlemen entered the coffee-room to take some refreshments, and Christian's discourse with the waiter ended abruptly. Our young hero did not altogether like the character he had heard of Mr. Sycamore, but as for that of the groom James, it had been explained to him in so figurative a manner, with so many rhetorical flourishes and allegorical illustrations, that he knew not precisely how to estimate it.

"After all," said Christian to himself, "I have heard nothing actually or substantially prejudicial to Mr. Sycamore. He has paid his debts at last, and will leave the hotel in an honourable manner. Perhaps it is one of his peculiarities to keep his creditors waiting and pay them in a mass. It may be that he considers them a set of 'low people,' and likes to show his contempt for them. At all events, I had better keep to my engagement; it will be easy for me to throw it up if it does not please me."

Scarcely had our young hero arrived at this conclusion, when James entered to inform him that Mr. Sycamore was ready to start. A couple of cabs were at the door, as Christian's new employer travelled with a considerable quantity of luggage. That gentleman entered one of the vehicles, to the box of which James ascended, and Christian followed in the other. They proceeded to the railway-station at Lon-

don Bridge, where the Honourable Talbot Sycamore took a first-class ticket for himself, a second-class one for Christian, and a third-class ticket for James. The train was just ready to start, and they proceeded to occupy their seats according to the classification just described.

In the compartment to which Christian Ashton was assigned, there were only two passengers in addition to himself. One was an elderly man, who settled himself in the corner to take a nap, — most probably for the purpose of sleeping off the liquor of which he had evidently been partaking rather freely, and the fumes of which hovered around him, giving to the compartment the savour of a wine-vault. The other passenger was a female very neatly dressed, and with a veil drawn over her countenance. Opposite to this female did Christian happen to place himself, and it occurred to him that she gave a slight start, and even uttered a low ejaculation, as he entered the carriage. He could not very easily distinguish her countenance through the veil, but yet he saw enough of it to convince him that it was not altogether unfamiliar. He did not, however, like to regard her too earnestly, especially as she seemed to hang down her head as if in annoyance or confusion that he had even looked at her as attentively as he had done.

The train rolled out of the station; the intoxicated gentleman in the corner soon began to convince his fellow passengers, by certain nasal sounds, that he was wrapped in the arms of Morpheus, and then the female, slowly leaning forward, said, "How do you do, Mr. Ashton?"

At the same time she raised her veil, and our hero at once recognized Amy Sutton, who, as the reader will recollect, was one of the Duchess of Marchmont's lady's-maids. We may also, perhaps, remind the reader that it was she of whom the unprincipled duke to a certain extent made use when engaged in his vile plot against his wife. She was now in her twenty-fifth year; we have already described her as tall and handsome, but with a look displaying a resolute decisiveness of character, and which could at times merge into a savage fierceness. She was selfish, worldly-minded, and avaricious. At the time when Christian knew her, her character was unimpeachable, for her pride rather than her principle had prevented her from stooping to any underhand or immoral means to augment the sum of her hoarded

gold. It was this same Amy Sutton who now made herself known to Christian in the railway train, as above described.

After the exchange of a few observations, he inquired whether she was still in the Duchess of Marchmont's service.

"No," she answered, and her look became all in an instant strangely gloomy.

Christian now observed that she was altered since he had last seen her many months back; she was pale, and her countenance was somewhat thin and careworn. He did not like to continue questioning her, for he found that his first query had somehow or another given her pain. There was a silence of a few minutes, during which he felt awkward, and she looked down in sinister, moody pensiveness. At length that silence was broken by herself, for suddenly raising her eyes, and glancing toward the tipsy individual to assure herself that he was still slumbering, she leaned forward, and said, in a deep voice, "The Duke of Marchmont is the greatest villain upon earth."

"You and I saw enough of him, Amy," responded Christian, "to be enabled to arrive at no very favourable conclusion with respect to his character."

"You know full well, Mr. Ashton," she rejoined, "that I was completely innocent of any wilful complicity in that scandalous plot —"

"I know it, Amy," answered our hero. "You were deceived by appearances; those dresses which were worn by another —"

"Yes, I was indeed deceived," resumed Amy Sutton. "Never was deception more gross, more abominable."

"I hope that the duchess did not believe you guilty, and visit you with her displeasure?" said Christian.

"Oh, no, the Duchess of Marchmont treated me most kindly. Indeed, I have remained in her service until about a fortnight ago." Then, after another brief pause, she added, in a low, deep voice, "That miscreant Marchmont has been my — my — ruin."

Christian gazed upon her in astonishment. Such words coming from female lips naturally conveyed the impression of seduction's triumph, and our hero was surprised for more reasons than one. He had always heard Amy Sutton spoken of as a young woman of unimpeachable virtue, and who indeed would fiercely resent the slightest liberty that was

taken with her. Moreover, he had believed that she had detested the duke on account of that iniquitous affair of which they had been speaking. How, then, was it that her virtue had succumbed? How had her aversion been changed into love?

"Do not think, Mr. Ashton," she presently resumed, "that I have been wilfully and wantonly frail. If that were the case, I should not be addressing you in such a manner. No, with shame should I do my best to conceal my fault. Can you not understand me? I was the victim of the most diabolical atrocity, and I will be signally revenged."

Christian was more and more astonished at what he heard, but it was a point on which he would not ask questions; he could only listen to just so much as Amy Sutton might choose to reveal to him.

"Perhaps you consider it indelicate," she went on to say, "that I should make such a revelation to one of the opposite sex. But it is because you already know so much of the villainy of Marchmont's character, and because we were both as it were mixed up in a transaction which so signally exposed his baseness and his turpitude, and perhaps, too, it is a relief to my goaded feelings to be enabled to speak of my wrongs to one who knows their author so well, and knows likewise how fully capable he is of inflicting any wrong, even the worst and most flagrant that one fellow creature can sustain at the hands of another. It was shortly after the return of the family from Oaklands to Belgrave Square. He made an overture to me; I rejected it with scorn and indignation. He repeated it, he displayed gold before my eyes, and still I rejected his advances with abhorrence. I threatened to leave my situation the very next day, and to explain to the duchess wherefore I left —"

Amy Sutton paused for a minute; her countenance was perfectly livid with the workings of her feelings and the deep sense of her wrongs.

"That same night," she continued, in a voice so low that it was barely audible, and after having flung another glance toward the slumberer in the corner, — "that very night I was awakened from my sleep by the sensation of something poured between my lips, but between that awakening and a sinking into a state of perfect unconsciousness there was only a moment's interval, so that it appears like a dream when

I think of it. When I awoke in the morning," — and here Amy Sutton lowered the veil over her countenance, — "when I awoke in the morning, the duke was with me — my ruin —"

The remainder of the sentence was lost in a low, deep, stifling sob. Christian sat aghast at this narrative of diabolic villainy. Bad as he knew the Duke of Marchmont to be, yet he could scarcely have fancied that he was capable of such hideous turpitude as this. Amy Sutton sat back in the railway carriage with her veil over her countenance, and in this posture she remained, completely immovable, for nearly ten minutes, — all her senses and faculties being absorbed in the contemplation of the tremendous wrong which she had sustained and of the vengeance that she purposed to wreak whenever the opportunity should serve.

"Perhaps you will ask me," she at length resumed, "or at all events you will wonder, why I did not drag the Duke of Marchmont before the tribunals and punish him for his flagrant iniquity? But if I had adopted that course, it would have been likewise to expose my own disgrace, to parade my own dishonour, and I am dependent on my character for my bread. The world might have sympathized with me perhaps, but amongst all those sympathizers, who would give me another situation? Who would have received me into his home to attend upon his virtuous wife or his chaste daughters? And then, too, Mr. Ashton," continued Amy, "there was another consideration, — a consideration suggested by the language which the duke himself held to me when I reproached and threatened him for the atrocity of his conduct. It was that against my accusation he would reply that he had been invited to my bed, or at least that I had willingly received him there, and that I subsequently proclaimed a foul charge against him because he would not yield to the exorbitance of my demands for pecuniary reparation."

"And after that, Amy," said Christian, "you remained for several months in the service of the duchess?"

"Yes," she replied, and then remained silent, offering no explanation of this portion of her conduct, nor did Christian like to ask for any.

There was a further pause, which was broken by our hero inquiring whether Amy Sutton was going all the way to Ramsgate.

"I am not," she answered. "My destination is a small village a little way on this side of Ashford."

She said no more, and there was another long pause. The tipsy individual in the corner now woke up, and having slept off the fumes of his former potations, he appeared to think it was necessary to renew them. He accordingly drew forth a case-bottle from his pocket, and taking out the cork, applied it first to his nose to inhale the smell, and next to his lips to imbibe the liquor. Having taken a deep draught, he wiped the mouth of the bottle with his sleeve, and proffered it to Amy, who declined it with disgust; then to Christian, who refused it with cold civility.

"Well, then," said the drunken gentleman, "there is all the more for me," and he forthwith proceeded to empty the bottle.

He then observed, for the behoof of his listeners, that he could replenish it at Ashford, but that he wished he had done so at Reigate, where the brandy was better, and then it occurred to him that there was very good rum to be got at the Ashford station, and he thought it might agree with him best. He next noticed that the crops looked very fine, though how he could manage to see them at all was a perfect miracle, inasmuch as he had one eye closed and the other blinking like an owl's. So, having delivered himself of the sage observations just recorded, he fell into the corner and into a sound sleep simultaneously.

In about half an hour the train stopped at Headcorn, and there Amy Sutton took leave of Christian Ashton, for she had reached her destination. At Ashford the intoxicated gentleman woke up, and contrived to alight for the purpose of replenishing his flask. When he had returned to his seat, he applied himself with much industry to the said flask, — the effects of which, instead of making him sleepy, rendered him quarrelsome; so that, to Christian's surprise and astonishment, he began to pull off his coat, hiccupping out an expression of his deep regret at the necessity under which he laboured of polishing our hero off. For this polishing purpose he rose up from his seat, but Christian, in order to put an end to these pugnacious displays, forced him back into it again, with the assurance that if they did come to a fight it would be much the worse for him who provoked it. Fortunately the city of Canterbury was soon reached, and there

the drunken gentleman was claimed by his wife and three grown-up daughters, who were waiting to receive him, and who assailed him in no measured terms on beholding the condition in which he had brought himself back to the bosom of his family.

Ramsgate was reached in due time, and the Honourable Talbot Sycamore took up his quarters at the Royal Hotel.

CHAPTER XXX

CHRISTIAN'S NEW EMPLOYER

WHETHER it were under the bracing influence of the sea air, or whether it were because even the most fashionable people keep more natural hours when at watering-places, we cannot take it upon ourselves to decide, but certain it was that the Honourable Talbot Sycamore did actually and positively leave his couch at nine in the morning after his arrival, and did with an equal degree of certitude sit down to breakfast at half-past nine when he had taken a short lounge upon the sands in his flowered silk dressing-gown, his morocco slippers, and a red cap with a gold tassel very much resembling a Turkish fez.

While still at breakfast, he somewhat sententiously inquired of the waiter whether his private secretary had partaken of his breakfast, and on receiving an answer in the affirmative, he desired that Mr. Christian Ashton might be requested to walk up. Our hero accordingly repaired to Mr. Sycamore's sitting-room, and that gentleman said, "If you place yourself at the side table near the window, you can write a few letters to my dictation, and during the intervals when I am wearied of talking, you can gaze out upon the harbour and the sea."

This last recommendation might have been very considerate indeed if it were not somewhat puerile, and while Mr. Sycamore went on discussing his muffin, his egg, and his ham, Christian arranged the writing materials at the side table. The waiter entered the room with a hot muffin, and Mr. Sycamore said, with an air of easy indifference, "The first letter, Mr. Ashton, is to my London bankers. Just put the address and date; don't write the word 'Gentlemen,' but put 'My dear sirs,' as I am devilish intimate with them. Waiter, some more cream."

While the waiter was absent, Mr. Sycamore remained silent, and Christian certainly thought it was rather a singular coincidence that he should only begin dictating again when the waiter reappeared. Yet such was the fact.

"Write thus," said Mr. Sycamore: "' I will thank you to remit to the Ramsgate banker five thousand pounds to my account. With regard to that sum of twenty thousand which Lord Toddington paid into your hands on my behalf the other day — ' "

But here Mr. Sycamore stopped short as the door had just closed behind the waiter. It might have been that he had dictated enough at a stretch for one of his languid temperament, but it certainly appeared to Christian very much as if he desisted then and there simply because the individual for whose behoof he was thus parading his financial concerns was no longer present. However, after a little while the letter was concluded with some special instructions as to the laying-out of the twenty thousand pounds paid in by Lord Toddington, and by the time it was finished, the waiter entered to clear away the breakfast things.

"Now, Mr. Ashton," said the Honourable Talbot Sycamore, "we must write a letter to my friend, the Duke of Arlington. Put the place and date, and then begin 'My dear Arlington.' Now go on to say, 'Here I am installed in devilish comfortable quarters at Ramsgate. Do you mean, my dear fellow, to fulfil your promise of joining me here for six weeks? If so, let me know by return of post, as the place is most disgustingly crowded, and I must bespeak rooms for you at the hotel three or four days beforehand. Tell Lord Toddington that I find I have lost my wager of five thousand guineas, and shall send him up a cheque by this same post. He paid me twenty thousand the other day, so it is a devilish good sweep for him to get back a quarter of it in so short a time. By the bye, tell Toddington likewise that I will give him eight hundred for that black mare of his — ' "

Here there was another stopping short, and Mr. Sycamore, throwing himself back in his chair, yawned considerably, but Christian could not help noticing that the waiter had left the room a few instants before the task of dictation was thus suspended. He shortly returned to finish clearing away the table, and the instant his steps were heard upon the landing outside, the dictation was renewed. We will not,

however, inflict any more of it upon our readers; suffice it to say that the remainder of the letter to the Duke of Arlington was in the same familiar style as its commencement, so that to disbelieve the fact that the Honourable Talbot Sycamore was the very dear and intimate friend of his Grace of Arlington would have been tantamount to the guilt of a supposition that the said Honourable Talbot Sycamore was dictating a tissue of falsehoods either for purposes of vainglory, or for others still less innocent.

Several more letters were dictated to noblemen and baronets, and thence it was to be inferred that Mr. Sycamore did indeed enjoy a very select and honourable acquaintance amidst the titled aristocracy of the three kingdoms. When the letters were all finished, Mr. Sycamore affixed his signature thereto; they were duly folded, placed in envelopes, addressed, and sealed with the Honourable Talbot Sycamore's armorial bearings, which consisted of a griffin with three heads and such other curious conceptions as the wisdom of the Heralds' College or the genius of some imaginative seal engraver had succeeded in producing.

"Shall I take these letters to the post?" inquired Christian, when the morning's task was over.

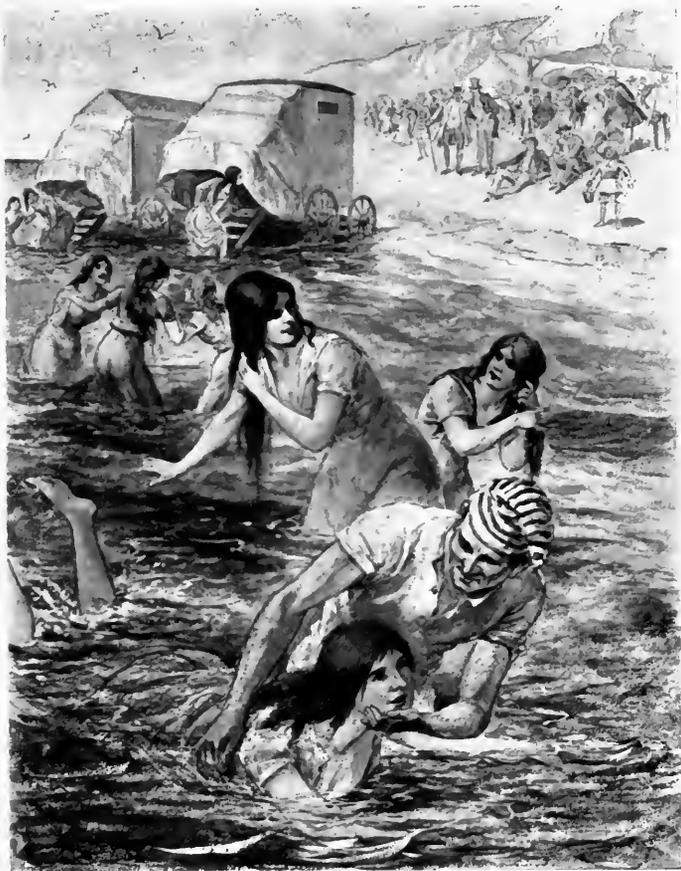
"Yes, you may," replied Mr. Sycamore, in his wonted languid, indifferent manner, but just as Christian was about to leave the room, he said, "No, on second thoughts I'll take them myself. I shall be passing that way in my rambles, and I have got an inquiry to make about a letter which ought to have reached me here."

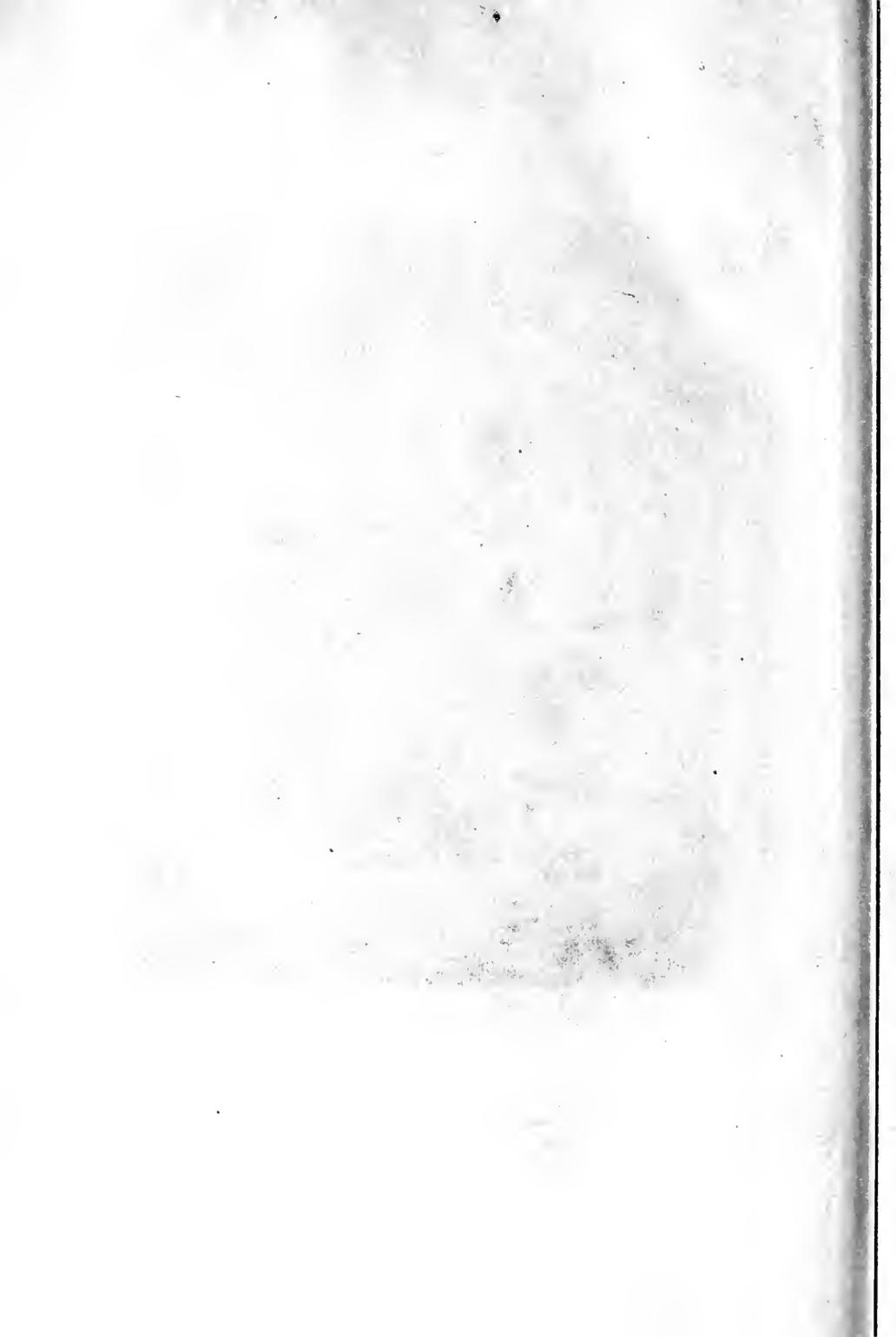
Christian issued from the hotel to take a walk, and he naturally reflected on all that had been done in reference to the letter-writing. He had certain misgivings in his mind, but yet he dared not allow them to obtain an immediate ascendancy over him. It looked very much as if the Honourable Mr. Sycamore had dictated in a particular sense, in order to impress the hotel waiter with a grand idea of his finances, his acquaintances, and his general respectability, so that the hotel functionary might go and report everything to the landlord, but, on the other hand, it might all be correct, legitimate, and straightforward enough, and nothing more reprehensible in the gentleman's mode of procedure than a love of ostentation and prideful display. At all events, Christian was resolved not to be too ready to jump at a con-

clusion, nor stand the chance of doing his employer an injustice by a rash and precipitate formation of opinion.

He repaired to the sands where the visitors were bathing, and at first he stood looking on, amidst other spectators, with a feeling of cheerfulness and a sense of exhilarating amusement. But by degrees our hero began to conceive strange notions respecting the delicacy of all that he saw before him. There were male bathers in a condition of perfect nudity within five or six yards of female bathers, who certainly were enveloped in long gowns, but they were so loose that they came open at the breast with every ripple of the sea and with every movement of the form. Then, too, the gentlemen were swimming about in all directions, performing a thousand evolutions on the water as well as in it, — floating on their stomachs and their backs, leaping high to dive down head foremost, or ascending the steps at the back of the machines in order to plunge off into the sea again. Then on the shore, too, Christian could not help observing that the ladies rambled or stood nearest to those points where the gentlemen were bathing. Some sat upon the sands pretending to be deeply absorbed in the novels which they held in their hands, but the pages were only turned at very long intervals, and the eyes which should have been bent upon them were peering over at the flandering, swimming, leaping, diving, antic-playing gentlemen bathers.

But if the ladies thus congregated near the places where those of the opposite sex were frolicking in the water, the gentlemen spectators on the other hand seemed as if by accident — oh, yes, quite by accident — to be lounging individually or collectively in little groups nearest to where the fair sex, like so many draped nereids, were disporting in the sun-lit sea. Many a fair bosom thus unveiled its beauties to the libertine regards devouringly fixed upon them; glimpses of white glancing limbs were likewise caught as the fair bathers practised swimming by the aid of the guides, or as they ascended the steps of the machines on emerging from the water. Hoary old men riveted their gloating looks upon those charming bathers, and some even went so far or were so carried away by their libidinous feelings as to raise their eye-glasses all the better to catch and devour the glimpses of those charms which were being continuously revealed to them. And the ladies knew full well





that they were thus the objects of such earnest contemplation on the part of the gentlemen spectators, but they exhibited no indignation, no blush of shame rose to their cheeks, no voice of offended modesty appealed to the guides to request that the insolent beholders might be desired to stand back.

As the consciousness that all these disgusting and scandalous indelicacies were being enacted before him gradually dawned into the mind of Christian Ashton, he at first felt astonished; he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses. Yet it was indeed but too true, — for there in the broad daylight, with the sun's refulgence blazing upon the entire scene, was all this going on. Very fortunate was it for the proprietors of the machines that their bathers belonged to the well-to-do orders, numbering amongst them persons of rank, standing, and wealth. Oh, if those bathers had only belonged to the poorer classes, how the saints would have held up their hands and turned up the whites of their eyes! What tirades would have been heard from the pulpits of churches and from within the walls of the House of Parliament. What fulminations and lamentations would there have been in respect to the immorality and profligacy of the working classes! Magistrates would have come down armed with all the powers of the law to prevent bathing altogether, and to plunge into ruin the owners of the machines; bishops and other legislators would have clamoured for additional legal enactments, and Exeter Hall would have echoed to the snivellings, the whinings, and the lugubrious lamentations of the "godly." Such would have been the case if those bathers belonged to the working class; but they formed a portion of the higher orders, — those orders who are not merely privileged in respect to all political rights, but likewise privileged to enjoy all immoralities with the fullest impunity.

That feeling on Christian's part which had commenced with amazement and had progressed into incredulity as to the evidence of his own senses terminated in disgust. He retired from the scene, and rambled through the town, marvelling that ladies and gentlemen of education, and who arrogate to themselves the credit of being the depositaries of all that is best in refinement, delicacy, and virtuous principle in this country, should thus scandalously forget them-

selves, or, rather, wilfully act in a manner that gave the lie to all their presumptuous boastings.

Several days passed, and every morning Christian was employed for about an hour and a half in writing letters to Mr. Sycamore's dictation. These were to a variety of noblemen and gentlemen of position and wealth, and were couched in different degrees of intimacy and familiarity. Mr. Sycamore generally took them for the purpose of posting them himself, or else he gave them to his man James with the command to do so. Letters arrived from London in response to these, and Christian could not help thinking that Mr. Sycamore was very negligent in allowing his correspondence to lie about on the table in his sitting-room.

Mr. Sycamore hired horses and equipages, and lived altogether in the style of a man of fortune. He picked up acquaintances — if he had not previously formed them — at Ramsgate; a lord or two dined with him, two or three baronets joined him at champagne breakfasts, he received invitations to parties, and by the time ten days had expired, he was the perfect star of the place. He seemed determined likewise that the tradespeople of Ramsgate should benefit by his presence, for, as he observed to Christian, "What was the use of having money unless to diffuse it fairly and do good with it?"

Acting upon this admirable principle, the Honourable Mr. Talbot Sycamore was lavish in his orders. The jewellers, the tailors, the boot-makers, the perfumers, and the livery-stable-keepers were speedily honoured with his patronage. But so far as the liberality of his custom went, the landlord of the Royal Hôtel had no reason to complain, for the handsomest suite of apartments was retained by Mr. Sycamore, the costliest wines were daily put in ice for his table, the markets of Ramsgate did not furnish suitable dainties for his repast, and therefore the landlord was compelled to send large orders to London, and get down the choicest products of Billingsgate and Covent Garden for his customer's use. Christian's misgivings had almost entirely disappeared, and he honestly thought that he must have wronged his employer by them. For if Mr. Sycamore were not everything he seemed and represented, would he not be at once detected? Would he be allowed to lead such a life as this without molestation?

One day, at the expiration of about a fortnight, the landlord of the Royal Hotel requested Christian to step into his private parlour, and begging him with the utmost civility take a seat, he said, " I entreat your pardon, Mr. Ashton, for the course I am adopting, but from what I have seen of you, I have formed an opinion that leads me to it. Might I ask how long you have known Mr. Sycamore? "

" I was only introduced to him the very day before we came down to Ramsgate. I advertised in the *Times* for a situation as private secretary to a nobleman or gentleman; Mr. Sycamore answered the advertisement, letters were exchanged between us, I called upon him, and received the appointment."

" And where was he staying, sir, at the time? " inquired the landlord.

Christian mentioned the hotel in Piccadilly, and he thought it right to add that Mr. Sycamore had lived there upwards of three months, that he had spent a vast amount of money, and that he had paid all his bills with the utmost liberality ere leaving the metropolis.

The landlord's countenance brightened up, and after a little reflection, he said, " I am sure you will pardon me, Mr. Ashton, for thus boldly questioning you, but the truth is, we do get bitten sometimes by gentlemen who cut a dash and live extravagantly. Mr. Sycamore however does seem a regular gentleman, but there are one or two little circumstances which did cause me some uneasiness. The first is that in my waiter's hearing, and on the very first morning after his arrival, he dictated a letter to his London bankers, ordering them to remit him a considerable sum, and I happened to learn by inquiry at our Ramsgate bankers that they have as yet received no advices to any such effect. Another circumstance is that none of the friends who visit him here were ever acquainted with him before. I ventured to ask Sir William Gregory this morning who Mr. Sycamore is. Because of course as he is an honourable, he must be a peer's son, but Sir William himself seemed struck by the question, declaring that he had never thought of the matter before. Perhaps you can tell me, Mr. Ashton, who Mr. Sycamore's father is, or to what noble family he belongs? "

" Really, " replied Christian, " I can only say as Sir William

Gregory appears to have answered you, that I never thought of the matter before."

"You see, Mr. Ashton," continued the landlord, "there are two noblemen and three or four baronets who visit Mr. Sycamore, but between you and me, they are not at all likely to trouble themselves as to who or what he is, so long as he gives splendid champagne breakfasts and dinners."

"I can assure you," responded Christian, in some degree of affright, "that if there be anything wrong I am totally innocent —"

"I know you are," interrupted the landlord, "and that is the reason I took the liberty of questioning you. I saw at once that you were a well-conducted young gentleman; you live so quietly, you never take any wine, you do not avail yourself of your employer's permission that you are to have whatever you choose. Mind, I don't say there is anything wrong, and all you have told me about Mr. Sycamore's mode of life in London at the Piccadilly Hotel has eased me considerably. Prudence, however, suggests that I should make a little further inquiry. By the bye," exclaimed the landlord, "what if I were to write up to those London bankers of his? At all events, Mr. Ashton, you will not tell him that I have been questioning you."

"Not for the world," responded our young hero.

At this moment the parlour door opened, and Mr. Sycamore lounged in with his wonted fashionable ease, and perceiving Christian there, he said, "Ah! Mr. Ashton, having a little chat with the landlord, eh?"

"Yes, sir," stammered Christian, and he rose to leave the room.

"Don't go — don't go," exclaimed Mr. Sycamore; "it's no secret. You are acquainted with all my affairs," he added, with a laugh, "in your capacity of my private secretary."

Still Christian was moving toward the door, as he thought that the business might not concern him, but Mr. Sycamore, with an appearance of kind playfulness and urbane familiarity, said, "Really, you need not go, for I repeat, I have no secrets that you are not acquainted with."

Christian was therefore compelled to remain, and Mr. Sycamore, depositing himself with easy indolence upon a chair, said, "Landlord, this is an admirable hotel of yours,

and I have been doing my best to recommend it, but all to tiptop people, mind; no low persons will ever seek your establishment through any hint or suggestion from me. Ashton can tell you that I am very particular on that score, — devilish particular."

"Of course, sir," observed the hotel proprietor, "every gentleman is."

"I should think so indeed," exclaimed Mr. Sycamore, "or else what would become of us? Damme, what would become of us?"

The landlord shook his head solemnly, as if inwardly repeating the question which had been put in so earnest a manner, and then he appeared lost in the wide field of speculation which it had opened to his mental view.

"By the bye," resumed Mr. Sycamore, after a pause, "you will have to keep a suite of rooms from Monday next for six weeks. They are for my friend Lord Toddington, from whom I have this morning received a letter to tell me that he is coming. You remember, Ashton, I told you his lordship was certain to come? Ah, here is his letter," and Mr. Sycamore tossed it to the landlord as he spoke.

The hotel proprietor took and read it, and his countenance exhibited a brightening satisfaction at what he evidently regarded as a proof of Mr. Sycamore's sincerity.

"Yes, sir," he said, "the apartments shall be kept, and I thank you for the recommendation. His lordship, I perceive, is coming with his cousin the Honourable Captain High-flyer and his nephew Mr. Skelter; they will all be attended with their valets, and there are likewise three grooms to provide for."

"That's just it," said Mr. Sycamore, "and you perceive that his lordship requires breakfast, dining, and drawing rooms. Damme, we shall have a fine time of it. Toddington is a devil of a fellow to drink champagne, and so is High-flyer, but Skelter will punish the burgundy. Ah, by the bye, that reminds me of something I had to suggest. You must be very careful about your burgundy; Skelter is an excellent judge, and if he does take a fancy to it, he'll drink three or four bottles a day."

"I think, sir," remarked the hotel proprietor, deferentially, "that you are enabled to pass an opinion upon my burgundy?"

"Yes, I think I may venture to say that it is excellent," responded Mr. Sycamore. "Well, then, Ashton, we must write to his lordship presently, and tell him that the rooms are engaged. Ah, by the bye, landlord, you will have to find stabling accommodation for four horses, as you see by that letter."

"It shall be done, sir," was the hotel proprietor's answer, and he proceeded to make certain memoranda in his books.

The Honourable Talbot Sycamore rose from his seat, and was lounging toward the door, when, apparently stricken with a sudden thought, he exclaimed, "Ah, by the bye, Ashton, just run up to the bank and inquire whether they have received a letter of advice about my remittances. I can't make out how the delay has been; it's too bad of those fellows in London, and all the worse because I am their private friend as well as their customer. They are no doubt overwhelmed with business, but if they don't pay more attention they will very soon lose it, and I for one don't mean to stand any nonsense. I'll close my account and cut them dead, if the money has not been sent by this last post."

Thus speaking, Mr. Sycamore looked uncommonly fierce, as if he had just come to a resolve which was perfectly inexorable, and from which he would not suffer himself to be moved even if all the partners in the London banking firm went down upon their knees at his feet.

Christian Ashton hastened off to make the inquiry at the Ramsgate banker's, and the Honourable Talbot Sycamore loungingly resumed his chair, saying, "I'll just wait here till my private secretary returns, and you shall give me a glass of that famous liqueur of yours that you sent up to us last evening."

The hotel proprietor — who had much approved of the firm and manly conduct of Mr. Sycamore in respect to the mode of dealing with his negligent London bankers — displayed considerable alacrity in ringing the bell and ordering in the choice liqueur of which Mr. Sycamore had spoken. This gentleman quaffed a glass with the air of a connoisseur, and as he began to sip a second, he said, "I tell you what it is, landlord; there is not finer liqueur in all England than this. Toddington will like it," — another sip, — "Highflyer will like it," — another sip, — "and damme, Skelter will like it!" and the last sip drained the glass.

In a few minutes Christian Ashton returned, with a visible expression of disappointment upon his features.

"Well, what news?" inquired Mr. Sycamore. "Am I to use harsh measures with those careless London bankers of mine? Or am I to give them back all my confidence?"

"I am very much afraid, sir," responded our young hero, "that you will have to adopt the former course."

"Then, damme, I'll rush up to London at once!" exclaimed the Honourable Talbot Sycamore, starting from his chair with indignation depicted on his countenance. "I'll take the next train, I'll go to the bank, I'll order all my funds to be paid over to their great rivals, Pump, Aldgate, and Company, I'll close my account, and, damme, I'll horsewhip the head of the firm and blacken the eyes of the chief cashier."

While giving vent to these dreadful threats, Mr. Sycamore appeared to be worked up into a towering passion, and the hotel proprietor, being convinced of the genuine sincerity of all his customer's proceedings since he had seen Lord Toddington's letter, ventured to intercede on behalf of the London bankers, adding that perhaps another letter, written in very strong terms, might bring them to their senses, or that perhaps it would answer the same purpose if Mr. Ashton were sent up to London.

"To be sure," cried Mr. Sycamore, suffering himself to be appeased to a certain extent. "I don't see why I should put myself out of the way for these careless, negligent fellows. We'll just write them another letter, Ashton, and if that don't answer the purpose, you shall cut off to London the day after to-morrow, with full powers from me to close my account, thrash the principal, and pummel the cashier."

Our young hero expressed his readiness to undertake the journey to the metropolis whenever called upon, but he thought it as well to abstain from pledging himself with regard to the thrashing and pummelling process.

"Come, Ashton," said his employer, "we will go and write this letter to the bankers, and also the one to my friend Toddington about the apartments. Oh, by the bye," added Mr. Sycamore, turning back from the door as he was about to open it, "just cash my cheque, landlord, for a couple of hundred. I shall date it the day after to-morrow, by which time my funds are certain to be here, or if you have a payment

to make in the metropolis, I can of course draw it at sight on my London bankers."

The hotel proprietor looked somewhat blank at the Honourable Talbot Sycamore's proposition, but that gloominess passed away in an instant, as divers considerations swept through his mind. There was Lord Toddington's letter promising a rich harvest for six weeks; the recommendations of Mr. Sycamore were very certain not to end there, but if he were offended he would leave the hotel himself, and prevent all his aristocratic acquaintances from taking up their quarters there in future.

"He must be all right," said the landlord to himself, as a sequel to those rapid musings, but still he thought that in respect to the required amount he might accomplish a prudential compromise. "It would really give me infinite pleasure, Mr. Sycamore," he observed, now speaking aloud, "to comply with your request —"

"Oh, it don't matter in the least," exclaimed the gentleman, with an air of the most perfect indifference. "Ashton can run up to London by the next train; he will be down early to-morrow forenoon, and then all will be right. But I do know that at the hotel over the way they never refuse to cash a gentleman's cheque — damme, never!"

"Beg your pardon, sir; really did not mean to offend — did not for a moment think of refusing," said the frightened landlord, "but was only about to hint that my own account happens to be very low at my banker's, and if a hundred pounds would suffice —"

"No, it don't matter," said Mr. Sycamore, and he was again lounging toward the door, when he turned back, observing, "Well, I'll draw the cheque; I want some loose gold for to-day."

The hotel proprietor hastened to furnish writing materials, and while Christian drew a cheque to Mr. Sycamore's dictation, the landlord drew another at his own desk. Mr. Sycamore appended his signature to the first-named draft, and receiving the landlord's cheque, he despatched Ashton to the Ramsgate bank for the cash. As our young hero was proceeding along the street, he observed that James the groom was following him, but he thought it was merely accidental, and that the man was going in the same direction, either for a walk or on some business of his own. But on issuing forth

from the bank, Christian found James lurking about at the door, and now looking as if he were anxious to speak to him. Our young hero accordingly stopped; the groom accosted him, and with a touch of the hat, observed, "Beg pardon, Mr. Ashton, but I s'pose you've been to the bank to get money?"

"Yes," replied Christian, though in a cold and distant manner, for he thought the question impertinent. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, for nothink partickler, sir," responded James. "It's all right," and he turned to hasten away.

"Stop a moment," exclaimed Christian. "You must have some reason for making such an inquiry. I suppose your master does not owe you any wages?"

"Not he, indeed, sir," cried the groom; "he is always in advance rayther than t'otherwise. Only I knowed there was some little delay about master's money, and I was glad to think the matter was put right. You see, Mr. Ashton," added James, with a look and a tone of mysterious confidence, "master is so negligent about his money affairs, and it all comes of being too rich. Them London bankers of his'n takes the advantage of him, and if I was him I'd cut 'em dead — that I would."

Having thus spoken with a very determined air, James pressed down his hat fiercely upon his head, and looked very much as if he wished he had the chief of the London banking firm then and there in his presence, that he might inflict summary chastisement upon him. He walked slowly away, and Christian returned to the hotel. There he handed the money to his employer, who proceeded to dictate a very angry letter indeed to his London bankers, and then a very familiar one to his intimate friend Lord Toddington.

"Shall I take them to the post?" asked Christian, which was the question he invariably put, but to which he had hitherto as invariably received a negative response.

On the present occasion, however, the Honourable Talbot Sycamore said that he might take them to the post, and thither he proceeded accordingly. He had forgotten to ask whether his services would be required any more for that day, and, having posted the letters, he hastened back to put the inquiry. On ascending toward Mr. Sycamore's sitting-room, he was just about to enter, when his ear caught so strange

an observation from within that he stopped short. The door happened to be ajar, and it was the dapper groom's voice that was making the observation.

"Come, none of this nonsense. I know you have got plenty of blunt, — young Ashton told me so, — and you must fork over twenty at least."

"I tell you, James," replied Mr. Sycamore, "that I could only manage to get a hundred pounds, and you must satisfy yourself with ten."

"Well, I s'pose I must, then," said the groom, in a sulky tone, and Christian heard the chinking of gold. "But I say, how long's the game to last now?" inquired James.

"Hush, damn you! the door's open," rejoined Sycamore, in a low, savage voice.

Christian glided away with a sensation as if he were walking in a dream. He was in a complete state of consternation and dismay, and he mechanically issued forth from the hotel. He was, as it were, an automaton moved only by an influence which was independent at the time of his own volition. When he gradually began to collect himself, he found that he was walking on the pier, and he felt as if he had been taken up from the hotel and set down there by some invisible hand, for he had not the slightest recollection of why or how he had come thither at all. In a word, it was as if he were awaking out of a dream in which he had been walking.

He proceeded to reflect upon what he had so recently heard, and it was with a species of bewildering terror that he thus meditated. That his employer was a rank swindler, there could be no doubt, and that James was in league with him was equally certain. Christian recollected that the dapper groom had on more occasions than one sought to enter into discourse with him, and had invariably expatiated upon his master's wealth, standing, and aristocratic acquaintances.

"And all this was done," thought Christian to himself, with mingled indignation and bitterness, "that I might in my turn puff off my employer whenever questioned with regard to him. But what am I to do? Shall I at once unmask him?"

Our young hero felt that this was his duty, and yet there was the lingering apprehension in his mind that he himself might be suddenly turned around upon and accused as an accomplice.

"But no," he said within himself, after further reflection, "it is impossible that I can become thus compromised. The landlord of the hotel told me that he felt persuaded I am an honourable young man. Good heavens! to think that I should have thus become the tool and instrument of a vile adventurer."

Our hero's mind was made up, and he retraced his way to the hotel, with the determination of speaking to the landlord. But on inquiring for him, Christian was informed that he had gone up to London by the train half an hour previously.

"Then," thought Christian to himself, "he has doubtless set off to make his own inquiries; he will be back either late to-night or early to-morrow, and a few hours' delay will make no great difference."

Christian again issued from the hotel, and wandered forth, painfully reflecting on the discovery he had made with regard to his employer. As the hour approached at which he was wont to dine, he was resolved not to increase on his own account that hotel bill which he felt assured would never be paid by Mr. Sycamore, and he repaired to a tavern, where he ordered some refreshments. It was a third-rate hostelry, and the coffee-room was fitted with boxes in the old-fashioned style. At the moment Christian entered, only one of these boxes was occupied, and this was by two men, somewhat plainly though not shabbily dressed, and who were discussing cold beef and porter. Christian sat down in the next box, and took up a newspaper until his dinner was brought in.

"So they say he dines at half-past six and won't be in till then, is that it?" observed one of the men to his companion, and though they spoke in a low voice, yet Christian could not possibly help overhearing what was said.

"I have already told you so once," was the response given in a sulky, growling tone, "but you are such a chap for making a feller repeat the same thing over and over again."

"Every one who knows honest Ike Shadbolt," remarked the first speaker, when he had refreshed himself with a deep draught out of the pewter pot, "gives him credit for prudence and circumspection. I tell you what it is, friend Withers, when two gentlemen like you and me have got a delicate business of this here nature in hand, we must put our heads together to conduct it in the nicest, pleasantest, comfort-

ablest way." Then, after a pause, he asked, "Does nothing strike you?"

"What the deuce should strike me," growled the individual whose name appeared to be Withers, "except that we've got to do a certain job at half-past six?"

"But look you, friend Withers," resumed Mr. Shadbolt, "there are two ways of doing a thing, — one with a rumpus, and one without it. This customer of ours that we've come down after has no doubt got plenty of ready tin, and why not so conduct ourselves that a little of it shall find its way into our pockets?"

"How so?" asked Mr. Withers, who seemed to be speaking with a mouth very full of bread and beef.

"How so!" echoed Mr. Shadbolt contemptuously; "was there ever such a feller —"

"Well, then, why don't you speak out plain?" growlingly demanded Mr. Withers, who might possibly have been a very excellent member of society, but who certainly appeared to be afflicted with a most unamiable temper.

"Five words will explain," was Mr. Shadbolt's response. "If we make a public affair of it, announce ourselves at the hotel, put on handcuffs, and drag our customer up to the railway station like a felon, he won't thank us, will he? And not thanking us, he won't give us each five guineas as a reward for our civility? Answer me that."

"What the devil answer does it require?" sulkily demanded Mr. Withers; "the thing speaks for itself."

"To be sure it does," continued Mr. Shadbolt, "and so does the next proposition I am going to submit to your consideration. What if we do the thing quite genteel, — just introduce ourselves as Mr. Smith and Mr. Noakes, two gentlemen come down on very particular business indeed to see the Honourable Mr. Talbot Sycamore, — I say, did that young chap start there in the next box?"

"Not he," growled Mr. Withers; "he is reading the paper, and can't hear what we are saying. But you'd better make an end of this long talk of yours."

"Well, then," resumed Mr. Isaac Shadbolt, "I was saying if we do the thing quite genteel, see our customer alone, whisper in his ear a pressing invitation to accompany us to London, let him pay for the three first-class places, and put him quite at his ease the whole way, don't you think he's

very likely to make us a compliment? Just leave it to me, and I'll give him such a hint that we'll get our tip beforehand."

"Well, do as you like," answered Mr. Withers, unbending somewhat from the sullen dignity in which he was previously wrapped up close. "You're a cunning fellow, Ike, and as you say, I don't see why we shouldn't blend profit with business."

"That's so sensible a remark," observed Mr. Shadbolt, "that we'll have another pot on the strength of it," and he rang the bell accordingly.

The waiter appeared at the instant, bringing in Christian's dinner, but when it was placed before our young hero, he could not eat a morsel. He saw that the crisis was at hand; his employer was evidently about to be arrested on some serious charge of felony, and these were London police officers who had come down for the purpose. As for giving Mr. Sycamore a warning instruction, such an idea did not for a moment enter young Ashton's head; so far from defeating justice under such circumstances, he felt himself bound to do all he could to further its aims.

Christian looked up at the clock in the coffee-room; it was just five, and therefore in another hour and a half Mr. Sycamore would be in custody. The conversation in the adjoining box had been temporarily suspended, from the fact that, the second pot of porter having been discussed, Messrs. Shadbolt and Withers had just begun to regale themselves with glasses of hot rum and water, and it apparently took them some little time to arrive, by dint of divers sippings and tastings, at a conclusion as to whether the compound was to their liking or not.

"What a rum feller that chap Sycamore appears to be by all accounts!" said Mr. Shadbolt, at length breaking that interval of silence. "What a game he was carrying on at the hotel in Piccadilly — what is its name again? — before he got that forged bill cashed."

"A game indeed," growled Mr. Withers. "But how do you account for this, that when he did get it cashed, he took and paid all his debts and came off like a gentleman when he might have bolted away with all the blunt?"

"Why, don't you see," responded Shadbolt, "it was a three months' bill, and he never thought the forgery would be detected till it came due. So no doubt his plan was to

enjoy life in the meantime. But if he had left London without paying his debts, he would have been blown upon. I dare say he meant to pay the watering-places a visit one after the other, and at each he would of course refer to the Piccadilly Hotel — what's its name again? — as a proof of his respectability."

Christian felt so sick and dizzy at all he had heard, and likewise in consequence of the excitement through which he had for the few previous hours been passing, that he could not remain in the hot, stifling coffee-room any longer. He accordingly paid his bill, and departed. He walked out upon the pier to reflect upon the course he ought to adopt, — whether he should at once proceed to the Royal Hotel, pack up his box, and depart, or whether he should await the expected catastrophe. He was apprehensive that if he adopted the former course, it might be subsequently imagined he had been all along Sycamore's accomplice, and that he fled from the presence of impending danger the moment he heard of it. But while he was yet deliberating within himself, he suddenly perceived Mr. Sycamore advancing along the pier, in company with a couple of the fashionable acquaintances whom he had formed at Ramsgate. A sudden thought flashed to Christian's mind, and he resolved to act upon it.

CHAPTER XXXI

SIR JOSEPH STEWARD

APPROACHING the group, who had stopped to gaze upon a vessel in the distance, our hero said, in a cold, firm voice, "Mr. Sycamore, I wish to have a few moments' conversation with you."

"With me! What about?" exclaimed that individual. "Don't you see I am engaged with friends for the present? Damme, man, I'm engaged!"

"Mr. Sycamore," responded Christian, "that which I have to say to you will admit of no delay."

"Oh, ah, I see!" ejaculated our hero's employer, and turning to his friends, he said, in an easy, offhand manner, "It is about some little business that I entrusted to my private secretary. Excuse me for a few minutes; I will speedily rejoin you."

Christian allowed the falsehood about the "little private business" to pass unnoticed, and he moved away from the spot. Sycamore was almost immediately by his side, and he said, in a hurried, anxious voice, "What is it, Ashton? Why the deuce do you look so serious?"

"I cannot speak to you here," responded Christian. "I will thank you to accompany me to the hotel."

"But what is it?" demanded Sycamore, who did not dare be angry, for he saw that there was indeed something ominously wrong.

Christian made no answer, but led the way straight to the hotel, — Sycamore walking by his side, and continuing to ask what it all meant, but without receiving a single syllable in reply. In a very few minutes the hotel was reached; Christian proceeded straight up to his employer's sitting-room, and when they were both there alone together, Mr.

Sycamore said, "Now will you tell me what the deuce you mean by this strange conduct on your part?"

"Simply this," answered Ashton, "that it does not suit me to remain any longer in your employment, and I require a written acknowledgment to the effect that our acquaintance has only lasted a fortnight, that it commenced under certain circumstances, and that it is of my own accord I at this particular hour insist on severing our connection."

Sycamore's countenance grew more and more blank, and his manner more and more nervous, as our hero went on speaking. He nevertheless exerted every effort to veil his confusion and his misgivings, which indeed amounted to terror, but he could not succeed, and in a trembling voice he said, "But my dear Ashton —"

"Address me not, sir, in so familiar a manner," exclaimed our young hero, indignantly; "do not ask me another question, but sit down at once and pen such a document as I have suggested."

"One word, and only one word," cried the trembling villain. "Something must have been said — you must have heard something —"

"At all events I have seen enough," interrupted Christian, "to be only too anxious that our connection should be severed."

"The people of the hotel — have they said anything to you?" asked Sycamore.

"Nothing more has been said to me since I left your presence in the forenoon," and then it struck Christian that if he left Mr. Sycamore in a state of fearful uncertainty, he might suddenly abscond, in which case justice would be cheated of its due, and he himself would have given that very warning intimation which he had resolved not to afford. He accordingly went on to say, "I see through you, Mr. Sycamore, and that is the reason I choose to leave you. But for my own character's sake I am determined to have such a certificate or acknowledgment as that which I have described."

"You see through me?" Sycamore repeated involuntarily, for he was trembling and quivering, and his senses were almost lost under the influence of terror. "But the people of the hotel —"

"They doubtless continue in the same happy state of

credulity," answered Christian, "as that into which you have succeeded in lulling them. Now, sir, without further delay, give me the document."

"But what use will you make of it?" asked Sycamore, who for an instant thought of bullying and blustering, but the next moment he felt that he had better not, for Christian's demeanour was firm and resolute.

"The only use I shall make of it," replied the young man, "is that if ever a word be uttered aspersing my character in connection with your name, I shall at once produce that document."

Mr. Sycamore appeared to be relieved somewhat by this assurance; yet still he required another one, and he said, in a voice of abject entreaty, "You will not, Mr. Ashton, you will not breathe a disparaging word —"

"I promise you that I shall not meddle unnecessarily in your affairs," interrupted Christian. "The first thing to-morrow morning I shall leave Ramsgate."

"Oh, of course I shall pay you the money that is due to you," cried Mr. Sycamore, who began to breathe more freely, and he even resumed somewhat of his jaunty air of indifference.

"Not a shilling," ejaculated Christian. "I would not touch a single farthing of the money which you have in your possession, and I will thank you to add to the document that I thus positively renounce every fraction in the shape of salary or remuneration."

"Well, just as you like," observed Mr. Sycamore, half-sullenly, half-flippantly, and then, as he sat down at the writing-table, he added, with an ironical smile, "It is now for you to dictate and for me to wield the pen."

Christian took no notice of this species of sarcastic jest, but he began to dictate a document in the sense which he had already sketched forth, rendering the terms altogether exculpatory of himself with regard to complicity in whatsoever misdeeds might subsequently transpire in respect to his employer. Sycamore winced considerably beneath this infiction, for such to all intents and purposes it was. Once or twice he looked up into Christian's countenance, but he beheld firm resoluteness there, and he was compelled to write unto the end. When he had finished and signed the document, Christian read it carefully over, folded it up, and placed it in his pocket.

"You really don't mean me any mischief?" said Mr. Sycamore, again adopting a tone of entreaty.

"Whatever promises I have made you," answered our hero, "shall be faithfully fulfilled."

He then issued from the room, and descending to the bar of the hotel, said to the young female who kept the accounts in the landlord's absence, "Can you make me out a bill altogether separate from that of Mr. Sycamore?"

"Certainly I can, sir," she replied, with a look of amazement. "But why do you ask the question?"

"Because I have resigned my situation with Mr. Sycamore," responded Christian, "and as I intend to leave the hotel to-morrow morning, it suits my arrangements with Mr. Sycamore to settle my own account offhand."

"In that case, sir," answered the barmaid, "your bill shall be made out. But I hope that there has been no sudden disagreement, — nothing unpleasant —"

"Do not say another word now," interrupted Christian, "and I will take an opportunity of letting you know all about it a little later."

He then repaired to his own room, where he began to pack up his things in preparation for departure in the morning.

Meanwhile Mr. Sycamore had been left in no very enviable state of feeling, for he could not rightly conjecture the cause of Christian's conduct. Indeed he knew not whether it were better to decamp at once, or whether he might venture to remain at the hotel until the first thing in the morning, — at which time he had already come to the determination of departing likewise. After having taken two or three agitated and uneasy turns to and fro in the room, he rang the bell and desired that his man James might be ordered to step up to him.

"Well, James," said Mr. Sycamore, as soon as his accomplice made his appearance, "things seem to be taking an awkward aspect — But are you sure you have shut the door?"

"Yes, yes; the door's shut fast enow," answered James. "But how do you mean that things is looking orkard? Where's the orkardness?"

"I mean that young Ashton has suddenly left me," responded Sycamore, "and he said as plainly as he could speak that he has seen through me."

"How could he have found out anything?" asked James. "Did he suspect that you yourself answered them letters which was written to dukes, marquises, and earls, bankers and baronets, and that I sent up them answers of your'n in a parcel to my brother in London to be posted there?"

"I don't know how he came to suspect," replied Sycamore, impatiently, "but I do know that the case is getting devilish serious."

"But you meant to leave to-morrow morning," said James; "it was agreed upon 'twixt you and me that our quarters was to be shifted."

"Yes," exclaimed Sycamore; "because I reckoned upon what this evening's business might produce. Here have I got hold of two young chaps with plenty of money; I have already ascertained that they are ready to take a hand at cards or rattle the dice. A splendid little dinner is ordered, I should ply them with champagne, I should get them into a nice train, and I know deuced well it would be worth a couple of thousand, perhaps more. Then away to Dover to-morrow, and off to Boulogne. That was the plan, but how the deuce I'm to act now, I can't for the life of me decide."

"You must risk it," answered James. "Everything seems right enough amongst the hotel people, — though, by the bye, I did hear that the landlord is gone up to London, but he can't very well get back again till to-morrow, and by the time he comes we may be far away."

"Ah! but there is such a thing as sending down a telegraphic message," ejaculated Mr. Sycamore, with a sudden consternation upon his features.

"By jingo, ay," cried James, looking equally discomfited. "I never thought of them galvanic wires which talks eighty or a hundred mile at a stretch."

"Well, what is to be done?" asked Sycamore, pacing the room in agitation and bewilderment. "To have to bolt with a beggarly hundred guineas in one's pocket would be a wretched affair indeed."

"Why didn't you follow my advice," asked James, sullenly, "and bolt from the hotel in Piccadilly when you got the five hundred pounds? What the devil was the use of paying all them debts —"

"You know what my calculations were," answered Syc-

more, impatiently. "I thought that we should come down here with such a good name that by this time I might have hooked thousands out of the young fellows at play, and now, just as the opportunity is serving, the storm begins to gather as dark as possible."

"Well, but does young Ashton mean to peach?" inquired the dapper groom; "that's the pint."

"No, I don't think he does, and yet there is something strange and mysterious in his conduct which I cannot altogether understand."

"Never mind the strangeness," responded the groom; "you must run the risk. Let the dinner go on, let the young chaps come, do you feather your nest, and we'll make a bolt of it precious early in the morning. You've got loads of jewelry and different things that you can carry away easy enough, and as for the clothes, they must of course be left behind."

Mr. Sycamore reflected for a few minutes, and then said, "Well, James, it must be as you have suggested: the dinner shall go on, and we will risk it."

In the meanwhile Christian Ashton, having given his instructions to the barmaid in respect to his bill, issued from the hotel to ramble about and commune with himself. He bitterly regretted that he had ever entered the employment of such a person as Mr. Sycamore; he blamed himself for want of prudence and caution in having adhered to his engagement after his suspicions were first awakened at the hotel in Piccadilly. But it was unfortunately too late thus to remonstrate with himself, and his repinings were useless. He had made up his mind, as the reader has seen, to discharge his own account at the hotel, and thus prove that his principles were upright; and we must observe that he had an ample supply of ready money, inasmuch as a comparatively small inroad had been made upon the fifty guineas presented to him by Mr. Redcliffe after the affair at Oaklands several months back. He resolved to remain absent from the hotel until after Mr. Sycamore's arrest, as he did not wish to be present to have the appearance of triumphing in the downfall of that individual.

He roamed beyond the precincts of Ramsgate, out into the country, but so absorbed was he in his reflections that his walk was prolonged to even a greater distance than he had

first intended. The fields through which he had been proceeding brought him toward the highroad, and he sat upon a stile to rest himself ere he began to retrace his way. About a hundred yards off stood a house of handsome appearance, having a flower-garden enclosed with iron railings in front, and with a kitchen-garden, shrubbery, paddock, and other grounds in the rear. The habitation stood all alone, and Christian was just wondering to himself in a sort of abstracted manner who dwelt there, when his ear suddenly caught the sounds of an equipage advancing along the road at a rapid rate. It was a travelling carriage with four horses, and as it whirled by the spot where Christian was resting himself, he caught a transient glimpse of two ladies seated inside. One of them appeared to be of exceeding beauty, so far as he could judge by that passing look, but he had no opportunity of particularly noticing the features of the other. Scarcely however had the equipage thus dashed by, when there was a sudden crash, the postilions shouted out, and the horses began to plunge. The hinder axle of the carriage had broken, and the vehicle itself had only been saved from completely upsetting by falling against the high bank which bordered the road on the opposite side to that where Christian was placed. Screams thrilled from within the carriage, and in a moment our young hero was flying toward the spot to render his assistance.

The postilions were so busily occupied in restraining their frightened horses that they could not at once help in extricating the ladies from the interior of the carriage, and therefore Christian's prompt appearance on the scene of the accident was most opportune. He hastened to open the door which was uppermost, and to his hastily put inquiry, he received the assurance that the two ladies had experienced no more serious inconvenience than the sudden shock and the accompanying alarm had occasioned. He aided them to descend; his idea of the beauty of one was immediately confirmed, and he now perceived that the other was as handsome and as commanding in appearance as the former was more delicately and youthfully charming. But he had not many moments to contemplate the ladies, nor to reiterate the expression of his hope that they had sustained no injury, ere another individual appeared upon the scene. This was an elderly gentleman, who with half-shuffling, half-hobbling gait

had issued forth from the house which Christian was a few minutes back so much admiring. He was one of the oddest looking beings that our hero had ever beheld, with the single exception perhaps of the unfortunate Earl of Lascelles. He was enveloped in a flowered silk dressing-gown of the gayest pattern; a cap of the same material contrasted strangely with his gray hair and his coarse, sensual, forbidding features. His feet, which had a gouty appearance, were thrust into loose slippers; and though it was now past six o'clock in the evening, yet it seemed — to judge by his apparel — as if this singular old man had only just got out of bed.

The lady, to whom we have alluded as being of a fine and commanding beauty, was about thirty years of age, and her handsome countenance had a bold and resolute expression. Her companion, whom we have described as beautiful, was at least ten years younger. The former had dark hair and eyes, the latter brown hair and blue eyes. Immediately upon the old man approaching this group, exclamations of recognition were exchanged by himself and the elder lady, at the same time that they shook hands.

“My dear Mrs. Oxenden, what an accident! What a way to arrive at your old friend's house!” ejaculated the elderly gentleman, with an air of the deepest concern.

“It is fortunate that the accident should have occurred close by your door, Sir Joseph,” answered Mrs. Oxenden, “or else we might have had a long and tedious walk.”

Christian observed that while these observations were being exchanged the young and beautiful lady appeared to be suddenly stricken with a sort of dismay. She started, she looked in wild bewilderment upon the shuffling, shambling old man, and then she stood transfixed with consternation and painful wonderment. Christian was himself astonished at the effect thus produced upon her, and in the confusion of his own thoughts he was about to ask if anything had distressed or frightened her, when the old man, having first bent a devouring regard upon the young lady, fixed his looks suspiciously upon our hero.

“This young gentleman,” Mrs. Oxenden hastened to observe, “is not one of our party; he is a stranger, and he came forward most kindly to render us his assistance.”

“Oh, very good,” said the old man, with an air of relief; and then he again turned his eyes upon the young lady, who

became pale as death and seemed as if she were about to faint.

"We thank you most sincerely, sir," said Mrs. Oxenden, turning toward our hero, but with a certain impatience in her air, as if she felt him to be one too many upon the spot and wished him to be gone.

He dared not remain any longer, — he had no excuse. He accordingly raised his hat, and was turning away when he perceived that the young lady gave a half-start, as if she would have flown toward him for protection.

"Laura, do not be foolish," said Mrs. Oxenden, in an undertone, but with rapid and peremptory utterance; and she caught the young lady by the arm, at the same time bending upon her a look of almost menacing significancy with her imperious dark eyes. "This is Sir Joseph Steward."

A low, faint shriek, coming from the lips of the beautiful but afflicted Laura, caught Christian's ear as he was again turning from the spot; and again, under an irresistible influence of pity and compassion for that young lady, did he stop short. Mrs. Oxenden now darted upon him a look full of anger, and she said, "Your presence, sir, becomes an intrusion effacing the sense of gratitude for the assistance you rendered."

Christian's countenance grew crimson at this rebuke so pointed and almost insolent, and he hastened away from the spot. But on reaching the stile, he glanced back, and at that instant Sir Joseph Steward was addressing something to the young lady. He had laid one hand familiarly upon her shoulder, and with the pointed forefinger of the other hand he was gesticulating as if to convey impressiveness to the words he was uttering. Laura was shrinking in visible terror and dismay, while Mrs. Oxenden, who stood behind the old man, was bending upon her a look of mingled reproach and command. This was the spectacle which met our hero's eyes, filling him with renewed wonderment and compassion, and for a few moments riveting him to the spot whence he contemplated what was thus passing. But again did he catch the dark eyes of Mrs. Oxenden flashing an angry glance toward him, and struck with the impropriety of thus obtrusively seeming to meddle with other persons' business, he began to take his hurried way back across the fields.

While retracing his steps to Ramsgate, which was about

three miles distant, — for, as we have already said, he had wandered much farther than he intended when first setting out for his walk, — he naturally pondered all that had just taken place. Profound was his pity on behalf of that young and beautiful lady who had evidently been introduced to Sir Joseph Steward for the first time, and who had shrunk with so much surprise, aversion, and dismay at his presence. What could it all mean? Was some compulsory marriage in contemplation, or was anything worse intended? Christian half-regretted that he had not lingered upon the spot to ascertain whether he could really render any assistance to a young lady against whom he feared an outrage of some kind or another was being contemplated. While thus reflecting, he beheld a milk-woman advancing across the field, and he resolved to question her. As an introduction to the wished-for discourse he asked for a draught of milk, for which he paid her liberally, and he inquired, “Does not that house belong to Sir Joseph Steward?”

“Yes, sir,” was the reply, “and a strange old gentleman he is.”

“In what way?” asked Christian.

“Oh, he lives such a queer sort of life when he is at home,” responded the milk-woman, “and dresses in such an odd fashion that the little boys in the neighbourhood all laugh at him; and then he tries to run after them to beat them with his cane, but he never can catch them because of the gout in his feet.”

“Is he married?” inquired Christian.

“No, sir,” answered the woman; and then, with a meaning look, she added, “But I’m sure he ought to be, for there isn’t a decent girl in all these parts will go into his service.”

“You mean to say,” observed Christian, trembling on the beautiful Laura’s behalf at what he thus heard, “that Sir Joseph Steward is not very correct in his conduct?”

“Correct? No, sir,” exclaimed the woman. “My sister was fool enough to let her daughter take a situation at Verner House, — that’s the name of his place, — but she was a good girl, and so no harm came of it; but it was for no want of trying on Sir Joseph’s part if she didn’t meet her ruin there. He is very rich, but does no good with his money; he is a bad landlord and a bad master, and I shouldn’t mind telling him so to his face. Ah, sir, old as he is, and with one foot in the

grave, I can tell you that he has brought sorrow into many a humble home in these parts, for if he don't use his riches to do good, he is lavish enough of his gold when it is to do harm. You understand me, sir?"

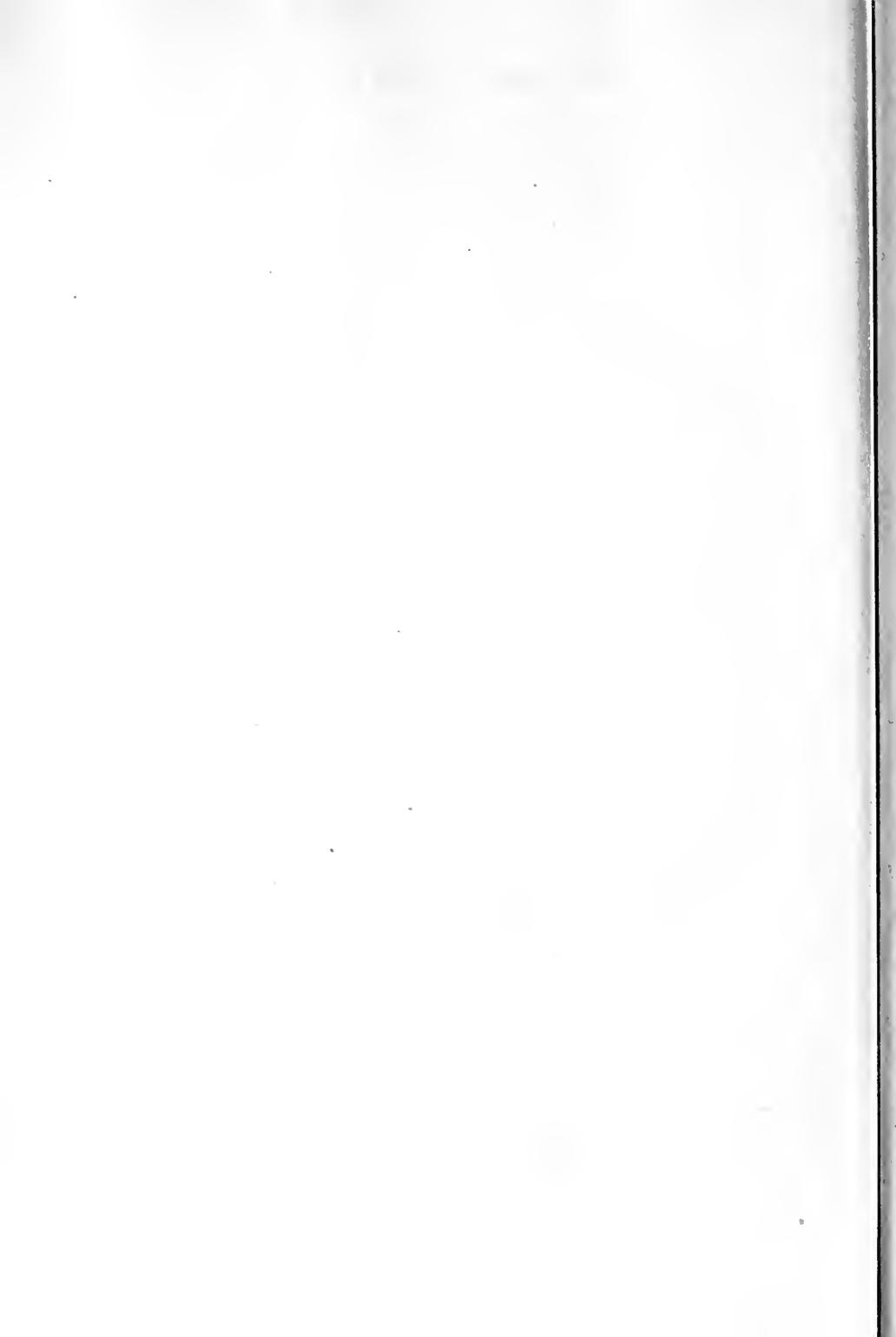
"I do — unfortunately I do," rejoined Christian, his thoughts painfully associating themselves with the beautiful Laura; and when he remembered that she had an air of artless innocence strongly contrasting with the fierce, commanding, and imperious demeanour of Mrs. Oxenden, he felt his blood boiling with indignation at the bare suspicion of what might be in store for that defenceless being.

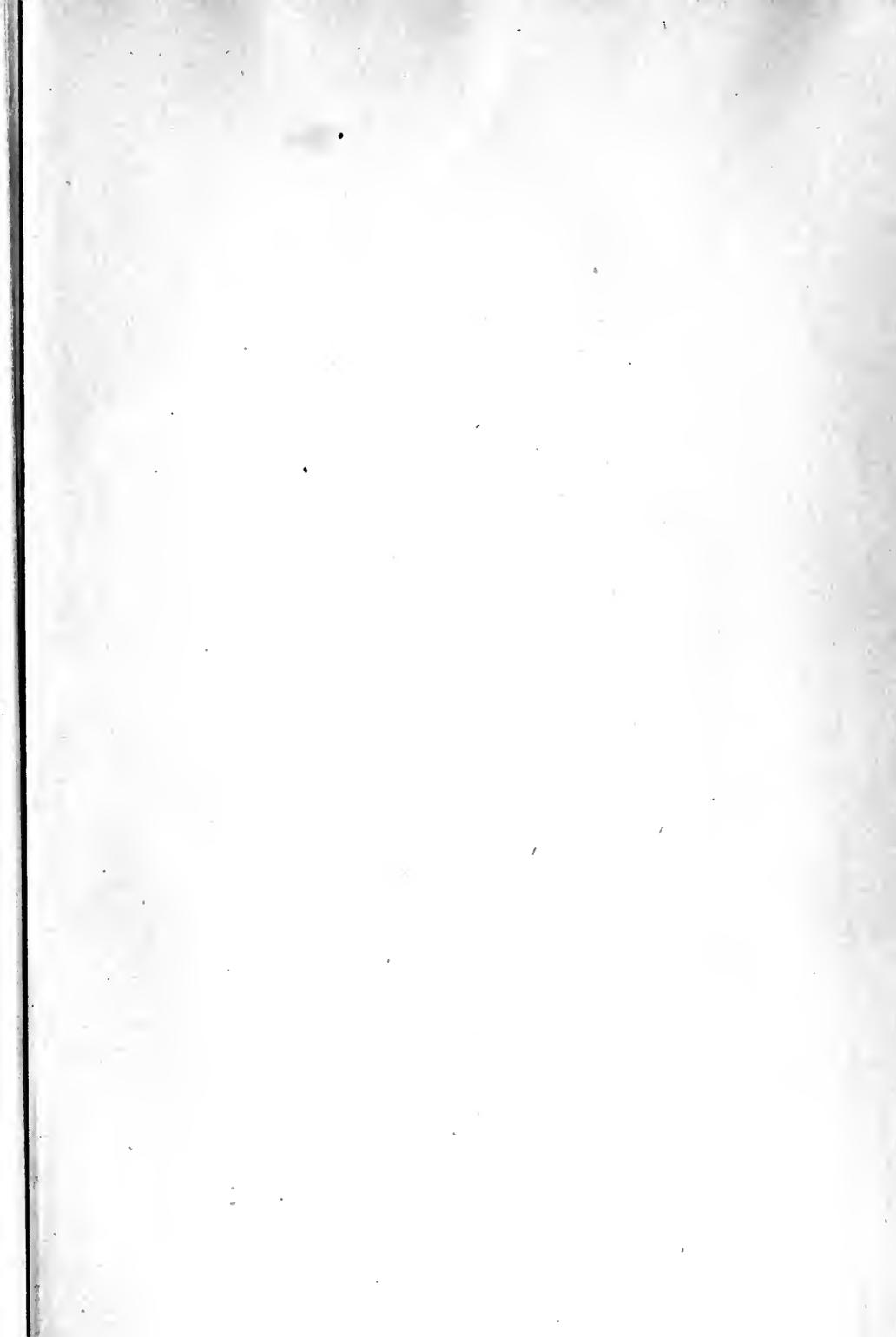
"Yes, sir," continued the milk-woman, "there are many people about here who could tell a tale but little creditable to Sir Joseph Steward, and my only surprise is that he hasn't had his brains beat out long ago by some indignant husband, father, or brother. But money is such a power! — and if it does much mischief, it can also help to hush it up. Would you believe it, Sir Joseph is a magistrate, and that gives him an opportunity of terrifying the poor wretches whom he has first injured."

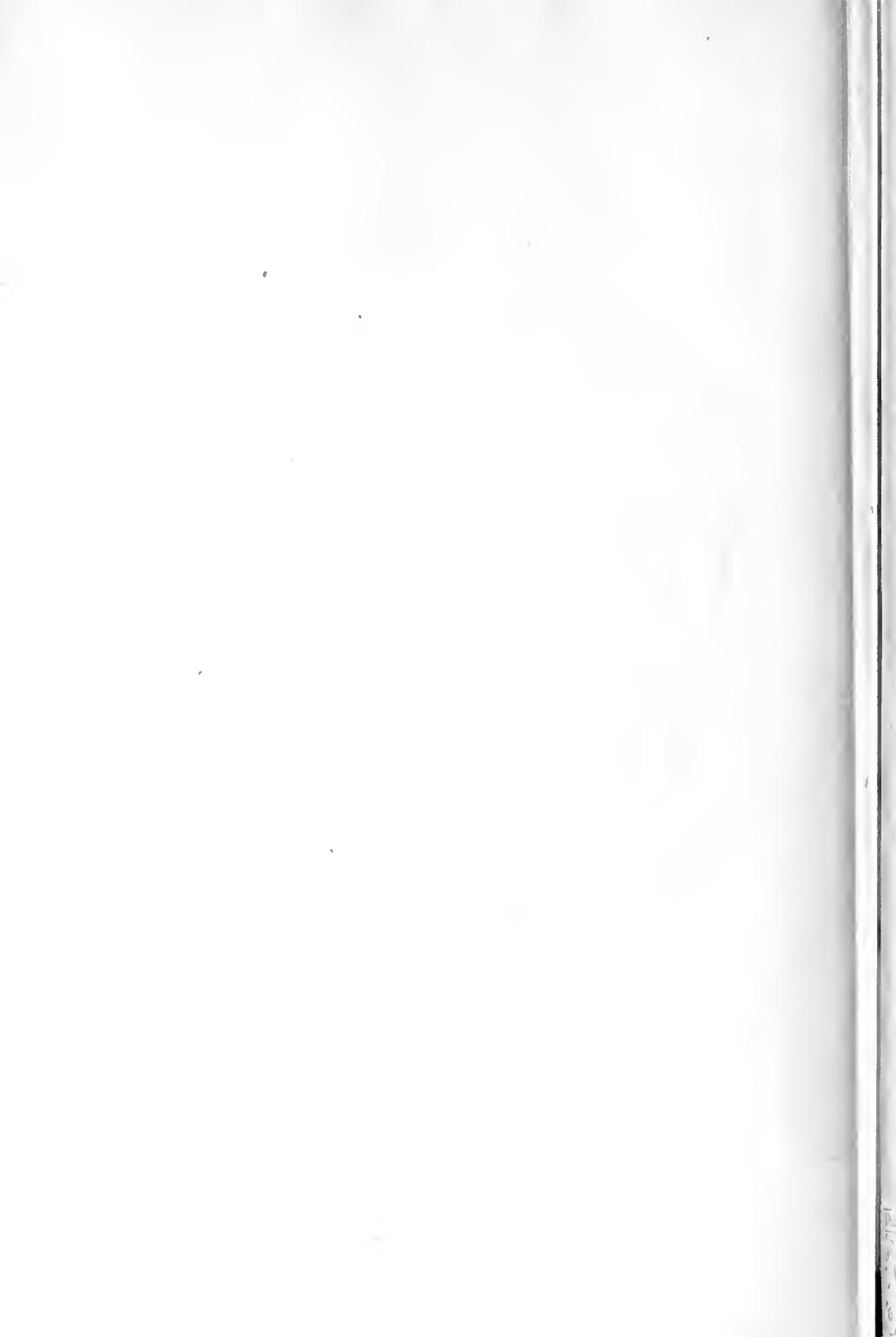
"Do you happen to know the name of Oxenden?" inquired our hero.

"No, sir," answered the woman. "But I must be going, for I am already later than usual."

Christian could not detain her any longer, and he had heard enough to deepen all the compassion he had previously felt on behalf of the beautiful Laura, as well as to fill him with the most serious apprehensions that some dark plot was in contemplation against that defenceless being's peace of mind. But how could he assist her? And this was the question which he kept asking himself during the remainder of his walk back into Ramsgate.







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