THE

# SEAMSTRESS;

OR, THE

# WHITE SLAVE OF ENGLAND.


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WITH FIFTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS.

DRAWN BY HENRY ANELAY.


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# THE SEAMSTRESS.

## CHAPTER I.

### VIRGINIA.

TAVISTOCK STREET is a narrow and gloomy thoroughfare lying between the bustling Strand and the equally busy mart of Covent Garden. The reader may picture to himself a dark and sluggish ditch in some spot where there is a rushing, roaring torrent on the one hand, and an ever-agitated lake on the other;—and such is the relationship which Tavistock Street bears to the great living flood that pours along the Strand, and the constant activity of swarming life in Covent Garden. The mingling hum of myriads of voices and the din of countless vehicles reach the ears of the dwellers in that dingy-looking, sombre street: but seldom are its echoes awakened by carriages passing through it,—while the number of foot passengers is at no time great enough to send forth those sounds peculiar to the many-trampling feet of crowded ways.

The shops in Tavistock Street are few and by no means imposing in appearance: the hair-dresser's, the oilman's, the picture-warehouse, the masquerade-clothier's, and the gin-palace are the principal. The houses seem to be chiefly private ones: but they are generally occupied by lodgers whose names and avocations are specified on little brass-plates affixed to the door-post and each serving as an index to the particular bell which must be rung in order to summon forth the special individual whom the visitor requires. Some of those houses are perfectly respectable: but in others there are female lodgers whose reputation would not exactly stand the test which Cæsar insisted upon applying to his own wife.

We must now introduce our readers to a little chamber on the uppermost floor of one of the dingiest-looking houses in Tavistock Street. That back attic—for it was nothing more—was as scrupulously clean as the nicest sense of female tidiness could render it: but its aspect was that of cold, cheerless penury. Upon the floor was stretched the humble bedding—a flock mattrass and one thin blanket, with a pair of sheets as white as snow. A small deal table, a solitary chair, a basin and ewer, a candlestick, a little moveable cupboard, and a piece of broken looking-glass hanging to the window, completed the furniture—if such indeed the articles may be called—of that poor chamber. A neat straw-bonnet, a shawl, and a cotton dress, were suspended to pegs in one corner of the room; and a band-box contained a few other necessaries belonging to the scanty wardrobe of the young person who occupied this miserable attic.

And who was this young person? Reader, picture to yourself a pale and pensive girl of about eighteen,—with a countenance as beautiful as the utmost perfection of features could render it,—a figure slightly formed, but full of sylphide grace,—a hand of the most delicate shape—and feet and ankles small even to a fault. Her face was oval, with one of those complexions so dazzlingly fair that the skin seems transparent: her forehead, high and admirably formed, and stainless as alabaster, announced the intellectuality of her character;—while the simple mode in which she wore her rich brown hair and the general expression of her countenance gave her an appearance of virginal artlessness calculated to inspire the most tender interest.

The eyes of this sweet girl were large and of a deep blue: without being intensely eloquent, they were full of sensibility, as if the holiest and most melting light of heaven dwelt in their limpid depths. Her nose was perfectly straight, and, with the well-formed forehead, exquisitely chiselled mouth, and rounded chin, gave a classic outline to her profile. Her lips were of the pure red of the rose; and, without hyperbolical affectation, it seemed as if the simplest words passing between them must be invested with a charm peculiarly their own. But, Oh! when in some sunshine moment, a smile appeared upon those lips—revealing teeth that were white and even as strings of orient pearls—imparting a slight dimple to the chin—and diffusing over the countenance a radiance that lit up the eyes as with twin-lamps of celestial glory,—then was it that this fair being, at other times so sweetly gentle, became suddenly endowed with all that unconscious fascination and winning loveliness which constitute the charming woman.

She was attired in the plainest manner: but in her simple neatness she was more adorned by her own modest and unassuming loveliness than if the bird-of-paradise had given its plumage to wave above her brow and Golconda its most star-like gems to gleam upon her hair. Her dress, of a dark stuff, ascended to the throat, thus concealing the charms of that bust whose virgin contours the close-fitting corsage nevertheless developed;—and although not the slightest attempt at unnatural compression was ever made, or even dreamt of, by the young creature, her waist was of the most delicate proportion. In stature she was not above the middle height: but when she stood, the graceful elegance of her form and its flowing outlines of sylphide beauty made her appear taller than she really was.

But she was not one of those beings whose beauty blazes upon the eye all in a moment, to dazzle, to bewilder, and to overpower: on the contrary, it was not at the first glance that even the keenest observer amongst men and the greatest admirer of the fair sex would single her out as a creature endowed with a rare loveliness. There was nothing radiant—nothing grandly striking—nothing magnificently imposing about her. A modesty almost too timid for dignity, an artlessness bordering upon infantine

simplicity, and then the air of pensiveness which was becoming habitual to her, surrounded her as it were with a veil and threw her into the back-ground whenever a stranger's glance was flung upon her. But by almost imperceptible degrees there would come upon the mind of the observer a consciousness that he was in the presence of one whose unobtrusive loveliness was gradually, gradually unfolding itself to his perception—stealing as it were upon his senses, like the perfume of unseen flowers,—until he would be brought to contemplate with mingled surprise and respectful admiration that beauty which thus dawn upon him from behind the veil of its own modest simplicity.

Nor was the young girl whom we are describing thus sweetly bashful and innocently retiring *in appearance* only: she was so *in sooth*. Despite of an experience already bitter with regard to this world's varying fortunes and cold heartlessness,—despite also of that natural quickness of apprehension and appreciation of circumstances and things, which resulted from a fine intellect,—the purity of her thoughts remained as unimpaired as the chastity of her morals;—and although her sad condition—poor, orphan, friendless as she was—had necessarily thrown her, even at so tender an age, into occasional situations only too well calculated to shock her virgin mind, yet as her imagination was too fond of cherishing the most wholesome ideas to find even leisure to dwell upon opposite reflections, the result was that through her knowledge of life and its ways increased day by day, her soul passed uncontaminated through the ordeal.

We said that she was pale: but as yet it was not a pallor that had fixed its settled abode upon her cheeks. The natural plumpness of the flesh was sustained by the vigour of youthfulness and the strength of a good constitution;—and thus was it apparent that if this poor orphan gentle girl could only be suddenly or even soon rescued from the sad condition in which we find her,—snatched away from the miserable attic in which she toiled early and late,—and borne off into the country, to inhale the fresh bracing air, wander amidst the green fields, pluck flowers almost as fair as herself, and listen to the warbling of birds whose voices were nearly as harmonious as her own,—Oh! if all this could be done for her while it was yet time, then the roses would come back to her cheeks to mingle with the purity of the lily which was already there!

But, alas! small is the prospect of such a blissful change in the condition of the orphan Virginia! And now we behold her toiling far into the night,—the long, long night of winter;—toiling, by the feeble glimmer of the solitary candle, at the work which she has in hand. The clock of St. Paul's, Covent Garden, has already proclaimed the hour of one—one in the morning!—and yet the poor girl quits not her seat to retire to her humble pallet. Nevertheless she is ready to sink with fatigue: her temples throb violently—her back aches—her fingers are stiff—her limbs are rigid. The snow lies thick upon the roofs that may be seen from her attic-window: the moon shines with a lustre that is the very purity of ice-like coldness itself;—and yet she feels not the piercing chill. A feverish excitement tingles in her blood and sustains an unnatural warmth throughout her entire being: for she is pushing her physical energies to the extreme—she is goading herself on as it were with whip and spur—she must finish her task before she dares think of seeking her couch!

Fain would she pause if only for five minutes—just to get up and stretch her limbs by walking to and fro in that chamber, narrow and circumscribed though it be. But she must not—she may not pause thus!—she knows full well that if she once checks the unnatural tide of over-wrought energies now hurrying her along, a complete paralyzation of the whole powers, mental and physical, would instantaneously take place. She resembles the high-mettled steed which, to suit its master's stern necessity, allows itself to be ridden to the very death,—keeping up at last with a kind of mechanical energy and artificial strength—surviving as it were the exhaustion of its legitimate power—and yet at any moment ready to drop down dead it its foot should only happen to be tripped up with a stone or its rider should suddenly attempt to rein it in!

Conscious, therefore, that to pause even for a minute would be to surrender herself up to utter prostration, Virginia pursues the toil which is only too well calculated to produce in a few hours the effect of as many years' wear and tear upon her constitution. Since five in the morning had she been at work: 'twas now one on the next morning;—twenty hours of unceasing, unvarying toil—broken only by two intervals of ten minutes each to allow the poor girl to partake of some trifling refreshment!

But how happens it that she—this poverty-stricken young creature who hath nothing save the innocence of her own sweet pensive countenance to become security in her behalf,—how happens it that she should have been entrusted with a superb dress of costly velvet to make up? For such is the work to which she is now devoting all the energies she can possibly concentrate to the accomplishment of the task. And let us pause for a moment to examine in detail the amount of property thus confided to an orphan girl whose entire worldly possessions are contained within the four walls of that narrow, poor, and cheerless attic!

First, there were eighteen yards of the most magnificent velvet, at one guinea per yard—making £18 18*s*. Next, there was the same quantity of costly silk for the lining at 4*s*. a yard—making £3 12*s*. Then the exquisite white Brussels lace, supplied for the trimmings of the sleeves and body, had been purchased at not one farthing less than fifteen guineas. Add together the cost of the three items of velvet, silk, and lace, and we shall find that the total amount is £38 5*s*. Nearly forty pounds entrusted to this poverty-stricken girl—and yet the most liberal furniture-broker in London would not have given her twenty shillings for all her worldly possessions!

But ere we explain how this superb dress had been confided to Virginia Mordaunt—for such was the name of the young seamstress—we must watch her in the accomplishment and conclusion of her task. With a mechanical precision does she continue to ply the needle: the feverish excitement which sustains her with an artificial strength, increases rather than diminishes;—and upon the pallor of her cheeks a hectic glow is gradually suffusing itself. Her respiration becomes short and quick: her veins tingle as the blood courses through

them like lightning. The clock strikes again: 'tis two—two in the morning!—and a faint smile of satisfaction appears upon the countenance of the maiden, as she perceives that another half-hour will behold the end of her task.

And now it is with nerves and fibres straining to the extremest faculty of tension that Virginia pursues her toil. Her eyes grow dim: she closes the lids with a sort of violence for a few moments—and the blue orbs appear to recover all their power. A dizziness seizes upon her: she presses her hands for an instant to her throbbing brows—and the reeling of her brain seems to be stopped. But so unnaturally over-wrought are her physical energies that her mental faculties are becoming bewildered: she loses sight of her own identity—she forgets where she is—a hurry, a confusion, and a droning hum take possession of her brain,—and yet she continues to ply the needle with a sort of automaton accuracy. The candle requires snuffing—but she heeds it not: dimly and more dimly does it burn—and still she plies, and plies, and plies the needle with an unvarying precision. 'Tis now a mere mechanical process with her: she is like one in a dream!

But suddenly she starts from that waking trance: the toil is over—the work is done. From her hand falls the superb velvet dress; and for a few moments she lies back in her chair to collect her scattered thoughts. The re-action now commences: the ebb of the tide of energies so unnaturally forced in the same channel for so many hours, begins in terrible earnest. The sensation is as if the warm blood were receding from the heart and flowing out of the veins, bearing away all the vital powers on its crimson current. A feeling of languor, painfully deepening into exhaustion, comes over the maiden; and she is compelled to arouse herself to another effort in order to escape from sinking into utter lethargic prostration. Rising from her seat, she carefully hangs the dress over the back of the chair which she has just quitted: then, hastily throwing off her apparel, the wearied, toil-crushed Virginia seeks her humble pallet spread upon the floor.

In a few moments she is sleeping profoundly. Then gradually do her thoughts take the roseate hue which adapts them, when no longer under the regulating power of the intelligence, to form the phantasmagorian train constituting a dream of fairy happiness;—and she beholds herself wandering in a delicious garden—threading her way beneath festooning verdure and amidst parterres of flowers. The atmosphere is warm and perfumed: the silver murmurs of a neighbouring streamlet, mingling with the songs of birds, are wafted to her ears. Delicious sensations come upon her—all the harmony of nature is stealing in unto her soul—she imbibes the fragrance of the flowers—she moistens her lips with fruits of exquisite flavour. It seems to her that this is her own garden—that she is the genius of that terrestrial paradise. Then the remembrance of her recent sorrows gradually mingles with the felicitous train of her reflections; and she rejoices to think that some heavenly intervention has removed her from her cheerless attic to this scene of floral charms and fruitful plenty, where summer ever reigns!

But suddenly a chill seizes upon the young maiden and strikes with the effect of an ice-shaft to her very heart's core. She shivers all over—a sombre shade falls upon the delicious garden—deeper and deeper grows the gloom—the gem-like glories of the fruits and flowers are absorbed in the darkening cloud—the harmonies of nature sink into a dead and ominous silence—and the last vestiges of the enchanting vision fade rapidly from her view, until they disappear altogether.

Virginia awakes with a subdued cry upon her lip—and she starts up in a species of consternation. The effect of the dream is still upon her;—and she cannot immediately comprehend where she is. But in a very few moments her ideas settle down into their proper departments;—and she becomes painfully and poignantly alive to the fact that in proportion as the garden of her dream was warm, glowing, and delicious, so is the garret of her reality chill, wretched, and cheerless.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE VELVET DRESS.

The clock of St. Paul's, Covent Garden, is now striking seven, as Virginia rises from her humble pallet. The snow has piled itself up on the window-ledge, veiling the lower row of the small panes with a natural curtain of dense gauze. The atmosphere of the chamber is fraught with an intense chill; and from the badly fastened door and window the searching draughts penetrate like keen and cutting shafts of invisible ice. The water is frozen in the ewer; and the maiden's breath freezes into a vapour-wreath as it emanates from the ivory doors and the rosy portals of her charming mouth.

No wonder, then, that ere Virginia Mordaunt had even awakened from her slumber, the barbed chill of the winter-morning should have pierced through the thin blanket even unto the very marrow of her bones. Shivering from head to foot, she abandons that couch whereon she would fain repose her weary limbs a short time longer, cold though it be: for, after twenty-one hours and a half of continuous, unwearied toil, four hours and a half of slumber were but the veriest shade and mockery of rest! But not another minute might the maiden linger on that pallet: the clock had struck seven—and it was at seven that she had calculated upon rising when she had lain herself down so short a time before.

And now she was compelled to break the ice in her pitcher before she could perform her ablutions;—and while thus employed, her delicate hands turned blue with the cold—and her teeth chattered—and she felt so very, very wretched and dispirited altogether, that the poor girl burst into tears. For she thought that it was hard—oh! it was hard to have toiled so much and have rested so little,—to be compelled to sit up so many hours, and to be enabled to sleep for so short a time,—to plunge herself by sheer labour into such utter exhaustion, and to rise again with the stiffness still in every joint and the aching in every limb!

But wiping away the pearly tears from her sweet plaintive countenance, Virginia addressed herself with reviving courage to her simple toilette. The intense chill of the water brought a colour back to her cheeks; and a copious bathing of the eyes miti-

gated their heaviness. In a word, by the time she had resumed her apparel, the natural freshness of youth, aided by the vigour of a good constitution, had so far triumphed over the lassitude and languor which she felt on first rising from her couch that although still experiencing a sense of weariness, she was astonished that it should be so comparatively slight when measured with the magnitude of her recent exertions.

The moment she was dressed, Virginia opened her cupboard, and thence took forth the materials for her frugal breakfast. Having put about a thimbleful of tea into a little brown earthenware tea-pot, she opened the door—tripped gently down stairs—and descended to the kitchen, where she was allowed to procure some boiling water. Of a dirty slatternly servant-girl she asked "how Mrs. Jackson was this morning?"—and the response, indifferently but not insolently given, was to the effect that the female thus inquired about had passed a comfortable night and was somewhat better.

"I suppose you are going to take up her breakfast now, Jane?" observed Virginia, whose voice was of silvery sweetness and touching softness: then, perceiving that the girl nodded her head affirmatively, she added, "Have the goodness, then, to inform Mrs. Jackson that the dress is finished and that I will be with her in about ten minutes."

"And do you mean to say, Miss, that you've done that velvet gown since the night before last?" inquired the servant-girl, gazing upon the young seamstress with mingled amazement and interest.

"Yes—I finished it at half-past two o'clock this morning," replied Virginia, her beautiful lips wreathing into a smile of satisfaction as she lingered for a moment on the threshold of the kitchen-door.

"And you ain't worn out?" ejaculated Jane, the expression of her countenance deepening in wonder and sympathy,—feelings which her usually cold and sullen disposition seldom allowed her to exhibit: then, shaking her head with a kind of ominous solemnity, she added, "But you won't keep it up long, Miss—you'll see you won't. It will kill you right off in a few years if you do. Well, it's a pity—a great pity, such a sweet pretty creature as you are—and quite a lady too: but your fate is fixed, as the saying is—and in a short time you'll be glad to take it easy as Miss Barnet does."

"Miss Barnet—the person who lives in the room underneath mine?" said Virginia, interrogatively. "I think I saw her on the stairs the day before yesterday—a tall, handsome, well-dressed female, of about two-and-twenty——"

"The same, Miss," replied Jane, with a faint smile of superciliousness upon her lip. "Has she not formed your acquaintance yet?"

"She made some observation of ordinary civility as we passed each other on the staircase," returned Virgina; "and I of course gave a suitable answer. But what did you mean, Jane, by the remark that I shall soon be glad to imitate Miss Barnet?"

The servant-girl, who was not above eighteen herself, but whose experience was such that she had little left to learn, fixed her gaze steadfastly upon Miss Mordaunt as if to read her through and through: but almost in a moment was she satisfied that the air of artlessness which the maiden's charming countenance wore, was nature's own veritable impress and utterly beyond all power of affectation. Then did the grimy but not ill-looking features of the servant-girl assume a look of the deepest commiseration, as she said in a low tone, "And you really don't understand me, Miss?"

"Certainly I do not, Jane," was Virginia's immediate response: "or else I should not have solicited an explanation."

"Then may you continue in ignorance, Miss," ejaculated the servant-girl, with an abruptness alike of tone and manner which seemed passing strange to our innocent heroine: and turning away, the slattern Jane, apparently relapsing into all her wonted sullenness and reserve, continued her work without taking any farther notice of the young seamstress.

Virginia accordingly hurried up-stairs to her own chamber; and as she sate down to drink her tea and eat a slice of dry bread therewith, she could not help reflecting that there was something very singular in the servant-girl's observation. But she had not much leisure for giving way to her thoughts upon the subject: for as soon as she had finished her frugal and hurried meal, she threw the velvet dress carefully over her arm and once more descended the stairs. But this time, instead of proceeding down to the lowest region, she stopped at the back-room on the first storey and knocked gently at the door. A faint voice desired her to enter; and Virginia accordingly obeyed the invitation.

It was a bed-chamber into which the maiden thus passed; and an elderly female was lying in the couch. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate—that apartment was well-furnished—and the breakfast materials, neatly arranged upon a tray, stood on the table by the side of the bed. The air of comfort which pervaded the place struck the seamstress as being positively luxurious after the chill and cheerless aspect of her own garret; and the genial warmth of the atmosphere struck as gratefully upon her shivering frame as a kind word falls beneficently upon the afflicted spirit.

"I am glad to learn from Jane that you are better this morning, Mrs. Jackson," said Virginia, as she approached the couch.

"Yes—I have slept well—and that is a good thing for an invalid," returned the female, who possessed one of those cold, passionless countenances which afford not the slightest index to the reading of the mind. "But you have finished the dress—you have kept your word—and you are a good girl," she added, in an imperturbable business-like fashion.

"I hope it will give you satisfaction, madam," said Virginia, as she held up the superb robe in such a manner that the light from the window gave a living lustre to its gloss.

"Come close," exclaimed Mrs. Jackson, raising herself partially up from the pillows which supported her head: then, drawing the dress towards her, she examined it with a look which though hurried was keenly critical—while Virginia stood by, her gentle bosom palpitating with suspense. "Yes—it will do excellently—that is to say, it will do," observed the invalid, suddenly checking herself so as to qualify any amount of praise which an

evanescent and unintentional ebullition of enthusiasm might have implied. "Now, then, Miss, have you made out your bill and receipted it?"

"No, madam—I—I—did not know whether I was to do so immediately—or not," faultered Virginia. "And, moreover," she added, with increased hesitation, "I was not exactly aware what to charge."

"Oh! the usual price, of course!" exclaimed Mrs. Jackson, fixing her large cold gray eyes, now made haggard with illness, upon the young maiden who was trembling with suspense. "Three-and-sixpence, you know, is the sum—and you must take the dress somewhere for me into the bargain. Now then, run and make out your little bill—and put on your bonnet and shawl, there's a good girl."

Three-and-sixpence!—the words struck like a panic to the heart of Virginia—for the poor girl had calculated upon at least double that sum as a recompense not so much for the time as for the skill employed in carrying out the special artistic design of the fashionable milliner who had originally cut out the dress. The disappointment, then, fell with the sudden virulence of a blight upon her feelings: but in order to conceal the tears that were gushing from her eyes, she instantaneously quitted the room.

Hurrying up to her own chamber, she threw herself upon the seat and gave free vent to her emotions. It was not so much for the mere pecuniary consideration in this special instance that she was thus afflicted—although heaven knows she was poor enough: but her soul was wrung with a poignant anguish because she had hoped that a specimen of superior skill which she felt convinced she had afforded in the making up of that dress, would have evoked such a recompense as might serve not only as a positive recognition of her ability but also as a promise of future employment. When, therefore, that miserable pittance was proposed, the maiden's hope was suddenly blasted—her pride was wounded—and the sickening thought struck upon her soul that all her skill with the needle would never do more than sustain the frailest, narrowest barrier between herself and utter destitution!

Therefore was it that the poor girl wept: therefore was it that the friendless orphan gave way to the full tide of her affliction.

But those tears relieved her—and she was not of an age to bid farewell to hope altogether nor to hurry forward in order to meet despair halfway. She accordingly hastened to dry her cheeks: and, having written out her little bill in the neatest hand that ever embodied feminine grace in calligraphic fluency, she put on her bonnet and shawl and once more hurried down stairs.

"Now, Miss Mordaunt," said Mrs. Jackson, as soon as she had paid the three shillings and sixpence which she took from a purse beneath her pillow,—"put the dress carefully into that box and take it as quick as you can to Mrs. Pembroke-Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury. Her address is on the box—so you cannot mistake it."

Virginia hastened to obey the orders which she thus received, although she had previously entertained no idea that she was to be employed as a messenger as well as a needle-slave. But she was naturally of an amiable and obliging disposition; and she would not refuse such a service for a person confined to her bed by illness. Moreover, she was in hope of obtaining fresh work from Mrs. Jackson, in spite of the dispiriting incident which had ere now wrung such bitter tears from her eyes.

In about twenty minutes the maiden reached Great Russell Street; and, having discovered Mrs. Pembroke's abode without difficulty, she was at once shown up into a handsomely-furnished apartment, where she found a good-looking middle-aged lady seated at breakfast. The table was spread with many luxuries: the appointments of the room generally denoted the possession of wealth on the part of its occupant;—and she herself in her elegant French cap and morning-wrapper, was lounging upon the sofa with the indolent ease of one whose mind is troubled with very little care.

"Well, Miss, so you come from Jackson with the velvet dress—eh?" said Mrs. Pembroke, who had already heard from her servant the object of Virginia's visit. "There—you need not take it out of the box—I've no doubt it is done properly—and if not, there's no time to make any alteration. Has Jackson sent her bill?"

"No, ma'am," replied the young seamstress, timidly—for Mrs. Pembroke spoke quite with the air of a superior and never once thought of asking her to sit down. "Mrs. Jackson is ill in bed."

"Ill in bed, eh? Well—I suppose she'll get over her indisposition, whatever it may be," observed Mrs. Pembroke, with all the heartless indifference of that fashionable class whose airs and manners she studiously affected. "Let me see—I am going out of town for a few weeks—and therefore I had better settle Jackson's bill at once. There is nothing between us that I am aware of, except that dress: so write out the bill and receipt, Miss, and I will pay you for her. There are materials," she added, pointing languidly towards an elegant rose-wood desk that lay open on a side-table.

"How much am I to charge, madam, on Mrs. Jackson's behalf!" inquired Virginia, with increasing timidity—for the artless, bashful girl was overpowered by the great-lady-airs which Mrs. Pembroke gave herself.

"Oh! the usual price, to be sure!" she exclaimed, quite surprised at the ignorance displayed by the question. "Seven shillings."

And poor Virginia sighed as she sate down at the writing-table to draw up the receipt: for she now began to acquire a little insight into the way in which affairs of this nature were conducted—and she wondered why *she* should not have received the whole amount of seven shillings, this being the value of the making-up of the dress in the second stage of its progress towards the hands whence the order originally emanated.

The bill was accordingly made out; and Mrs. Pembroke tossed half-a-sovereign across the table. Virginia gave the three shillings change, and was about to retire, when the languid lady observed in a somewhat more conciliatory tone than she had hitherto adopted, "By the bye, you can do me a great favour, Miss, if you would be so kind."

"I shall feel very happy, madam," answered the amiable girl, with all the sincere readiness of her obliging disposition.

"The truth is I am going out of town for a few weeks," resumed Mrs. Pembroke; "and I

therefore told *my young person* who carries parcels for me, that she need not come any more until my return. I quite forgot last night when I thus dismissed her, that this robe was to be brought to me to-day; and therefore, to come to the point at once, I have no one at hand just at this instant to convey it up to Portland Place for me. Will you undertake that task?—and—and permit me to pay your omnibus," added Mrs. Pembroke, tossing a sixpenny piece across the table towards Virginia.

"I will take home the dress with much pleasure for you, madam," replied the young seamstress: "but as I shall walk both to the place of destination and back homeward, I do not require any money for omnibus-fare;"—and, with her cheeks displaying the slight flush of a pride somewhat wounded by the self-sufficiency of Mrs. Pembroke, Virginia took up the sixpence and laid it down close by her side.

"Well, just as you please, Miss," observed the lady, somewhat haughtily: then, instantaneously relapsing into the fashionable languour which she was assuming, she said, "You will greatly oblige me by taking the dress up to Madame Duplessy's establishment in Castle Street, Portland Place."

"Certainly," replied Virgiana: and she was preparing to depart with the box once more, when Mrs. Pembroke again made a motion for her to pause.

"Give me half a sheet of that writing-paper and the ink-stand, Miss," said the lady, raising herself up to a sitting posture upon the sofa. "The Duplessys are so particular—they always will have an invoice with everything, however trifling," she continued in a murmuring tone to herself: then, having written out a bill upon a slip of paper, she handed it to Virginia, observing, "You must be sure to give this to Miss Dulcimer, Madame Duplessy's fore-woman."

The young seamstress promised to execute the commission punctually; and, taking her departure from Mrs. Pembroke's abode, she sped along Oxford Street towards Portland Place.

It was now close upon nine o'clock; and the great thoroughfare was thronged by persons hurrying to their places of employment or business. A thaw had commenced, and the pavement was almost ankle-deep in mud. Virginia was compelled to hold up her dress a little to save it, plain and humble though it were, from being covered with dirt; and, as she thus went half-trippingly along, the neatest ankles and the prettiest feet in all the world were revealed to the admiring eyes of those who happened to observe them. The coldness of the weather and the exercise that she was taking enhanced into a perfect glow the colour which the chill water had brought to her cheeks when she was performing her ablutions in her own chamber:—and thus was it that Virginia Mordaunt had never perhaps appeared to greater advantage than on the present occasion, although wending her way along the muddy thoroughfare and carrying a large but very light box in her hand.

She was just turning out of Oxford Street into Portland Place, when a handsome cabriolet, drawn by a splendid animal, and with a genteel little page standing behind it, came dashing up from Regent Street. Suddenly the gentleman who was seated in this cabriolet caught sight of Virginia's feet and ankles as they tripped glancingly over the slimy pavement: and, being instantaneously ravished by their delicate symmetry, he kept his eyes fixed upon her until he was enabled to obtain a glimpse of her countenance.

"She is lovely, by Jupiter!" ejaculated the gentleman—who, by the bye, was not more than about one-and-twenty years of age, and eminently handsome;—and, suddenly reining in his spirited steed, he leapt from the cabriolet, exclaiming to the agile page who was at the horse's head in a moment, "Follow at a short distance."

The page touched his hat and jumped into the vehicle; while the young gentleman proceeded in the track of the beautiful seamstress who was now about thirty yards a-head.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE MILLINER'S ESTABLISHMENT.

TOTALLY unsuspicious of the admiration which she had excited in the breast of the tall, handsome, and elegantly-dressed youth who was thus pursuing her,—and indeed, equally ignorant of the fact that she was being purposely followed at all,—Virginia continued her way into Great Castle Street, where she soon found out the splendid millinery establishment of Madame Duplessy and Co. The windows consisted of immense panes of plate-glass in gilt frames; and within might be seen several caps and bonnets of the latest fashion and most exquisite appearance. The royal arms were mounted over the door; and in large letters was conspicuously announced the fact, for the behoof of any one whom it could possibly gratify, that Madame Duplessy enjoyed the patronage of some Royal Highness of the feminine gender.

It may be as well to mention that Madame Duplessy was in reality an Englishwoman bearing the not very euphonious name of Snuggins: but, being well aware in the first place that the ladies of the English Aristocracy would patronise nothing in the shape of native industry when French competition was in the way, and in the second place that the appellation of Snuggins was far from being a passport to patrician favour, the worthy milliner had coolly and quietly adopted a French name and dubbed herself a Frenchwoman. She had no husband: but she had a lover who lived with her, and thrashed her soundly into the bargain; and this gentleman, who was well known at all the gambling-houses in London as plain Bill Smith, passed as Monsieur Duplessy in Castle Street. The female herself was pretty, sharp-witted, intriguing, and possessed of much tact; and by aid of a suitable affectation of speech, she contrived to sustain her assumed character of a Frenchwoman with tolerable success; while her paramour, by means of a moustache, an imperial, and a curiously-shaped hat, enacted the part of a Frenchman to equal perfection. For be it well understood that the notions entertained by the giddy, gay, and frivolous ladies of "high life" relative to the French people and the French character, are of the most distorted, extravagant, and fantastical description; and hence the facility with which those ignorant, prejudiced,

and narrow-minded females of rank and fashion are duped by sham-foreigners and pseudo-continentals.

But to resume the thread of our narrative. Into the splendid establishment of Madame Duplessy and Co.—the "Company," by the way, being as fictitious as the milliner's French name and naturalization,—did Virginia Mordaunt enter with a timid step; and her glance was rapidly thrown around the elegantly-appointed shop—or rather *magasin*, as Madame Duplessy styled it. One handsome young woman was busily engaged in putting it in order for the day—that is to say, arranging a few bonnets, caps, and turbans upon stands: another was measuring out a costly silk for a dress;—a third was packing up a box to be sent off into the country; and a fourth was sorting feathers and artificial flowers upon the counter. These proceedings were taking place under the inspection of Miss Dulcimer, the forewoman—a middle-aged person whose Janus-face could wreathe itself into the sunniest smiles for a patrician customer, and assume the most chilling look for a shop-girl or a seamstress.

"Well, and what do *you* want?" demanded this petticoat-authority, flinging the question as it were across the shop at the young maiden who was entering with such respectful timidity.

Virginia stated in a few words the object of her mission; whereupon the forewoman bade her open the box. This order was immediately obeyed; and Miss Dulcimer proceeded to inspect the velvet dress with the most critical eye. There was really no room for the faintest cavil: the work was perfect;—but Miss Dulcimer was the last person on the face of the earth to bestow praise where the spite of a petty tyranny might be safely vented. She accordingly found several faults, the glaring injustice of which made poor Virginia's heart swell almost to bursting.

"And the invoice?" demanded Miss Dulcimer, with harsh abruptness, as if she secretly hoped that it really had been forgotten, so that she might have a justifiable and plausible ground for giving vent to her natural peevishness.

"Here it is," said Virginia, presenting the bill which Mrs. Pembroke had charged her to deliver.

"Fourteen shillings, eh?" ejaculated Miss Dulcimer, looking very much as if she longed to fly into a rage. "Now I told Pembroke the other day that she must take such things as these at thirteen and six——But, however, I'll settle that with *her*!" she added in a determined tone. "Stop a minute, young woman."

This command was addressed to Virginia, who had already begun to feel very uneasy in the presence of such a harsh-speaking and cross-looking lady as Miss Dulcimer. She was however compelled to remain, while the forewoman walked with the air of a tragedy-queen to a little desk at the end of the shop. There she wrote out a bill—enclosed it in a cream-laid envelope, as the fancy stationers call it—sealed it with perfumed wax—and addressed it in a handwriting as fluid as the blue ink itself.

"Now, young woman," said Miss Dulcimer, returning to the spot where she had left Virginia standing, "you must have the goodness to take the dress and this note along with it, to the Duchess of Belmont's in Grosvenor Square. I can't spare any of our young people this morning—we are so busy. The note contains the bill—and you will wait for the money, mind. Her Grace already owes Madame Duplessy upwards of six hundred pounds; and it is an understanding that she is to pay cash in future, on consideration of the old debt not being pressed for. So, if you wait, her Grace will be sure to send down the money, which you will bring straight back here to me. And now look sharp, and don't be more than a quarter of an hour getting to Grosvenor Square—for we promised that her Grace should have the dress to try on by ten o'clock this morning, in case of alterations being required. Ah! things are going queer, I fancy, at the Belmonts'," added Miss Dulcimer, in an ejaculatory style, as she turned away from Virginia and addressed the observation to the young woman who was arranging the artificial flowers.

"So I have heard, ma'am," was the reply. "But how is it that neither Madame Duplessy nor yourself ever go to try on her Grace's dresses?"

"Oh! because her Grace has got that French minx of a lady's-maid who always *will* take that duty upon herself," responded Miss Dulcimer, in a tone of deep disgust. "But, as I live, there's the Duke's son—the Marquis of Arden—passing by at this very moment!—and didn't he stare in at the window!"

"Is that the Marquis? Oh! what a handsome young man!" exclaimed the young woman to whom Miss Dulcimer had been addressing those last observations. "I just caught a glimpse of him as he passed by. But I believe his lordship is the Duke's son by a former marriage, and that the present Duchess is only his step-mother?"

Virginia did not hear the reply which Miss Dulcimer gave to this query on the part of the shop-woman: for at that precise moment the young maiden had finished her task of carefully re-consigning the velvet dress to the box;—and resuming her burthen, she sallied forth once more. The tall, elegantly-dressed stranger was watching at a little distance: but the maiden did not observe him;—and, still utterly unconscious of the fact that her footsteps were thus dogged and followed, she pursued her way towards Grosvenor Square.

But why had the pensive expression of Virginia's countenance deepened into a positive mournfulness from the moment that the door of Madame Duplessy's establishment closed behind her? Because she had there received a farther insight into the circumstances connected with her own toil: she had seen the value of fourteen shillings set upon her labour—whereas this same labour had only benefited her to the amount of three shillings and sixpence!

Without pausing, however, for the present to examine into the system and trace it step by step from its basis of selfish rapacity to its colossal height of tremendous injustice—and, without even upon this occasion stopping to chronicle the thoughts which new experiences were engendering in the mind of the poor seamstress,—we will at once conduct her to the mansion of the Duke of Belmont in Grosvenor Square. The elegant young stranger was still following her at a short distance, and still also did his pertinacious adherence to the track which she was pursuing, remain unnoticed by herself.

On reaching the ducal abode, Virginia was at a loss whether to ascend the area-steps or to

ring the front-door bell. She paused and hesitated: but at the moment when this bewilderment was becoming even painful to herself, a footman in a splendid livery issued from the mansion. To him did she submit the cause of her embarrassment; and, after having bestowed upon the maiden a look of such mingled insolence and patronising familiarity that it brought the warm blood up into her cheeks, the lace-bedizened flunkey condescended to turn back a few paces and escort her into the hall. There a fat porter bade her pass into a waiting-room, while a page took charge of the box containing the velvet-dress and the note enclosing the bill.

Nearly an hour went by, while Virginia remained in that waiting-room. Several other persons, both male and female, were introduced thither in the same manner: but they were all speedily summoned, one after another, to the interviews which they sought with the Duke or Duchess, or with the superior officials of the mansion. At last Virginia began to think she was forgotten altogether: then the idea struck her that she had done wrong to wait at all;—and then, again, she reassured herself on this point by the recollection that she had been positively enjoined by Miss Dulcimer to wait for the money, "as the Duchess was sure to send it down." In fine, at the expiration of an hour, the page whom she had before seen entered the waiting-room and bade her follow him.

Virginia was now conducted across the magnificent marble hall—along a gallery ornamented with pictures and statues—and thence up a private staircase leading to the apartments of the Duchess. On the threshold of that suite the page withdrew; and a lady's-maid, in a tasteful morning-dress, now became Virginia's guide. They traversed an anteroom where three or four other female dependants, dressed in a similar style of tasteful elegance, were gossipping round the fire that blazed in the grate: then they passed through a small but beautifully-furnished saloon, embellished with all the expensive trifles and costly nick-nacks which are of so little real use and on which thousands and thousands may be lavished by an extravagantly-disposed woman. Beyond this apartment there was a boudoir, where the most elegant refinement mingled with a certain voluptuous luxuriousness,—an effect produced by the sofas with their large downy cushions, the thick carpet into which the feet sank deep, the numerous mirrors, the pictures whose subjects were of classic love-scenes, the alabaster statues representing groups of naked Graces and Bayaderes, the perfumed atmosphere, and the miniature orangery formed by the double window. From this enchanting place a door opened into a large and magnificently furnished bed-chamber, where a lady of grand and imposing beauty was trying on the velvet-dress, assisted by a sprightly-looking French *femme-de-chambre*, or abigail.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE DUCHESS.

The Duchess of Belmont was one of the finest women of the day; and she had now reached that age when, with her magnificent style of beauty, she appeared in all the glory of her meridian charms. Thirty-seven winters had passed over her head without marring the rich gloss that sate like a lustre upon her dark hair, or dimming the light that shone in the depths of her superb hazel eyes;—and the suns of thirty-seven summers seemed to have dealt with her glowing loveliness as with a delicious fruit of the tropics, and ripened it into a luxurious development. Tall and nobly formed, her figure was full of symmetry and grace, even in its grand proportions: the richness of its contours bordered just sufficiently upon *embonpoint* to render her a splendid woman, without militating against a general appearance of feminine softness.

Her countenance was remarkably handsome. The classic outline of her features left nothing for the most fastidious critic to desire: but in their expression the pride of lofty rank was blended with a look of strong sensuality. It was a countenance admirably adapted to bear the stamp of genius and shine with the radiancy of that etherial light which the lamp of the mind can alone shed upon the human face: for assuredly had nature intended that high, open, and polished brow to bear the impress of the noblest thoughts, and those large, lustrous hazel eyes to reflect the glories of a brilliant intellect. But the false and factitious system of rearing, training, and education to which all females in "high life" are subjected, not only left the rich treasures of her mind utterly unexplored, but even checked and finally subdued those endeavours which they naturally made to develope themselves of their own accord. Thus, being nurtured in the usual hollow and heartless style peculiar to her sphere, she had fallen into the same ways of acting and thinking as those shallow-minded, frivolous, and self-sufficient beings by whom she was surrounded: her superior intellect became like a rare and delicate flower choking amidst the briars through which it vainly endeavours to push its own wholesome growth;—and thus in due course did the worldly pride of rank and station usurp the throne where the æsthetic pride of genius should have asserted its empire, while the grossness of the sense superseded the lofty purity and refining influence of the sentiment.

Proud as a Duchess and vain as a woman, her Grace's manner would have proved intolerable on the part of her inferiors, had it not been for a certain condescension which, without being positively amiable, mitigated her arrogance and self-sufficiency. Thus, even while standing upon the pedestal of her pride and her vanity, she could afford to distribute a few patronising looks upon those who gazed up from below;—and there were even moments when these looks would expand into smiles, in acknowledgment of any homage offered up to her elevated rank or her superb beauty.

And beautiful—or rather grandly handsome, she indeed was! We have already said that her hair was dark—that her eyes were hazel—and that her profile was chiselled in the perfection of classic elegance: we may now add that her complexion was dazzling fair—that her mouth was small, with lips resembling moist coral—and that her teeth were white as ivory. Nothing could exceed the sculptural richness of the proudly arching neck, the splendid bust, the sloping shoulders, and the rounded arms;—while every attitude when standing, and every movement when

walking, denoted a proportionately fine and flowing length of limb.

Such was the Duchess of Belmont, in whose presence Virginia Mordaunt now found herself;—and, as we have already stated, her Grace was trying on the velvet dress, with the assistance of her French lady's-maid. The robe fitted to perfection: there was not a fault to find with it;—and as the Duchess surveyed herself in the full length mirror before which she stood, a smile of satisfaction played for a few moments upon her lips. Even the French abigail, who was very difficult to please, expressed her full and complete approval,—speaking in her own native tongue when addressing her Grace, and in broken English when vouchsafing her remarks aside to Virginia.

But since the Duchess was in the habit of dispensing with the attendance of her milliner to try on her dresses,—and since she invariably took the opinion of the French lady's-maid in the first instance,—for what earthly purpose had Virginia been sent for into the presence of her Grace? The truth was that the proud, haughty, and self-sufficient Duchess of Belmont was reduced by circumstances to the necessity of adopting a little manœuvre in order to evade the immediate liquidation of the bill which had been sent up in company with the dress;—for inasmuch as she did not choose to send down an excuse by either of the pages in attendance,—and as it was totally at variance with the custom of the household to despatch her own lady's-maid with messages to the hall or waiting room,—the only plan which her Grace could adopt, was to send and summon Virginia to her own private chamber.

Having taken off the velvet-dress, by the assistance of the French *femme-de-chambre*, the Duchess assumed an elegant morning-wrapper; and flinging herself into an easy-chair which stood near the fire, she said in a tone of affected langour. "Clementine, give me Madame Duplessy's account."

The French lady's-maid, to whom this command was issued, handed to her ducal mistress the perfumed note which Miss Dulcimer had sent along with the velvet dress, and which Virginia had been so careful in delivering. Tearing off the envelope, the Duchess ran her eyes over the bill, which was drawn up in the following manner:—

Her Grace the Duchess of Belmont
To Leonie Duplessy and Co.

*January 16th*, 1844.

| | |
|---|---|
| To 18 yds. velvet, at 1*l.* 1*s.* per yd. ..... | £18 18 |
| To 18 yds. silk, at 4*s.* per yd. ..... | 3 12 |
| To lace for bertha and trimmings ..... | 15 15 |
| To making up dress ..... | 4 4 |
| | £42 9 |

*Received for Duplessy and Co.*,
*Jane Dulcimer.*

When the Duchess of Belmont observed that the bill was already *receipted*—as plain and unmistakable an intimation as could possibly be conveyed relative to the necessity of a cash payment—a severe though transitory contraction of the brows betokened her displeasure. But instantly regaining her self-possession, she turned towards Virginia, saying, in a tone more than usually condescending, "Are you the person whose name stands at the bottom of this bill?"

"I cannot say—I do not know, madam—that is, your ladyship—I mean your Grace," faultered the young seamstress, blushing in the confusion which seized upon her.

"You do not know!" ejaculated the Duchess, with mingled surprise and contempt. "If you can write, you must be aware whether you affixed your own signature to this document;—and if you can only read, and not write, you can tell whether any one else has appended your name for you."

With these words the Duchess passed the bill to the French lady's-maid, who handed it to Virginia; and the young maiden, trembling all over (she knew not why) as she took it, cast her eye mechanically upon its contents. The very feature in the document which happened *first* to strike her, was the item for the "making up" of the dress; and she thus became aware that Madame Duplessy had charged the Duchess four guineas for what *she* (Virginia) had been that morning paid three shillings and sixpence!

The poor girl's eyes remained rivetted upon that item for nearly a minute; until she was suddenly recalled to herself by an impatient ejaculation which fell from the lips of the Duchess.

"Well, young woman—*is* it, or is it *not*, your name?" was the demand made by the great lady.

"I—I beg your Grace's pardon—I had forgotten," returned the young seamstress, startled from the half reverie into which she had fallen. "No—this is not my name—it is that of the forewoman, I believe——"

"You believe!" exclaimed the Duchess, affecting to regard the timid, blushing, trembling girl with a look of suspicion. "Surely you must be acquainted with the names of the people in the establishment to which you belong? Clementine," added her Grace, turning her eyes upon the Frenchwoman,—"do you not think there is something strange in all this?"

"I do, my lady," was the fawning abigail's prompt reply.

"And—and you would advise me not to pay the amount to this young person?" continued her Grace. Of course it is all the same to me: but——"

"But, as your ladyship observes, it would be better not," the Frenchwoman hastened to respond.

"I think I shall follow your advice, Clementine," said the Duchess, apparently in a musing strain: then, once more turning her eyes upon Virginia, she added, "You may go back to Madame Duplessy and tell her that I shall send the amount of her bill in the course of the morning. You can tear off the receipt, young woman, and leave the memorandum. It shall be duly attended to."

"But does your Grace think me capable of endeavouring to impose upon you?" exclaimed Virginia, her wounded pride and her indignation now supplying her with a courage which rose paramount above her natural timidity. "Was I not entrusted with the dress, to bring it home to your Grace?—and what is more probable than that I should also be authorised to receive the amount of this bill? Just now I was bewildered: but at present I recollect full well that the name affixed to the memorandum is that of Madame Duplessy's forewoman."

"I would rather send the money by one of my own servants," said the Duchess, affecting the calm

deliberation of tone and manner which was meant to imply a consciousness that she was justified in the course just announced.

"Under other circumstances," observed the maiden, her feminine dignity inspired as it were with the excitement of the scene, and her courage rising in proportion as she felt herself smarting under a poignant and unmerited insult,—"under other circumstances I should thank your Grace for relieving me from the responsibility of becoming the bearer of so large a sum of money: but after the observations made by your Grace, I must firmly though most respectfully insist upon receiving the amount specified in this bill."

"And pray, young woman, who authorised you to dictate to the Duchess of Belmont?" demanded the patrician dame, suddenly speaking as it were from the height of her lofty rank and proud position,—while her countenance expressed a sovereign hauteur and her magnificent eyes concentrated all their power in the look which she fixed upon the young seamstress.

"And may I not ask, with equal justice," said the maiden, astonished at her own dignified fortitude,—"by what right your Grace ventures to suspect the integrity of the poor but honest Virginia Mordaunt?"

The proud and overbearing Duchess of Belmont started as if a serpent had suddenly stung her—the colour fled at the same instant from her cheeks, leaving them ghastly pale—and she stared with almost a frienzied wildness upon the young maiden. Her whole aspect was that of a person who had either heard something too terrible to be believed, or else who had just received an insult too astounding to be regarded otherwise than as a mistake. The blow was evidently one of no ordinary nature: it was violent—it was severe—it was cruel;—and the noble lady's brain reeled and her entire form shook convulsively beneath the shock!

But this paroxysm of tensely wrought feeling was as evanescent as it was violent. It resembled the abrupt and furious boiling up of a river's surface and the almost instantaneous subsiding of the agitation, which accompany the process of blasting with gunpowder the concrete accumulation below. The storm which had sprung up so strangely, which had shaken her so terribly, and which had passed away so rapidly, scarce left a trace behind upon the countenance of the Duchess—save the pallor which still held the hues of health in abeyance upon her cheeks. In all other respects she recovered herself in an instant,—so promptly indeed, that Virginia who had trembled at the effect which her words so unexpectedly produced, and the Frenchwoman who shrank back with an unknown terror, found themselves the next moment wondering whether the incident which bewildered them had in reality just taken place, or whether it was only a fiction of their imagination.

The occurrence, then, which has required so many words to explain and comment upon, only occupied in sooth a few moments. The start—the wild look—the air of mingled incredulity and terror,—all were simultaneous—and all were circumscribed within the verge of a dozen seconds. Then the Duchess was herself again—save and except the flight of colour from her cheeks: and therefore, as nature's roseate hue stole not speedily back again to its damask resting-place, it may be inferred that the mind still continued a prey to deep inward convulsions, although the lady's features had relapsed into an expression profoundly calm.

But after she had withdrawn from Virginia's face that glance of transitory wildness—and after the strong spasm had ceased to vibrate through her frame—she cast another but more composed and settled look on the young maiden,—a look which embraced her entire person without wandering over it, and enabled the Duchess to observe the cast of the features and the contours of the form all as it were at the same instant. Then, once more averting her eyes, the patrician lady appeared to reflect profoundly for nearly a minute,—while the French abigail watched her with continued amazement, and the young seamstress felt her position becoming so awkward and embarrassing that she would have left the room had not the unpaid account which she still held in her hand reminded her of the duty she had to perform.

"Clementine," at length said the Duchess, in a low tone which was also tremulous,—and she spoke in the French language,—"you must go to his Grace's secretary and tell him that I am utterly without funds this morning—that, indeed, I have the most pressing urgency for forty or fifty pounds ——in fine, this milliner's bill *must* be paid at once. Go—and return quickly."

The lady's-maid accordingly hurried from the room; and Virginia was left alone with the Duchess.

"Are you engaged in Madame Duplessy's establishment?" inquired the patrician dame, without looking towards the young seamstress.

"No, my lady," was the answer. "I never was even there until this morning. But I made that dress, which I was desired to bring home to your Grace."

"Then I suppose you work at home—at your own abode?" said the Duchess, speaking with an embarrassment in her manner and a pathos in her tone which she could not altogether subdue: then, having received a reply in the affirmative, she observed, but with an increasing hesitation and a deeper interest, "You reside, I suppose, with your parents?"

"Alas! no—would to God that they were alive to be kind and good to me!" exclaimed the seamstress, bursting into tears.

"Poor girl!" murmured the Duchess, now gazing with intentness upon the fire—and a train of unutterable thoughts swept over her countenance so grandly handsome, but now so pale.

Then there was a long silence in that room, broken only by the half-stifled sobs that convulsed Virginia's bosom, as she wrestled with all her energy against the grief which had been so poignantly awakened by the questions of the Duchess of Belmont.

"Have your parents been dead long?" inquired the patrician lady, in the same low and tremulous tone as before, and without averting her eyes from the fire which was blazing so cheerfully in the grate.

"My father I never knew," answered Virginia, in a voice broken with sobs and full of deep emotion. "But my mother——Oh! she was good and kind—kind as a mother's perfect kindness could be——and I lost her!"

"She died?" said the Duchess, interrogatively: but her whole manner and tone—aye, and the looks,

too, which she kept fixed upon the fire—where penetrated with feeling and pathos.

"She died three years ago, my lady," responded the young seamstress, the tears raining down her cheeks. "Her death was sudden—very sudden: and therefore the blow fell all the more heavily. Indeed, I had retired to rest happy and joyous in the possession of a mother who loved me dearly—tenderly—devotedly: and I awoke in the morning to find myself a bereaved and friendless orphan! Oh! it was too much—too much——"

And the poor girl became convulsed with grief.

The Duchess rose abruptly from her seat—threw a strange look of mingled compassion and ineffable woe upon Virginia—and hurried into a dressing-room adjoining. She closed the door behind her;—and the seamstress thus remained alone in the splendidly-furnished bed-chamber.

The suddenness of her Grace's departure recalled the young girl in a moment to a sense of the awkwardness of her own position, remaining there as she was to receive the payment of a bill,—not knowing for what purpose the French lady's-maid had been so abruptly sent away,—and equally unable to comprehend the precipitate flight of the Duchess. A panic terror seized upon the maiden. Had she done any harm?—could any mischief be intended her? Poverty and friendlessness of position were not well calculated to inspire with confidence a young creature of her natural timidity, inexperience, and tender age;—and, hastily drying her eyes and cheeks, she was about to retire, when the Duchess emerged from the toilette-chamber adjoining.

Her absence had not lasted more than a minute: but if its object had been to enable her to recover any amount of mental composure which she had lost during the preceding dialogue, she had certainly succeeded, at least so far as external appearances were concerned. Once more wearing a demeanour that was calm, dignified, and imposing, she resumed her seat by the fire;—observing, in a voice so steady that it sounded as if it had never been ruffled, "I am sorry to keep you waiting, young woman—sorry also that I should in the first instance have spoken or acted in a way calculated to wound your feelings or convey a suspicion relative to your character. My maid will return in a few moments——"

The opening of the chamber door and the re-appearance of the Frenchwoman interrupted the speech of the Duchess. The money had been procured: the amount of the bill was forthwith handed over to the seamstress; and to the young maiden's respectful acknowledgment of thanks on behalf of Madame Duplessy, a cold and distant inclination of the head was the only return vouchsafed by the great lady.

The Duchess took up a book, in the contents of which all her interest seemed to be suddenly concentrated;—and Virginia Mordaunt withdrew, wondering why her Grace should have appeared so kind and compassionate towards her a few minutes previously, and so reserved and chillingly formal at last.

## CHAPTER V.

### MR. LAVENHAM.

On descending the steps of the ducal mansion, with the now empty box in her hand, Virginia suddenly became aware that she was the object of earnest attention on the part of a tall, and elegantly-dressed young gentleman who was standing at a little distance. His eyes were fixed upon her with an admiration wherein enthusiasm and respect were so far blended that it was impossible to feel that intentness of gaze in the common light of a libertine insolence. Virginia met his look as she slowly descended the steps—and her eyes were instantaneously cast down: then, as the thought simultaneously flashed to her mind that she must be mistaken and that it could not possibly be herself who was the object of such an earnest contemplation on the part of the young gentleman, she raised her eyes once more. Again their glances met,—*hers* so timid, so furtive, and so promptly withdrawn—and *his* so full of a glowing admiration mingled with respect!

A deep blush spread rapidly over the countenance of Virginia,—the blush of maiden confusion, as she thus acquired the certainty that the elegant stranger was indeed gazing upon herself. With quickening step she turned to the opposite direction from that which she ought to pursue: but the handsome youth was almost instantaneously by her side.

"Pardon me, Miss—a thousand times do I implore you to pardon me," he exclaimed, in a tone so supplicating that, in the suddenness of the surprise thus occasioned her, the maiden turned her fine blue eyes full upon him—and in his looks she read the same earnest entreaty, the same deprecating and respectfully fervid meaning, which were expressed in his voice. "Pardon me, Miss—but do, I beseech you, grant me a few moments' attention. I would not anger you—much less insult you: and yet I have been so struck by your beauty—your modesty——"

"Sir, you are a stranger to me—and I request—I command you to leave me," interrupted Virginia, now at length recovering the power of speech which amazement had temporarily suspended.

"As heaven is my witness," exclaimed the young man, with passionate vehemence, "I only meant to accost you with becoming respect. Beautiful creature that you are, do not prove as cruel as you are lovely."

The blush which was already glowing upon Virginia's cheeks, deepened into the most vivid crimson; and stopping suddenly short, she threw upon the young man a look which seemed to say, as eloquently as such charming eyes could possibly speak, "What have I done that you should insult me?" Then, turning abruptly round, she sped along in the proper direction which she should have taken when issuing from the ducal mansion.

But the young stranger was once more by her side ere she had accomplished a dozen paces;—and, with fervid ejaculations of passionate sincerity, he disavowed the slightest intention of insulting or annoying her. He besought her to listen to him for a few moments; and so earnest were his gestures, so vehement his language, that Virginia

became terrified lest the observation of passers-by or gazers from the windows should be attracted. Cruelly embarrassed how to act, and covered with confusion, the maiden felt her presence of mind abandoning her: but at this very moment the intervention of a third party rescued Virginia from the painful awkwardness of her position, and recalled the young gentleman to a sense of propriety.

"Charles—Charles—I am surprised at you!" exclaimed a middle-aged gentleman who had just entered Grosvenor Square from the nearest street. "In the broad daylight—before the very windows too—and a young creature whose appearance alone should protect her against insult!"

"Mr. Lavenham!" ejaculated the young stranger, raising his eyes from Virginia's countenance, and meeting the reproving looks of one whom he evidently dared not treat with disrespect: for all the fervour of mien and manner which he had exhibited towards the seamstress now changed in a moment into mingled shame and contrition. "This young person, sir," he observed, "will do me the justice to admit that I said nothing to insult her. I am incapable of such an action!"

"And yet, Charles," replied Mr. Lavenham mildly, "there is no one reason why you are justified in forcing yourself upon the notice of this young creature—whereas there are a thousand reasons why you should not. Come—take my arm, Miss; and I will see you in safety away from this neighbourhood."

These last words were addressed to Virginia, who mechanically accepted the protection which was proffered with a species of paternal kindness as well as with an unaffected bluntness of tone and manner;—and her middle-aged companion, without taking any farther notice of the young gentleman, escorted the seamstress out of the Square, into the nearest street, with as much respect and attention as if she had been a lady of title carrying an elegant reticule in her hand instead of a milliner's box.

The occurrence had taken place so promptly that Virginia had not an instant for reflection ere she thus found herself supported on the arm of a gentleman concerning whom she knew nothing more than that the elegant young stranger had addressed him by the name of Lavenham. But when she threw a hasty and timid look at the companion whom circumstances had thus given her, she could experience no other sentiment than one of mingled gratitude, respect, and confidence: for Mr. Lavenham was evidently a man moving in the superior ranks of life—his countenance wore an expression of affability mingled with a settled melancholy—and in his appearance were united the polish of good breeding, the commanding power of intellect, and the benevolence of a truly compassionate soul.

Gradually as the conviction penetrated into the maiden's mind that *she*—the poor humble seamstress, carrying a milliner's box in her hand—was walking in one of the most fashionable quarters of the West End, supported on the arm of one whom her own refined discrimination signalized as a gentleman of good social standing—gradually as this conviction settled in her mind, we say, did she perceive, or fancy that she perceived, the necessity of releasing him as speedily as possible from a position which she feared might have proved irksome to him even from the very first. She accordingly began to murmur some words of thanks for his kindness, making at the same time a motion as if she were about to withdraw her arm: but cutting her short with a species of blunt and frank benevolence, and tucking up her arm again in his own, Mr. Lavenham said, "I am not ashamed of walking with you, if you are not ashamed of walking with me. But whither are you going?"

"To Madame Duplessy's in Great Castle Street, sir," was the response.

"Ah! the fashionable milliner?" exclaimed Mr. Lavenham: then, after a few moments' pause, he said, "Did you ever see that young gentleman before?—I mean the one who was persecuting you with his nonsense just now?"

"I never saw him before, sir," replied Virginia.

"And you do not even know who he is, perhaps?" continued Mr. Lavenham.

"I have not the slightest knowledge of him," rejoined the seamstress.

"But suppose I had not come up just at that moment," observed her companion, eyeing her fixedly from beneath his brows,—"should you not have ended by looking more favourably upon so handsome a youth? Come, speak the truth, my dear—and I shall think all the better of you for your sincerity."

"Had you not treated me so kindly, sir," answered Virginia, in a low tone of mingled reproach and emotion, "I should *now* think that *you* also were disposed to insult me. Ah! sir, it is a hard thing that because one is poor, no credit will be given for rectitude of conduct—no faith put in virtuous intentions!"—and the maiden burst into tears.

"Don't cry—don't cry, my dear!" ejaculated Mr. Lavenham. "Pooh! nonsense—I did not mean to vex you! And now, by Jove! I feel a tear trickling down my own cheek," he added, as he passed his silk handkerchief rapidly over his countenance. "Well, I would rather have your indignant grief as an answer to the question I put to you, than a mere verbal protestation which might as well be false as true. What is your name, Miss?"

"Virginia Mordaunt," was the reply.

"A sweet name—a very sweet name!" observed Mr. Lavenham. "You must not be offended with me for saying so: I am old enough to be your father. And you belong to Madame Duplessy's? Now, my dear young lady," he continued, his tone suddenly becoming serious and even solemn,—"do let me beseech you to cling to that love of integrity and that appreciation of a good character which at present constitute the basis of your virtue. You are young—you are well-looking—you are dependent, no doubt, upon your labour for your bread; and London abounds in temptations. I speak to you, my dear, as if I were your father: for, somehow or another, I feel an interest in you. Think of my advice therefore; and although you may be poor, you will succeed in compelling the world to give you credit for that rectitude of conduct and those virtuous intentions of which you have spoken. And now, good bye, Miss Mordaunt. I shall not forget you—nor shall I lose sight of you."

With these words, the middle aged gentleman wrung the hand of the youthful seamstress with a

cordial warmth which seemed to flow from his inmost heart;—and then, turning abruptly round, he hurried away in the direction whence they had just come. His pace was quick, as if he were labouring under some emotion;—and he never once looked behind him as he sped towards Grosvenor Square. But Virginia could not help stopping for a few moments to follow with her eyes the worthy man who had acted and spoken with so much parental kindness towards her;—and when he disappeared round the corner into the Square, a profound sigh rose to her lips—for it suddenly seemed to her as if she had lost a good friend almost as soon as she had found one.

And this impression remaining upon her mind, it was with a heavy heart that she continued her way to Great Castle Street, where she duly paid to Miss Dulcimer the money received from the Duchess of Belmont. The forewoman barely thanked the young seamstress for having executed her commission;—and our heroine retraced her way to Tavistock Street, her mind full of the thoughts naturally resulting from the varied incidents of the morning.

## CHAPTER VI.

### MISS BARNET.

We have already observed that the house in which Virginia Mordaunt occupied a poor cheerless garret, was one of the most dingy-looking in Tavistock Street. It was let out in lodgings from bottom to top; and on the door-post were sundry zinc and brass plates, affording an index to the names and avocations of the principal tenants. Thus, for instance, a working-jeweller on a very small scale occupied the parlours on the ground-floor; Mrs. Jackson, the middle-woman, had the suite of rooms on the first-floor. On the second-floor front there was a music-master; and the back room of the same storey was occupied by two sisters, who were elderly women and earned a scanty livelihood by shoe-binding. In the front room of the third storey a poor wood-engraver dwelt with his wife and half-dozen children; and in the back chamber on that floor, lodged the Miss Barnet of whom mention has already been made. Finally, the front attic at the top of the house was occupied by an old woman and her daughter, who went out charring when they could get work, and were addicted to drinking when they could get gin;—and the back garret, as the reader is aware, was tenanted by our humble heroine, Virginia Mordaunt.

Mrs. Drake, the landlady of this house swarming with inhabitants, was a widow on the shady side of sixty. Her sole means of subsistence depended upon the rents paid by the various lodgers;—and the lease of the premises therefore constituted as it were her stock-in-trade—her capital—the source of her maintenance—the element of her respectability—the only barrier between herself and the workhouse. But in order to make both ends meet and have the necessary sum put by to pay rent, rates, and taxes, when quarter-day came round, the poor creature was compelled to live in the kitchen and eke out with respect to food as well as she was able. In fact, even when every room in her house was let, the benefit which she gained was but very little more than that of living rent free, with perhaps half-a-crown or three shillings a-week in the shape of actual profit: and then, on the other hand, she had to face the risks of having some of her room unoccupied from time to time—bad debts—occasional repairs—and other casualties to which landlords and landladies often find themselves liable, to their own especial cost.

It must be understood that Mrs. Drake let all her lodgings *unfurnished*—for the simple reason that she had never been able, during the thirty years of her widowhood, to replace the furniture which had been sold off under an execution to pay her husband's debts at his decease. To re-furnish the house—or only a portion of it—had been the most enthusiastic of her hopes and the extreme of her ambition: but year after year had gone by—disappointment had gradually traced its lines upon a countenance once so comely—grief and privation had reduced to spareness and meagreness a form once buxom with rounded proportions—the hair that was once dark and glossy became gray and grizzly—and in the aspect of the lean, withered, care-worn old woman of sixty was read the world's too common history of disappoint hope and blighted aspiration.

Thus was it that the years of Mrs. Drake's widowhood had passed in a continuous struggle with poverty, vexation, and embarrassment,—thirty of those long years, during which she had to maintain an appearance of respectability at the sacrifice of the comforts, and often of the necessaries of life,—suffering many hard privations in order to meet with exactitude the periodical calls of the landlord and the tax-gatherer,—and forced to endure the encumbrance of a large house with all its attendant expenses and cares, in order that she might live rent-free in one of the kitchens!

Her struggle against the world's vicissitudes had been a hard, a severe, and a painful one; and the inevitable consequence was that all the fine feelings and generous qualities of her youthful heart had been stifled and subdued one after another, their places being filled up by selfishness, egotism, and suspicion. In fact, her mind and her disposition gradually yielding with natural plasticity to the circumstances of which she was the victim, she became modelled by those noxious influences into the veritable type of the old landlady,—ready to dun, competent even to abuse, and inexorable in forcing the payment of rent by every available means.

But in spite of all her struggles, Mrs. Drake would not have been able to "keep the house over her head,"—to use her own expression,—were it not for the assistance of Mrs. Jackson. This female had occupied the widow's first-floor for many years, and paid for attendance into the bargain. The servant was therefore kept for her special behoof; and the remnants of Mrs. Jackson's meals constituted no small item in the resources of Mrs. Drake's own victualling department. Within the last few months, moreover, Miss Barnet had made arrangements with Mrs. Drake to be waited upon and have her repasts cooked by the servant;—and thus at the period at which our history treats, the widow was in circumstances a trifle more felicitous than they had been for many, many years.

Having recorded these few particulars relative to

the house in Tavistock Street and its landlady, we may resume the thread of our narrative.

Upon returning home, after her adventures at the West End, Virginia Mordaunt hastened up to her cheerless chamber and laid aside her bonnet and shawl. She then descended to Mrs. Jackson's bedchamber: but as the doctor was there at the moment, she was told to return in a quarter of an hour. Instead of retracing her steps to her own room, she continued her way down stairs to the kitchen, where Mrs. Drake was superintending the preparation of some mutton-broth which grimy-faced Jane was cooking for Mrs. Jackson's dinner.

"I have brought you the week's rent, Mrs. Drake," said Virginia, in her soft and somewhat melancholy voice: and she handed eighteen-pence to the landlady.

"Thank you, my dear," observed the widow, whom the odour of the broth—or rather the prospect of partaking of it—had put into a tolerably good humour. "The rent was due yesterday, mind: but it is all the same to me to have it to-day. Indeed, I shouldn't mention it at all, only it's just as well to keep regular."

"Depend upon it, ma'am, I shall always prove as punctual as my means will permit," observed Virginia, with difficulty stifling a profound sigh: then, after hesitating for a few moments, she said with a timid air of embarrassment, "Do you happen to know, Mrs. Drake, where I should be likely to apply with any degree of success for some work?"

"No—that I'm sure I don't!" ejaculated the landlady, her whole manner undergoing a sudden change as the prospect of the maiden's inability to pay the next week's eighteen-pence sprang up before her. "But do you mean to tell me, Miss Mordaunt, that you are already out of work?"

"For the moment—just for the moment," faultered Virginia, dismayed at the significant manner in which the old woman spoke, and which carried to the orphan's mind the unmistakable certainty that on failing to pay the rent she must expect to be turned forth from her lodging.

"Can't Mrs. Jackson give you anything to do?" demanded the landlady.

"I am afraid that Mrs. Jackson's illness—and another circumstance," replied Virginia, with increasing embarrassment, "will prevent her——"

"What other circumstances?" inquired Mrs. Drake, sharply.

"I mean that the lady from whom Mrs. Jackson appears to receive work, is going out of town for a few weeks," added the young seamstress.

"Ah! that is a bad business!" murmured the landlady, her looks now becoming troubled as well as stern and suspicious. "But you had better go up and speak to Mrs. Jackson upon the subject:—and, by the bye, there is Miss Barnet, who can get as much work as she pleases, but who is too idle to do any—*she* might put some of it in your way."

"Do you not think, ma'am," hastily interposed the slattern domestic, who had hitherto remained a silent listener, but who now broke in upon the discourse with some degree of excitement,—"do you not think, ma'am, that Miss Mordaunt could apply to other people better than to Miss Barnet?"

"Hold your tongue, Jane—and don't interfere," said Mrs. Drake, in a tone of harsh rebuke: then, turning towards Virginia, she observed, "Miss Barnet is a good-natured young woman, though somewhat too thoughtless and gay; but there can't be any harm in your applying to her for some of the work which she may have for the asking."

"I thank you for the suggestion," exclaimed the young seamstress: and away she sped from the kitchen, without observing the deprecatory shake of the head and warning look whereby the well-meaning Jane sought to convey her disapproval of the course recommended by her mistress.

On reaching the door of Mrs. Jackson's bedchamber, Virginia knocked gently and was invited to enter. The medical man had taken his departure; and the invalid was now prepared to listen to the young seamstress, as she explained the result of her mission.

"I went to Mrs. Pembroke," said Virgima; "and that lady is going out of town for several weeks."

"Going out of town!" echoed Mrs. Jackson, an expression of dismay suddenly appearing upon her countenance. "But did she not send me any private communication?—a note—a message——"

"Nothing, save the money which she said was due to you, madam," replied Virginia. "I was told to make out a bill and receipt on your behalf—for seven shillings—and here is the amount," added the maiden, with a sigh, as she placed the coin upon the table near the bed.

"And Mrs. Pembroke is going out of town?—and she treats me with this cold and wanton indifference?" murmured Mrs. Jackson to herself, her features, already made ghastly by illness, now becoming perfectly hideous with the look of blackest hatred that swept over them. "She even betrays the terms upon which I get *her* work done: she has let this young girl know the real value of her labour! Even *this* I could have put up with:—for it might have been an oversight on her part. But not to have given *me* the chance of procuring work from the same sources whence she has obtained it,—not to have put *me* into the proper channel to become her successor in the enjoyment of the patronage which has made *her* rich,—Ah? it is this that cuts me to the soul. I suppose she means to retire altogether—and she has probably sold the *good-will* of her connexion for a handsome sum of money! And now what is to become of me?—what is to become of me?"

Thus mused the invalid woman in a low murmuring tone, so that the young seamstress only caught a small portion of the complaints to which she was giving utterance. But Virginia had that morning acquired a sufficient insight into the system of which she herself was the victim, to enable her to comprehend that the departure of Mrs. Pembroke from town would prove seriously injurious to Mrs. Jackson: and this fear she had indeed expressed when in conversation with the landlady down stairs. The evil which she had thus foreseen, and the consequences of which redounded upon herself, now therefore received a mournful confirmation in the effect which the circumstance produced upon Mrs. Jackson: and as the ejaculatory question wherewith that female concluded her murmuring lament, was uttered loud enough to strike with all the fulness of its ominous meaning upon the maiden's ears, it touched a kindred chord in the young creature's heart and found an echo on her lips as with a deep

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sob she murmured, "And what also will become of *me?*"

But Mrs. Jackson heard not the response which her own lamentation had elicited from the poor seamstress: nor did she bestow a thought upon the friendless, orphan, helpless condition of that beautiful girl who was thus standing, in an attitude of drooping mournfulness, by her bed-side. The woman, with characteristic selfishness, was totally absorbed in her own gloomy reflections; and she had no feeling, no thought, no heart, for the adversity of another.

"What made you so long in returning?" she suddenly demanded of Virginia.

The maiden accordingly explained that she had been requested by Mrs. Pembroke to take the velvet dress to Madame Duplessy's in Great Castle Street, —and that she had thence been instructed to convey it to the Duchess of Belmont's in Grosvenor Square. But she said nothing relative to the particulars of her interview with that noble lady—nor yet concerning the handsome young gentleman who had accosted her, and the interference of Mr. Lavenham: for these circumstances had nothing to with Mrs. Jackson.

"Well, Miss," said the woman after another long pause, "I am too ill to look after work at present —and no work will come to me without looking after it. So I must make the best of it—and in a few days——"

"Can I be of any service to you in applying for work at such places as you may point out?" asked Virginia.

"What! do *you* even seek to ferret out my connexion with the trade, that you may undermine me?" exclaimed Mrs. Jackson, darting an angry look from her pillow at the young seamstress.

"Oh! madam, such a thought never entered my imagination for a moment!" cried Virginia, the tears starting forth from her long lashes. "I am incapable of anything like treachery," she added, with the altered tone of a sudden access of indignation as the foulness of the suspicion struck her with redoubled force.

"Well, well—I did not mean to vex you, my dear," said Mrs. Jackson, adopting a more conciliatory manner. "But everything now seems to go wrong with me: and this illness of mine——However," she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting herself, "I must endeavour to get well as soon as I can—and then, perhaps, matters will mend a little. In the meantime I have no more work to give you, Miss Mordaunt; and I do not know where to recommend you to apply. When I require your services again, I will let you know."

And she turned round in her bed, as if she wished to compose herself to slumber.

Virginia accordingly took the hint and retired. But as she was ascending mournfully to her own chamber she suddenly recollected the advice given her by the landlady relative to Miss Barnet, and which suggestion she had lost sight of during her interview with Mrs Jackson. A faint beam of hope played upon her sweet countenance as she quickened her pace towards that young female's apartment. She knocked gently: the door was immediately opened —and Miss Barnet appeared upon the threshold.

"Ah! Miss Mordaunt, is that you?" she exclaimed in a tone of good-natured welcome. "So you have resolved upon being neighbourly at last, after living here three or four weeks and scarcely speaking to me when I met you upon the stairs the other day? But never mind—walk in—and let us become good friends at once."

"I can assure you, Miss Barnet," observed the maiden, as she accepted the invitation and entered the room, "that I intended nothing unneighbourly: and when you spoke to me the day before yesterday, I answered you without reserve. But I am always so afraid of being obtrusive—I feel the loneliness of my position so much that there are times when I fancy I shall never meet a real friend again——"

"Come, come, my dear girl," exclaimed Miss Barnet, with a voice and manner of frank and open hearted kindness; "don't give way to gloomy thoughts. There—sit down near the fire—and we will have half-an-hour's gossip together."

Virginia accordingly took the chair to which her new acquaintance pointed; and the rapid glance which the young maiden threw around the chamber showed her that it was very neatly and comfortably furnished. A good carpet—a warm hearth-rug—a French japan bedstead, with dimity curtains hanging from a horizontal pole—half-a-dozen neat chairs —a table in the middle of the room, and another in a corner for the toilette—drapery to the window—a bright fender and polished fire-irons—and several mantel-ornaments,—all these articles gave to the place an air of comfort contrasting strongly and forcibly with the cheerless aspect of Virginia's own poor garret.

And now a word or two respecting Miss Barnet herself, before we resume the thread of our narrative. She was a fine, tall, showy young woman, of about two or three-and-twenty years of age. Her eyes were large, dark, and full of fire,—crowned by brows as black as ebony and giving a somewhat bold look to the general expression of her countenance. Handsome she decidedly was,—physically and sensuously handsome, but deriving no charm from anything of an intellectual or sentimental character in her features. Her facial outline was boldly though faultlessly pencilled: her lips were full and of a luscious red—her teeth were large, but white as ivory and admirably even;—her chin was well rounded—and her oval-shaped head was poised upon a neck so superbly white and gracefully arching that a queen might have envied it. Her complexion was indeed very fine; and upon her cheeks there was a sufficiency of carnation tint to denote a vigorous constitution and a robust health which neither toil nor dissipation had as yet visibly impaired.

Her hair was black—of a rich luxuriance—and with a lustrous gloss upon it. She wore it in ringlets, which showered down on each side of her full plump cheeks, and swept the handsomely-shaped shoulders the dazzling whiteness of which her somewhat low-bodied dress was permitted to expose. Her bust was in the same large proportions with the other contours of her fine form: her waist was symmetrical, without being positively wasp-like. She had a good hand, of which she was evidently proud—inasmuch as the almond-shaped nails were kept with the utmost care;—and although her feet and ankles could not be termed delicate, the former were gracefully modelled and the latter well rounded. Altogether Miss Barnet was a splendid specimen of woman in the perfection of her vital system; but her

charms where wholly of a physical nature, blending not in the slightest degree with the softer fascinations which denote the angelic nature of the sex in general.

She was dressed with neatness, and yet with a certain coquetry indicating that she was by no means unaware of her personal attractions. Good-natured and generous-hearted she naturally was: but the mode of life which she had adopted, rendered her not only callous to virtuous principles, but even prompted her to look with contempt upon those who made them their rule of conduct. That contempt would sometimes deepen into a positive prejudice bordering upon aversion; and thus, despite of tendencies originally kind and humane, her disposition had become so warped by unwholesome influences as to lead her sometimes to ridicule and at others to detest any one who was really enviable in the possession of that diadem of purity which had fallen from her own brow.

Such was Miss Barnet, Virginia Mordaunt's neighbour;—and having thus briefly described her person and glanced at her character, we will proceed to record the discourse which took place between herself and our young heroine on the occasion that has now brought them together.

"Well, since I have declared that we shall become friends at once and without any further ceremony," said Miss Barnet, seating herself opposite to Virginia, "let us behave as if we had known each other for a dozen years past. And I will candidly confess that I wished to make your acquaintance: for there are moments when I feel the want of a female companion——"

"Heaven knows that you could not have experienced this want more acutely than I!" exclaimed the young seamstress. "But then," she added, after a few instants' pause, and glancing round the room, "you have everything to make you happy and comfortable—and I——"

"You are poor—I know you are poor," interrupted Miss Barnet: "and I thought you were proud. That is the reason I did not force myself upon your acquaintance—and yet I longed to know you. Jane—the servant-girl down stairs—told me how hard you worked; and it required no one to tell me how badly you were paid. *I* have gone through all that myself; and my experience has been as bitter as anybody's."

"Would that I knew how to amend my condition!" exclaimed Virginia, with a profound sigh. "I was tolerably well educated—I learnt a few accomplishments, such as music and drawing——"

"And therefore you think you are qualified for a governess?" interrupted Miss Barnet. "My dear girl——But what is your Christian name?"

"Virginia," was the response.

"Oh! what a romantic name!" cried Miss Barnet, good-humouredly. "Mine is Julia; so you shall call me Julia in future—and I will call you Virginia. But as I was about to observe, you fancy that you are fitted for a nursery-governess? Now don't entertain such an idea: the market is clogged with goods of that kind; and moreover, if you did succeed in obtaining such a situation you would find that it is one of the most horrible slavery. No—you had better stick to your needle——"

"But I am fearful of experiencing difficulties in procuring work," remarked Virginia: "and even when I am fortunate in that respect, the remuneration is so low——"

"That it scarcely keeps you from starving," exclaimed Julia. "Now, all that you have at this moment uppermost in your thoughts, has been felt and pondered over by me. I have gone through the entire ordeal. You have been working for Jackson—have you not? Well, I worked for her myself for a long time—until I could struggle no longer against cold, penury, want, insolence, and everything else that one has to put up with as a seamstress."

"You have indeed summed up with a painful accuracy the details of the truth," observed our heroine, with another deep-drawn sigh. "But there is one question which I am desirous to ask you, Miss Barnet——"

"No—call me Julia," interrupted the dark-eyed young lady: "or I shall think that you are not disposed to be friendly with me. Now, what is the information you seek to glean from my experience?"

"I wish to learn if it be possible for the poor seamstress to obtain the real value of her labour," answered Virginia: "I do not mean the value which she herself might be disposed to put upon it—but the value which it actually fetches when made a marketable commodity by others. Shall I give you an outline of my brief experience?—and you will then understand wherefore I ask the question which I have put, and what is the precise meaning I would convey in that question."

"I can full well anticipate the general nature of your experience, my dear Virginia," said Miss Barnet: "but nevertheless, I should like to hear your views upon the subject, as well as an account of the particular treatment you may have received. Pray, therefore, proceed: I am all attention."

"Everything I have to say, Julia, can be summed up in a few words," continued Miss Mordaunt. "In the first place Mrs. Jackson, learning from the landlady that I am honest, of good character, and to be trusted, gives me a splendid velvet dress to make up. As I sate at work, I calculated the cost of the materials, which could not have amounted to much less than forty pounds. And these valuable articles are confided to me—a poor half-starving girl," proceeded Virginia, the tears running down her cheeks,—"to *me*, I say, whose cupboard was well nigh empty and who beheld not a single spark of fire in the grate! Well, by dint of the severest toil I accomplished the task in a space of time so short that it is even incredible to myself. And as a reward for this intense labour I received three shillings and sixpence from Mrs. Jackson. But Mrs. Jackson, who never put a single stitch into the dress, receives seven shillings from a certain Mrs. Pembroke, to whom I am ordered to convey the dress. Then Mrs. Pembroke receives fourteen shillings from Madame Duplessy, who originally gave out the dress to be made;—and, last of all, Madame Duplessy charges the Duchess of Belmont, who ordered the dress, four guineas for the making up alone. Now it is quite clear that my labour, which has only produced three shillings and sixpence to myself, was worth four guineas to Madame Duplessy. But if Madame Duplessy will only undertake to pay fourteen shillings for the product

of my labour, wherefore should I not at least receive the whole of this amount myself—instead of a poor three shillings and sixpence?"

"Because, my dear friend, the system is infamous to a degree and the poor workers are its wretched victims," answered Julia, with a bitterness arising from painful reminiscences rather than from any present associations. "Madame Duplessy employs a middle-woman, because it saves trouble in the first instance—and secondly because the result is to keep down the price of the work thus put out to be done. The middle-woman whom Madame Duplessy employs, contracts with sub-agents constituting a second grade of middle-women;—and from these last do the needlewomen receive their work and their pittances. Madame Duplessy, for instance, cares not through how many hands the work may have passed ere it returns again to her: or rather I should say, the more hands it passes through, the better she is pleased, because the earnings of the wretched needlewomen who do the work are diminished in proportion. By thus keeping down the wages of the needlewomen, the great houses—such as Madame Duplessy's—can from time to time reduce the prices paid to the middle-women. Madame Duplessy says to Mrs. Pembroke, '*You have been able to beat down your workers to such low wages, that you can easily afford to reduce your own prices.*' —Then Mrs. Pembroke says to Mrs. Jackson, '*My prices are reduced, and I must expect you to reduce yours.*'—And finally, Mrs. Jackson says to Virginia Mordaunt, or any other young slave whom she employs, '*My prices are reduced, and your wages must therefore be diminished.*'—The result is that your earnings, Virginia, will continue to grow less and less: but I question whether Madame Duplessy will lower her prices towards her aristocratic customers."

"I understand fully how the system operates," said our heroine: "indeed, I obtained a pretty tolerable insight into it this morning—and the impressions I then received are now confirmed by your explanations. But my query yet remains to be answered——"

"Ah! I recollect," ejaculated Miss Barnet. "You wish to know why you cannot obtain work direct from Madame Duplessy, for instance, without the intervention of a Mrs. Jackson or a Mrs. Pembroke? The answer is plain and easy, my dear friend. In the first place the system of middle-women saves trouble to such houses as Madame Duplessy's; and secondly it keeps down the wages, as I have explained to you. This is after all the main point. By the mere fact of the work passing through several hands, it becomes more difficult to obtain on the part of the needlewomen—and the result is a readiness to work for almost any pittance sooner than have no work at all. Moreover, where so many agencies are engaged and so many interests are combined in keeping down wages, how can the poor seamstress possibly make a stand against such a colossal tyranny? Mrs. Jackson crushes you—Mrs. Pembroke grinds Mrs. Jackson—and Madame Duplessy keeps a tight hand over Mrs. Pembroke. By such a complicated machinery *your* earnings are reduced to a far lower standard than Madame Duplessy could possibly succeed in bringing them, if the dealings took place between herself and yourself without the intervention of any other parties. Madame Duplessy, you tell me, charged the Duchess of Belmont four guineas for the dress; but she only paid fourteen shillings for the making of it. Now, were Madame Duplessy left to fight the battle of labour's value direct with *you* who did the labour, she would be pretty well at your mercy —because you could charge her at least a guinea for the work which she charged the Duchess four guineas for: and, however discontented Madame Duplessy might be at such a charge on your part, she has not the time to run all over London to ascertain who will work cheaper for her than you. But the intervention of the middle-women settles the point for Madame Duplessy, by fighting *her* battle with *you*—a battle in which *you* are necessarily conquered and crushed. The result is that she gets done for fourteen shillings that work which she would otherwise be charged a guinea for: and thus, by the fact that the work passes through the hands of several persons, and each person has to get a living out of its price, this price is actually kept down below the standard that it would be able to maintain if the one individual who did the work were alone paid. From all that I have now told you, Virginia," added Miss Barnet, "it is quite clear that Madame Duplessy has a direct interest in sustaining the system of middle-women, and that she would therefore discourage any innovation upon the mode of conducting her business."

"To middle-women, then, must I alone look for work?" said the young seamstress, in a tone of the deepest melancholy.

"It will be difficult for you to obtain it in any other way," responded Miss Barnet.

"And yet I thought—that is, I received from Mrs. Drake a hint to the effect—that you had sometimes more work than you could accomplish," faultered Virginia; "and if that were the case, I hoped—I felt assured—at least I resolved to ask you——"

"I know what you would say," interrupted Miss Barnet: "and I will do all I can for you in that respect. I possess a good friend in the forewoman of a large house at the West End; and she sends me as much work as she possibly can upon the sly. But if her employers knew that she did this, instead of sending everything to the middle-woman who contracts with them, she would lose her situation. Therefore you must keep the matter as secret as possible—and I shall be able to assist you."

"Believe me, my dear friend," exclaimed Virginia, with tears in her eyes, "that I am deeply, deeply grateful to you for this kindness on your part."

"Oh! it is nothing worth thanking me for," cried Miss Barnet. "The truth is, I hate work—I can't bear it—and yet I do not exactly choose to let Mrs. Robinson—that is the name of my friend the forewoman—know that I can do without it."

"You are happy in the possession of other resources," said Virginia, with a profound sigh. "But I suppose you have kind friends who assist you——"

"Yes—very kind friends," ejaculated Miss Barnet, with a smile which struck Virginia as being peculiar in its expression. "Look here," continued Julia, starting from her seat and throwing open the door of a cupboard in which several handsome dresses were hanging: "I can be as smart as any lady of quality, when I choose. Here is a beautiful

silk," she added, taking down one of the dresses and displaying it to Virginia's admiring eyes: "this was a present made to me only last Monday week. And here is a lovely merino. But that is not all. Look here!"

And opening a large band-box, Miss Barnet drew forth a velvet bonnet, a cashmere shawl, and a splendid fur tippet all of which articles she exhibited to the young seamstress who surveyed them with admiration, but without the slightest envy. For Virginia coveted not the elegancies nor the luxuries of life: her modest aspirations were limited to the attainment of the necessaries.

"Now do you not think that I must have a very good and kind friend to give me all these beautiful things?" exclaimed Miss Barnet, in a tone of joyous triumph: then, without waiting for an answer, she said significantly, "But you could be just as happy and comfortable, and independent as I am, if you liked."

A suspicion, vague and uncertain as the ringing of far-off bells in the ears, rose up in Virginia's mind as that remark struck upon her understanding as a temptation;—and at the same instant she remembered the singular and mysterious manner in which the servant Jane had alluded to Miss Barnet. But still the young girl was not able to define even to herself the precise nature of the suspicion which had just been engendered in her soul;—and with a trembling of the whole frame, as if beneath the influence of a panic-terror, she fixed her large blue eyes inquiringly upon her new friend.

"What innocence!" ejaculated this young lady, her sensual-looking lips wreathing for the moment into a smile of contempt: but she instantaneously added, with her wonted good-humour, "We will not talk any more upon *that* subject at present, my dear Virginia. Another time, perhaps, I may be more explicit. And now, as I have not a stitch of work to put in your hands at the moment, I will go and see what my friend Mrs. Robinson can do for us in that way."

Miss Mordaunt again expressed her thanks to her new acquaintance, and then retired, pensive and full of vague misgivings, to her own cold and cheerless chamber.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE BALL.

Between eight and nine o'clock in the evening a brilliant company began to assemble at Belmont House in Grosvenor Square. In rapid succession did the splendid equipages dash up to the front door of the palatial mansion—set down the elegantly-apparelled guests—and then shoot away, with their lamps shining like meteors, into the obscurity of the distance. From the open portals of the ducal dwelling streamed forth a flood of light, in the midst of which the numerous domestics in their gorgeous liveries resembled the variegated insects of the tropics flying and buzzing about in the beams of a refulgent sun. Through the spacious hall, with its pillars and its statues, its vases, and its lamps, passed the numerous guests,—titled dames in glossy velvet, and beauteous damsels in rustling satin, escorted by nobles and gentlemen dressed for the ball-room scene,—up the marble staircase which rose so grandly from the hall as if leading to the very palace of the sun itself,—across the spacious landing decorated with evergreens and hot-house flowers,—into the magnificent saloons where the light of the wax-tapers in the superb chandeliers of crystal was reflected in the vast mirrors which likewise multiplied the forms of elegance, and grace, and beauty already assembled there!

Soft was the perfume filling the warm air that glowed with a living lustre whose flood received a roseate tint from the rich crimson drapery and the furniture;—and through the gorgeous apartments sounded in loud and thrilling strains the music which the unrivalled band poured forth. It appeared as if the Genius of Harmony were speaking in tones of the grandest exultation;—and every pulse beat the more quickly, and every heart throbbed the more joyously, and every eye flashed the more brightly, as those glorious notes swept along the chords of the sensations that seemed to vibrate to the profundities of the soul!

By half-past nine o'clock upwards of eight hundred guests were assembled in the saloons of Belmont House; and amongst them might be observed all the various specimens of the world of aristocracy and fashion. There were dowagers with gorgeous turbans surmounting faces the wrinkles of which were concealed as much as art could possibly mitigate the appearances of old age: there were matrons whose air of elegant hauteur and gracious condescension derived a stateliness from the embonpoint of middle-age;—there were young wives who received with the easy listlessness of habit the complimentary nothings addressed to them by the gallants of the ball-room;—and there also were damsels whose happiness would be made or marred for the whole evening by the extent to which they were either courted or neglected. Here also were intriguing mothers each with their two or three marriageable daughters,—a few maiden aunts, very prim, very particular, and also very spiteful in criticising everything and everybody present,—and some dozen or so of widows, looking out for second husbands.

Of the male sex the specimens were equally varied, though all of course belonging to what is termed "the highest circle." There were noblemen who would not have envied the lot of angels unless they could trace their genealogy back to some cut-throat Norman Baron who came over with the ruffian marauder William the Conqueror;—and there were other great peers who rejoiced in the honour of being descended from the shameless strumpets who sold their charms to Charles II. Of these two classes of hereditary nobles, the latter were perhaps the most self-sufficient, arrogant, and prone to boast of their glorious ancestry. Then there was a considerable sprinkling of the younger scions of the Aristocracy,—the sons, brothers, nephews, and cousins of peers; and as a general rule it might be observed that the dullest and the heaviest-looking, or else the vainest and most frivolous, were sure to be members of Parliament. Then, again, amidst the male guests might be distinguished a dozen Colonels in the Guards, very handsome, very dissipated, and very great favourites with the ladies,—a few naval officers the fastidious elegance of whose appearance seemed utterly unable to sustain a breeze off Gravesend,

much less a storm in the Atlantic,—a sprinkling of well-dressed young gentlemen of straw, who some how or another managed to move in the very best society,—and a goodly number of baronets who were large land-owners, and in nine instances out of ten very obstinate, very prejudiced, very argumentative, and very much addicted to Port wine.

Such were the principal components of the brilliant society assembled on the present occasion: but we may add that the company, as just glanced at, were dotted with two or three foreign Ambassadors, sharp-faced and cunning-looking—five or six English diplomatists, reserved in manner, cold in aspect, and cautious in discourse—and a couple of Hereditary German Princes who were on a visit to the English Court, and whose travelling expenses from their native lands were defrayed by the English Treasury.

The Duchess of Belmont, leaning upon the arm of her husband, received her guests in the principal saloon of the magnificent suite thrown open for the occasion. Never had her Grace appeared more grandly handsome: never had she shone to greater advantage. The white plumes which waved so gracefully above her head, enhanced the dignity of her mien and threw out in a more striking contrast the dark glory of her hair. Fair as the lily and delicate as the camellia was her transparent complexion,—save where upon the cheeks the excitement of the scene shed the hue of the softest blushing rose.

She was attired in the velvet dress which had been brought home in the morning; and never did shapely robe do more complete justice to the harmony of exquisite proportions. Apparelled as she then was—looking all radiant in her sunny smiles and her magnificent beauty—and with that dignified elegance which characterised all her movements, the brilliant Duchess of Belmont seemed the impersonation of all those feminine perfections which even the richest language in the universe is too poor to describe. The effect of such an indefinable assemblage of charms,—charms which could alike fascinate and overpower, bewilder and entrance, ravish and astound,—such an effect as this, we say, can be felt, but never analysed. It was a perfect halo of loveliness which environed her, as a glory encircles the brow of a saint;—and yet the empire which her appearance asserted over the heart of every man who gazed upon her, was entirely of a physical nature;—the first look sent forth from the depths of her fine dark eyes, or the first smile that went warm and sunny from that splendid countenance to the soul of an admirer, would dominate and enthral the sense, although without exercising the faintest influence over the sentiment. She was a woman to be adored with the strong ardour and the luxurious passion which constituted the worship paid to the Paphian Venus: but her's was not that bright, that nymph-like beauty which engendered the pure, chaste, and æsthetic love that formed the soul and essence of Greek poesy.

We said that she was leaning upon the arm of her husband as she received her numerous guests. His Grace the Duke of Belmont was three-and-twenty years older than his wife: he was consequently sixty at the period of which we are writing. In person he was short—thin—but well made. His countenance was pale, and was marked with an expression which the superficial observer would deem severe, but which the more attentive scrutinizer would discover to be that care-worn look which by degrees settles itself indelibly upon the features, despite the struggle of the strong and haughty soul to subdue it. On the brow so lofty and intellectual, sate a calm which was unnatural when studied in connexion with the eyes that were alike vivid and thoughtful, restless and melancholy;—and in the smile whose very urbanity was mingled with the aristocratic pride that never unbent completely, might be seen the endeavour of a sickening heart to conceal a terrible mistrust with respect to the future.

The present Duchess was the second wife of the Duke of Belmont. By his first wife he had three children; namely, one son and two daughters. The mother died in giving birth to the youngest; and about three years afterwards the Duke married the beautiful but portionless Lady Augusta Cavendish—who consequently became the brilliant Duchess whom we have already introduced so thoroughly to our readers. This second union was unproductive of issue; and therefore, having no children of her own, the Duchess made a somewhat more affectionate step-mother to the offspring of her husband's former marriage, than second wives usually prove themselves to be, especially in those aristocratic circles where everything is shallow, heartless, and unnatural.

And now a few words relative to the Duke of Belmont's progeny ere we resume the thread of our narrative. The son, who had just attained his twenty-first year, and who bore the title of the Marquis of Arden, was none other than that same tall, slender, handsome young man who had followed Virginia Mordaunt, and whose attentions to the charming maiden were so abruptly cut short by the appearance of Mr. Lavenham. Not only was his physical beauty of that classic and intellectual character which rendered him an object of interest as well as admiration amongst the fair sex,—but his mind was indeed far superior to the usual aristocratic standard of intelligence. He possessed all the elements of genius, without having nurtured any one of them sufficiently to develope itself into positive brilliancy: but still the scintillations of that fine intellect frequently flashed forth, as the sparks are struck from the flint by every accidental concussion on the highway. Naturally of good principles, generous-hearted, and chivalrous in disposition, he would have proved a perfect model of his sex, alike in virtue and in heroism, had not the very station of life into which he was born surrounded him with evil influences. As the heir of the haughty house of Belmont, he was caressed and made much of in the society wherein he moved: the festivals, recreations, and pleasures of fashionable life, in which he was compelled to take part, weaned him away from those intellectual pursuits which at one period would have been more congenial to his tastes;—and thus was he gradually impelled into the vortex of dissipation which absorbs all the best feelings and drowns all the wholesome instincts of the upper classes. The consequence was that at one-and-twenty, the Marquis of Arden was already extravagant in money matters, and therefore on the high road to become a reckless spendthrift,—already

fond of betting at races, steeple-chases, and billiard-tables, and therefore in the right path to become a confirmed gamester,—already flushed with his successes amongst the fair sex, and indeed keeping a mistress, and therefore in a direct road to become a confirmed voluptuary.

Lady Clarissa Melcombe, the Duke's elder daughter, was nineteen years of age: her sister, Lady Mary, was seventeen. The former was handsome—proud—and reserved: the latter was beautiful—affable—and ingenuous. Lady Clarissa inherited all the family ambition, hauteur, and pecuniary extravagance: Lady Mary was a charming exception to the ordinary aggregate of heartlessness, frivolity, and wastefulness which constitute the character of young females in high life. Lady Clarissa Melcombe was jealous, envious, and selfish, even to the grudging of her own sister any particle of happiness in which she herself could not share: Lady Mary would have thought no personal sacrifice too great in order to afford the slightest pleasure to the hearts of those whom she loved. Lady Clarissa looked upon the Duchess as a brilliant rival who frequently engaged and monopolised attentions which would otherwise be devoted to herself: whereas Lady Mary regarded her step-mother as a kind and affectionate substitute for the maternal parent she had lost. The reader will therefore perceive how great was the discrepancy between the characters and dispositions of the two young ladies.

And now, while the Duke and Duchess are receiving the guests who continue to pour in, the sisters are conversing with some of those who were amongst the earliest arrivals. At first Lady Clarissa appears radiant with happiness: never did she seem more gracious—more condescending—more thoroughly good-humoured. Even the natural amiability and unaffected cordiality of Lady Mary ceased to shine to the usual advantage in contrast with the mien and manner of her sister. It was evident that Lady Clarissa was acting in accordance with a pre-determination to render herself especially agreeable upon the present occasion. But alas! for human resolutions!—in a short time, just as the discourse was progressing with all possible suavity amongst the group of which the high-born sisters had become the centre—just as the young ladies seated near, and the young gentlemen who were lounging in that charming vicinage, were tossing about from one to the other those fashionable nothings and elegant trifles which form the conversational staple upon such occasions,—at this particular period was it that the young, handsome, and wealthy Earl of Mostyndale sauntered up to the group.

Unmarried—possessed of a splendid fortune—with a countenance as intellectually beautiful as that of Apollo—bearing a stainless character alike in public and in private life—and endowed with those honourable and generous feelings which had passed scatheless through the ordeal of temptation,—the Earl of Mostyndale was the object against whom all intriguing mammas directed their wiles, and to whom the aspirations of all marriageable young ladies were certain to soar. To receive attentions from *him*, was at once to arouse the envy and hatred, the jealousy and spite of all those whom the preference threw into the back-ground;—and thus was it that when his lordship dropped with easy negligence into a vacant chair by the side of the beautiful Lady Mary Melcombe, to whom he began exclusively to address his discourse, all Lady Clarissa's studied good-humour and forced affability fled in a moment. Vainly did she endeavour to rally her spirits—fruitlessly did she strive with all her strength and all her power to appear at her ease: the cloud was not to be lifted from her brow—the gloom was not to be dispersed from her features;—nor was it within the compass of her ability to mitigate the lightnings which her really fine eyes darted forth at brief intervals upon her amiable, gay, and charming sister who remained utterly unconscious of the mortal envy which she was thus conjuring up.

In the meantime the Duke's son and heir, the young and elegant Marquis of Arden, was lounging through the brilliantly-lighted saloons,—pausing to exchange a few words with those guests who were most intimately known to him—bowing to others—and every now and then stopping for a short time to converse with any little knot or group that was composed of young and beautiful damsels. Then as his fine dark eyes lingered for a few minutes with a sensuous gloating upon their charms, and as his bright red lips repealed the white teeth between, soft looks glanced tenderly back upon him, reflecting his own and blending somewhat with their warm and impassioned ardour.

Presently Mr. Lavenham was ushered into the splendid saloons; and he was immediately welcomed by the Duke and Duchess with the cordiality which is only bestowed upon an old and staunch friend. He was dressed with the most scrupulous neatness, but in a plain and unassuming style: his whole appearance indicated the polished, well-educated, enlightened, and liberal-minded gentleman;—and though a simple commoner, without even the most insignificant of those aristocratic titles which are so much prized in the upper circles and so justly contemned by the masses of the people in general,—without even the factitious aid of one of those tinsel adornments to give a prestige to his name, he was greeted with respect and friendly warmth by all the noblest and highest in that brilliant company.

The dancing commenced: the Earl of Mostyndale became Lady Mary's partner in the first quadrille—while her elder sister, Lady Clarissa, was compelled to bestow her hand upon an antiquated beau who had numbered sixty winters, but who would fain persuade the world that he was yet a young man of forty. The fact of having been selected by such an ancient specimen of extravagant dandyism for the opening dance, completed Lady Clarissa's vexation;—and if burning looks had the power to kill, the glances of almost fiend-like malignity which she threw upon her sister, would have stretched this excellent and amiable young lady dead upon the painted floor over which her delicate feet moved with such graceful lightness.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE CONSERVATORY.

WHILE the first quadrille was proceeding, the Duke of Belmont had quitted his wife and joined a knot

of nobles and gentlemen who were discussing some prominent political topic of the day. The Duchess, upon abandoning her husband's arm, had seated herself upon a sofa to rest for a few minutes after the fatigue of receiving the guests; and she was almost immediately joined by Mr. Lavenham. The movement which she made and the smile which she bestowed upon him were a sufficient invitation for him to take a seat by her side;—and, after some general remarks, he observed, as his eyes looked in the direction of the couple to whom his words alluded, "I perceive that Mostyndale is paying a significant attention to Lady Mary."

"And what do you augur therefrom, Mr. Lavenham?" asked the splendid Duchess, with another of those sweet smiles which she would only have bestowed—at least in public—upon an individual who occupied a very friendly footing with regard to the family.

"Your Grace knows the inference which I should like to deduce from the marked attentions that Lord Mostyndale is now paying to your younger stepdaughter," replied Mr. Lavenham, his words having the measured tone and accent of importance: then, suddenly lowering his voice to a whisper, he added, "It would indeed be a fortunate event if such an alliance were to take place."

"Then you believe that his Grace's affairs are only to be rescued from their present cruel embarrassment by means of wealthy alliances on the part of his children?" said the Duchess, also speaking in a subdued tone, and with a sudden expression of pain, mortification, and even anguish, sweeping over her countenance, as the passing cloud throws its shade and ruffles with its breath the surface of the sun-lit sea.

"This is not the time nor the place to discuss such matters," observed Mr. Lavenham, hastily;—"and I was wrong to make any remark which could possibly give so disagreeable a turn to the conversation."

"Ah! my dear friend," murmured the Duchess, throwing around a hasty glance to assure herself that there were none of the guests nigh enough to overhear what she was saying,—"I am well aware that you only spoke in obedience to that kind and generous interest which you feel in our behalf——"

"In *your* behalf, Augusta," said Mr. Lavenham: and, while his voice sank to the lowest possible whisper as he uttered those words, the look which he flung upon the Duchess and which met her's flashing with ineffable motions in return, was full of a peculiar meaning of mingled sorrow, sympathy, and devotion. "Come—give me your arm," he exclaimed, rising abruptly from the sofa; "and let us enter the conservatory for a few minutes."

The Duchess accordingly took Mr. Lavenham's arm; and, traversing the saloons, they passed into the hot-house opening from the extremity of that splendid suite of apartments. This spacious conservatory was filled with a collection of rare plants and of exotic fruit-trees,—especially the orange, the fig, the citron, and the olive. The glass walls and roof of the enclosure were covered internally with luxuriant vines, whence hung the rich bunches of purple and white grapes; and in a frame at one extremity several large pines were developing their luscious growth. Silver lamps, suspended to the sloping beams that supported the glass frame-work of the roof, made the fruitage glow like enormous gems amidst their emerald verdure;—and the place was heated to a degree of warmth that felt like the atmosphere of their native climes.

In the front part of this conservatory a door, likewise made of glass, opened upon a flight of stone-steps leading down into the small garden at the back of the mansion: the hot-house therefore afforded the means of egress and ingress without rendering it necessary to pass through the saloons, which were only used upon grand occasions such as that which we have been describing. Near the glass-door of the conservatory a table was spread with some of the fruits which were the progeny of the hot-house itself: a splendid pine—some bunches of grapes—and a pile of figs, appeared upon crystal dishes;—and a few silver dessert-knives lay ready for the service of those who, retreating from the ball-rooms, might fancy a slice of the golden-hued anana.

All these particulars the reader will be careful to retain in his memory; as, trivial though some of them may appear at present, there is not a single detail just recorded which will prove irrelevant to the occurrences that will shortly develop themselves.

Into this conservatory, then, did the Duchess of Belmont and Mr. Lavenham enter;—and it happened that no one besides themselves was there at the time.

"Yes, my dear Augusta," said the gentleman, resuming the thread of that topic on which the conversation had previously turned,—"it has always been for *your* sake that I have done my best to support the falling fortunes of the ducal house of which that unhappy marriage has made you a member. Think not, my dear friend—think not for a moment," continued Mr. Lavenham, his rich-toned and harmonious voice becoming tremulous with impassioned accents,—"think not I say, that it has been through any friendship or sympathy for your husband——"

"Oh! hush—hush!" murmured the Duchess, her whole frame quivering as she threw a rapid and frightened glance around,—while she leant heavily upon her companion's arm, and he could feel the throbbing of the bosom that was thus pressed against him: "we may be overheard Julius—we may be overheard! And remember—oh! remember," she added, in an imploring tone, "that we have suffered ourselves this evening to relapse into a weakness of sentiment—a vain and useless fondness of manner—an ineffectual and tantalizing tenderness, such as for years past we have not shown towards each other! Ah! let us continue friends—friends only——"

"And forget that we were ever lovers?" said Mr. Lavenham, in a low deep tone that was full of gentle reproach, as the wind sighs plaintively through the vast forest on an autumn night.

"No—never, never can I forget!" exclaimed the Duchess, with a sudden and even alarming excitement in her manner. "But let these memories of our youthful love be buried deep in our souls, like the treasures that avarice inters in some safe and unsuspected spot! *We* know that the treasures are *there*: and that knowledge must prove the sole satisfaction that can be derived from their posses-


No. 4.—The Seamstress.

sion. My honour as a woman—my duty as a wife—my pride as a lady of exalted rank, all demand this sacrifice of the heart's dearest and best affections."

"Nor would I attempt to wean you away from your duty, Augusta—nor to place you in a position that would turn your pride into shame—nor do aught to dim the brightness of that coronet which marriage has figuratively placed upon thy brow!" —and as Mr. Lavenham gave utterance to these words in a tone of solemn earnestness and marked emphasis, his features, naturally expressive and faultlessly regular, glowed with the animation of high-minded principle and chivalrous feeling. "Nevertheless," he added, with a different manner and in a softer tone, "ere we take leave of this subject—perhaps for ever,—and ere I pledge myself sacredly and sincerely never again to resuscitate, at least by means of words, those memories to which you have so beautifully and pathetically alluded,—let me enjoy the momentary satisfaction of assuring you, Augusta, that I have remained unmarried simply because I never, never would prove a renegade to those vows and oaths which in earlier and happier days I pledged to you;—and if any other proof of my imperishable devotion to that love which once was my hope, my joy, and the very talisman of my happiness,—if any farther proof, I say, be wanting, you may behold it in the fact that the larger portion of my once princely fortune has been freely, cheerfully, and even eagerly given to prop up the affairs of this great ducal house the fall of which would overwhelmn *you* in its ruins! For although time has passed over my heart, yet were its inmost recesses laid bare, it would resemble the disentombed city of the Vesuviau lava,—its gems undimmed, its jewels unfaded,—all, all the same as on that day when the flood of burning levin poured down upon it, smothering everything, but consuming nothing! And now that I have given thee these assurances, Augusta, my mind seems to have disburdened itself of a weight whence it has long sought relief;—and we will bid farewell to the subject for ever!"

"Oh! why, why have we touched upon it?" sobbed the Duchess, her tears falling thick and fast, as she supported herself—or rather clung to the arm of her companion, so that he felt all the soft elasticity of that superb form as it pressed itself against him—while the mellow lustre of the lamps fell upon her pale and agitated features.

"Compose yourself, Augusta—in the name of heaven, compose yourself?" exclaimed Julius Lavenham, now seriously alarmed at the emotions which his words had conjured up.

"My God! wherefore did I yield to the persuasions of friends—to the commands of a father—to the entreaties of a mother?" murmured the still weeping and almost agonising lady, as the tide of memony surged up higher and higher in her wildering brain. "Oh! wherefore did I not fly to thee on that day when they dragged me as it were to the altar?"

"Because I was then poor—unknown—friendless," answered Mr. Lavenham, with a sudden accent of bitterness in his voice;—"and *you* were sacrificed to family exigencies!"

"Oh! you will not reproach me, Julius—you will not reproach me *now!*" murmured the Duchess, throwing her splendid white arms around his neck in obedience to one of those sudden and irresistible impulses which no human being can at the moment conquer, and which often give a new aspect to all the future destiny of a life.

"Reproach you!—no—never—never!" exclaimed Mr. Lavenham, hurried away by his feelings to such an uncontrollable degree that he strained the weeping lady to his breast and fastened his lips upon her stainless forehead.

For nearly a minute did they remain thus locked in each other's arms,—forgetful of the joyous, busy, animated scene so near at hand—deaf to the music that poured its rich volume so grandly through the brilliantly-lighted saloons—unmiudful of the crowds of guests any one of whom might at a moment saunter into that conservatory; for nearly a minute, we say, did the Duchess and her companion thus yield themselves up to the all-absorbing deliciousness—the deep, the ineffable joy of that fervid embrace.

Suddenly the noble lady extricated herself from the arms of Julius Lavenham, and fixed upon him her large dark eyes glowing with the same animation that suffused itself in a burning blush over her countenance. That look,—so full of passion and shame,—so replete with mingled tenderness and despair,—was such an one as we might suppose Eve to have cast upon Adam when the consequences of tasting the forbidden fruit were revealed unto them both in the garden of Eden.

"I know what you would say, Augusta," murmured Mr. Lavenham, his countenance becoming sorely troubled, and his entire frame trembling with agitation: "I feel all the eloquence of that fond, appealing, despairing look which you fix upon me?"

"Need I then ask you in words, Julius," said the Duchess, in a voice so low and soft that it sounded like an uncertain melody floating tremulously upon the breeze,—"need I then ask you in words what course we are to pursue *now?*"

"You mean, Augusta, that this weakness on our part has suddenly broken down every barrier which a stern and imperious sense of duty had enabled us to raise up against the torrent of our inclinations?" said Mr. Lavenham, looking with a fervid tenderness into the depths of her large, dark, eloquent eyes.

"My meaning was unmistakable, Julius," responded the Duchess, in the same low and plaintive tone as before;—"and you have therefore read it aright. For years past—ever since the day when I became *his* bride—have I struggled to remain faithful to my duty as a wife and my reputation as a woman;—and, although the memory of our youthful love hung round my soul with the charm of an undying perfume, yet in the very fortitude and constancy wherewith I resisted its influence, was there a species of mental satisfaction amounting to something more than a pious resignation—something more, even, than mere contentment,—almost to happiness! But now, by the incidents of this evening, the spell of that fortitude is destroyed—the talisman of that constancy has lost its power in a moment. All the affections of my youth are rekindled, never to be subdued—much less extinguished;—and you see before you, Julius, a woman who—though ten minutes ago shuddering at the bare idea of perilling her fame, and recoiling from

the thought of wrecking her honour, her reputation, and her proud position—now feels that she cannot live longer without you, and is ready to make any sacrifice for the sake of that love which she bears thee!"

"What — Oh! what would you have me do, Augusta?" demanded Mr. Lavenham, now terribly agitated;—for he was tossed upon the whirlwind of indescribable feelings—his passion for that splendid creature heaving him on its billows in one direction, and his honourable principles urging him with a strong current in another.

"What would I have you do, Julius?" echoed the Duchess, in a voice that was full of the concentrated emotions evincing a desperate resolve irrevocably adopted. "Take me hence — let me fly with thee—and death alone shall henceforth part us!"

And once more she sank upon his breast, her own bosom heaving and sinking convulsively as she strained him in her arms.

For nearly a minute was the chivalrous-minded man torn with conflicting feelings that tortured him as if he were stretched upon a rack; the workings of his countenance indicated all the rending anguish which he thus endured;—strong spasms convulsed his soul and shook his entire being to its deepest confines.

"No—no! this must not be!" he suddenly exclaimed, tearing himself with an almost wild abruptness from the lady, who started back with a cry resembling a suppressed shriek. "This must not be!" he repeated, in a state of terrible excitement; then, snatching up one of the silver fruit-knives from the table close at hand, he said in a voice that all in a moment sank and changed to a low, thick hoarseness, "Sooner, Augusta—sooner would I plunge this weapon into thy bosom and then immolate myself upon the blood-stained altar of our love, than that thou should'st live to feel the world's cold scorn and become an outcast from that society which thou wast made to gladden and embellish! No — never, never will I consent to become the destroyer of thy peace—the worker of thy ruin!"

"You refuse — you refuse!" murmured the wretched lady, sinking at his feet; and, extending her clasped hands towards him, she said, "Strike, Julius—strike! Better to perish by thine hand, than live to feel that all thy love was a mockery—all thine affection a falsehood and a deceit!"

"Unhappy woman," exclaimed Lavenham, "thou art driving me to desperation—madness! I am not the master of my own actions——"

"Strike, I say—strike!" murmured the Duchess, whose brain was reeling and whose senses were abandoning her.

"O God!" ejaculated Julius Lavenham, who on his part felt as if the toils of hell were closing rapidly in around him.

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The joyous scene was at its height—the dance was proceeding with all its thrilling fervour and exhilarating influence:—and the glorious music was sounding loud and triumphant through the splendid saloons of Belmont House. The absence of the Duchess and Mr. Lavenham had not been observed;—and their voices in the conservatory were drowned by the volume of harmony which the magnificent band poured forth. The Duke himself had been for some minutes absent from the saloons: a domestic had delivered to him a note which seemed to have demanded his immediate attention elsewhere. Lady Mary was still receiving the marked courtesies of the young and handsome Earl of Mostyndale;—Lady Clarissa, her elder sister, was pouting in the card-room amidst the dowager whist-players;—and the Marquis of Arden was flirting with the fairest of the many lovely beings whose presence graced the ducal mansion this night.

All were therefore occupied with their own amusements or their own thoughts in those brilliantly-lighted saloons,—when suddenly a piercing shriek, pealing through the sounding music, struck like a death-note upon every ear.

The band ceased in a moment—and for a moment also a dread silence pervaded the saloons. Every foot was paralysed in the midst of the dance—every cheek turned deathly pale—every lip became ashy white and quivering;—and eyes, that an instant before were lighted up with love and joy, now suddenly gazed in vacant dismay.

Then there was a simultaneous rush on the part of several nobles and gentlemen towards the conservatory whence that piercing shriek had evidently thrilled forth so agonisingly;—the ladies followed, clinging to each other as if all were menaced by some common danger;—and in another moment the tide of startled guests poured into the hot-house.

Ejaculations of mingled horror and amazement on the part of the foremost warned those who were in the rear that something terrible had occurred; and a scene of indescribable confusion, dismay, and consternation ensued.

For, behold! the Duchess of Belmont was lying upon the floor of the conservatory, weltering in her blood; and the red dyed fruit-knife which had inflicted the wound, was held in the hand of Mr. Lavenham, who was apparently about to escape by means of the glass door which stood wide open, when he was suddenly seized upon by the foremost gentlemen, amidst the cries of execration that branded him as the murderer of the Duchess.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE THREE VISITORS.—THE CATASTROPHE.

We stated towards the close of the preceding chapter that while the Duchess of Belmont and Mr. Lavenham were conversing in the hot-house, a note had been delivered to the Duke who immediately quitted the saloons to devote his attention to some urgent business to which it alluded. We now observe more explicitly that this letter was handed to him almost immediately after his wife had proceeded to the conservatory in company with Mr. Lavenham. The domestic who presented the note, whispered an intimation to the effect that it regarded some pressing matter;—and his Grace, stepping aside from the group of nobles with whom he had been conversing, glanced hastily over the billet. A quivering sensation shot through his frame, and his naturally pale cheeks blanched as completely as if Death had suddenly laid its icy

hand upon him: but instantaneously recovering his presence of mind, he followed the servant from the brilliantly-lighted apartments.

Upon gaining the landing outside, he turned somewhat abruptly round upon the domestic, and said, "Where is the man who sent up this note?"

"I have shown them into the library, my lord," was the answer.

"You have shown *them?*" echoed the Duke, with a petulance which he could not control: then, instantaneously experiencing a sentiment of shame at making his servant the victim of his vexation, he said in a milder tone, "How many persons are there waiting below?"

"Three, my lord," was the rejoinder.

The Duke asked no farther questions, but proceeded at once to the library—while the domestic hastened to communicate to his fellow servants the suspicions which he had formed relative to the present incident.

On entering the library, the Duke of Belmont found the three persons coolly and comfortably seated, as if they were "quite at home." They however rose the instant his Grace made his appearance;—and the rapid glance which the Duke threw upon them, one after another, produced in his mind a feeling of disgust and aversion which expressed itself for a moment upon his countenance. One was a tall, good-looking man, with that peculiar facial outline which denotes the Hebrew race: he was well dressed, had a gentlemanly appearance, and wore upon his features a certain air of frankness and good-nature which is not usually ascribed by tale-writers to individuals of his profession. The other two men were not of the Jewish family: nor had they, at least so far as personal appearance went, anything to be proud of in that respect;—for their sinister countenances and ominous looks contrasted strangely with the frank and open-hearted aspect of the Jew. Moreover, notwithstanding it was evident they had assumed their best apparel and bestowed some little attention on their toilette for this special occasion, there was a certain air of seediness about them which precluded all possibility of misconception relative to their state and circumstance.

"*You* are Mr. Solomon, I presume," said the Duke, conquering his aversion almost as speedily as it was conceived and forcing himself to adopt an air of more than ordinary condescension towards the individual whom he particularly addressed.

"That is my name, my lord," replied the Jewish gentleman, speaking with a tone and manner that were properly respectful, without being servilely cringing or fawning. "I am sorry to have disturbed your Grace at such an hour and on such an occasion: but Mr. Collinson, the lawyer, insisted upon its being done to-night—and I had no alternative. I however proceeded as delicately as I could, and sent your lordship up a few lines to explain the nature of my business. Otherwise I was afraid you would refuse to see strangers this evening; and as we must have persisted in remaining until we did see your Grace, the servant would have thought it odd."

"I am obliged to you, Mr. Solomon, for this consideration on your part," said the Duke, who had listened with attention to all that the sheriff's-officer—for such indeed the Jewish gentleman was—had just spoken. "But surely Mr. Collinson does not intend you to push this matter to the extreme?"

"I am afraid, my lord, that I have no alternative but to leave my men in possession," answered Mr. Solomon, glancing towards his followers, "unless the debt is paid or very satisfactory security given. But even this latter I could not take upon myself to accept. Your Grace must not blame me."

"On the contrary, I have thanked you for the urbanity and delicacy which have marked your proceedings, Mr. Solomon," returned the Duke. "It is too late for me to see Collinson to-night—and if your men remain in the house, my domestics will perceive in that circumstance the confirmation of those suspicions which your visit has no doubt already engendered. Are you compelled to leave your men here?"

"Having once taken possession, my lord," replied Mr. Solomon, "I dare not withdraw my followers except upon full payment. Thirteen thousand seven hundred and odd pounds, my lord, is the amount," added the officer, as he glanced at a slip of paper which he held in his hand.

"By heaven! this is perplexing to a degree," muttered the Duke between his quivering lips as he began to pace the room in an excited manner. "An execution in the abode of the Belmonts! What a disgrace—what a disgrace!"—then, stopping suddenly short and fixing his eyes significantly upon Mr. Solomon, he said with rapid accents, "Grant me but until to-morrow evening, and I will endeavour to find the amount."

"If your lordship means that I am to retire with my men," observed the sheriff's officer, "I must reiterate the impossibility of such a proceeding."

"I will make you a handsome—a very handsome present," urged the Duke, dropping his voice to a low whisper.

"I thank your Grace—but I dare not," responded Mr. Solomon.

"Consider my position—it will be ruin—total ruin!" continued that nobleman who was so proud—so haughty—and who entertained such an aversion for the race to which belonged the individual of whom he was thus anxiously and earnestly imploring a boon. "If it be once known that there is a seizure in my house, all possibility of amicable arrangement will be destroyed. My numerous creditors——"

He stopped short: for he suddenly perceived that the very arguments he was using in order to persuade Mr. Solomon to accede to his request, were those best calculated to influence the officer in a stern performance of his duty—inasmuch as his Grace was only laying bare the desperate condition of his circumstances.

"Since your Grace has alluded to your other liabilities," said Mr. Solomon, "I think it only right to inform you that from what I have heard, one or two more executions will be issued to-morrow; and that was the real reason why Collinson ordered me to be beforehand with them and come to-night."

"Then you have no power to assist me in any way?" demanded the Duke, his manner suddenly becoming stern and severe.

"None, my lord," was the officer's calm reply.

"In that case I must break the sad intelligence to Augusta at once," muttered the Duke to himself,

a terrible tightening of the heart accompanying the resolution which he thus expressed. "It will not be wise to incur the risk of her learning this fatal blow by some side-wind: I will at once seek her—lead her away for a few minutes from the festal scene—and whisper the misfortune in her ears. Oh! how I now loathe and detest that splendid gaiety—that joyous revelry which reigns in the saloons above! 'Tis the veriest mockery that could exist in the face of this tremendous calamity! But I must away to the Duchess."

Having thus mused while he again paced to and fro in a disturbed and agitated manner, the wretched nobleman abruptly quitted the apartment.

Mr. Solomon now gave some official instructions to his two men, and was about to take his departure, leaving them in possession of the ducal mansion, when it struck him that he had better wait a little longer to ascertain whether it were yet possible for his Grace to procure the requisite amount that night and thus get rid of the seizure. He accordingly whiled away a quarter of an hour by examining an elegant volume of plates that lay upon the table, while his two men carried on a whispered conversation between themselves by the fireside.

At the expiration of the interval just named the Duke of Belmont returned to the library. He closed the door somewhat violently behind him—and, flinging himself on a sofa, covered his countenance with his hands. The two men left off whispering—and Mr. Solomon ceased to turn the pages of the book: for the affliction of that ruined nobleman seemed something too solemn and sacred to be interrupted even in the slightest degree.

At length the Duke raised his head, withdrew his hands from his ghastly pale countenance, and casting a wild vacant look around, said in a hoarse thick tone, as if ashes were in his throat, "Give me some water."

Mr. Solomon hastened to fill a tumbler from a decanter which stood upon the table; and the Duke took it with a hand that trembled so violently he could scarcely convey the glass to his lips. Then the water went hissing down his throat, as if it were passing over red-hot iron.

"My brain is reeling—I feel ill—very ill," murmured the Duke, as he gave back the tumbler into the officer's hand. "This night will prove the death of me!"

"I hope that her Grace has received the intelligence with fortitude, my lord?" said Mr. Solomon, scarcely knowing whether he ought to venture the observation or not.

"Her Grace?" ejaculated the Duke, as if not altogether comprehending the query: then he immediately added in a more collected manner, "I was unable to find her Grace—she was not in the saloons—and——"

At that instant the rush of many footsteps and the confused din of numerous voices all speaking at once, reached the library;—and as the noise rapidly approached nearer along the passage leading to this apartment, the words "Where is the Duke?" rose plainly above the other sounds.

"Heavens! what is the matter?" exclaimed his Grace, springing from the sofa and rushing towards the door, which was at that moment burst rather than pushed open.

Then into the library poured a number of the guests; and their horrified looks, vaguely terrible ejaculations, and strangely disturbed manner were assuredly sufficient to inspire the Duke with that mortal dread which evidently seized upon him. Even Mr. Solomon and his two bailiffs were frightened: for although they were very far from conjecturing aught of the terrible drama which had so recently occurred, they felt convinced that something more fearfully exciting than even the rumour of the seizure must have occurred in the mansion.

The dreadful tale was soon told;—and the unhappy Duke, apparently crushed altogether by this new calamity, revealed amidst the most piteous lamentations the fact previously unknown and unsuspected by the guests, that the myrmidons of the law were in possession of his dwelling.

For some minutes the Duke appeared to be inconsolable: but when he was assured that the Duchess was not dead, and that the murderous blow had not proved immediately fatal, he seemed to be recalled to a sense of the duty which he owed as a husband. Exerting, therefore, a powerful effort in order to place a curb upon the frenzy of his feelings, he put hurried and anxious questions to those around him. Was the Duchess sensible? could she speak? had she given any explanation? and whether surgical attendance had been sent for?

The replies were equally prompt and curt. The Duchess was totally insensible—and although the vital spark was not extinct, yet those who had seen her, were afraid to hold out vain hopes. Her daughters-in-law and handmaidens were conveying her to her own chamber when the guests then present in the library had come in search of the Duke;—and several footmen had been despatched in various directions to ensure the prompt attendance of at least some of the numerous practitioners dwelling in the neighbourhood.

The Duke having received these hurried answers to his own hastily-put questions, was now all anxiety to rush to the chamber of the Duchess: but the numerous friends who flocked around him, besought him to exercise his patience at least until the arrival of the medical men. The truth was, they saw the fearfully excited state of the Duke's mind, and feared that, if the Duchess should rally, the very excess of his attentions and the demonstration of his grief at the awful occurrence would only be calculated to produce injurious effects. It was well known that he was devotedly attached to her,—that he was proud of possessing so splendid a creature as a wife,—and that his disposition, naturally cold in other respects, was capable of being excited into a frenzy of either enthusiasm or of grief by anything that regarded her.

While the Duke was still insisting upon flying to the chamber of the Duchess and his friends were battling against his obstinate purpose with all their powers of persuasion, intelligence was brought that a distinguished physician and an eminent surgeon dwelling in the neighbourhood had just arrived:—and soon afterwards the Duke's son entered the library with a prohibition against any one seeking the vicinage of his mother-in-law's chamber until the medical men had bestowed upon her the needful ministrations.

The young Marquis was dreadfully agitated: but

he now exerted himself to the utmost of his ability to soothe his father's still more troubled mind. It appeared that Charles had aided his two sisters and the female attendants to convey the wounded Duchess to her own chamber: but when the medical practitioners arrived, they ordered every one to retire with the exception of the eldest and most experienced female-servant, whom they kept to render the necessary assistance in their proceedings. The Duke's younger daughter, Lady Mary, had been taken very ill with the fright and grief consequent upon the murderous outrage experienced by the Duchess, to whom she was devotedly attached;—and Lady Clarissa was now occupied in attending upon her sister.

These facts were communicated by the Marquis of Arden to his father;—and such, then, was the position of the ducal family within a couple of hours after the opening of that grand entertainment which had commenced so joyously. Distress, horror, and misfortune seemed to have entered that proud mansion with the fury of a ravaging army:—and the genius of evil had chosen the brightest moment to change to the darkest, and the gayest scene to plunge into one of mourning and sorrow.

But where was Mr. Lavenham all this time?—what had become of him whom so many damning evidences pointed out as the assassin?

When accused of the appalling crime and seized upon by the guests who burst into the conservatory, he neither denied the charge nor offered resistance. The stupor of indescribable woe had taken possession of him, as the frost fastens with a paralysing chill upon the benighted wanderer in hyperborean lands: he said nothing—made no significant gesticulation—and seemed scarcely able to believe that the thing which absorbed all his thoughts had really occurred, or was otherwise than a hideous dream. But when those around had so far recovered from the first sensation of horror as to be enabled to raise the Duchess gently from the floor of the conservatory and bear her into the adjoining saloon preparatory to conveying her to her own chamber,—then did Julius Lavenham appear to start from that frozen state of feeling and that statue-like petrifaction of form;—and, although no word escaped his lips, yet did he cast upon the inanimate countenance of the Duchess one long and lingering look full of unutterable and indescribable emotions!

She was borne away from the conservatory—and he followed with his eyes the form that was thus carried corpse-like into the saloon. Then the crowd closing around the senseless lady and blocking up the door-way, concealed the mournful object from his view;—and a deep groan of mental agony burst from his lips. In another moment he was handed over to the grasp of two of the Duke's footmen, who hurried him down the steps into the garden: then through the lower department of the mansion was he conducted, amidst the horrified looks and execrations of the domestics whom he encountered on his way;—and, treated as a ferocious animal, he was thrust into a cellar, where he remained during the few minutes occupied in fetching the police-constables to take him into custody.

Return we now to the library, where we left the Marquis of Arden endeavouring to solace his almost distracted father. In this filial attempt he succeeded to a considerable degree; and by the time that the Duke was enabled to testify a sense of his son's kind attentions and to yield to their influence, the surgeon came down from the chamber of the Duchess to make his report. It appeared that her Grace had received a dangerous wound, inflicted by a sharp knife, just below the right bosom. The weapon had been turned somewhat aside by the corset, along which it had grazed as it were previously to piercing the flesh;—and to this circumstance she had no doubt owed her salvation from a mortal blow. The wound, though dangerous, was not so extremely serious as had at first been imagined;—and the opinion of both the medical men was that the chances were in favour of her Grace's eventual recovery. She had already been restored to consciousness, but was for the present unable to articulate a word, and would no doubt remain speechless for some days.

Such was the report of the medical practitioners; and dreadful as the occurrence was, there nevertheless appeared scope for some degree of congratulation amongst the Duke's friends that the event was no worse. And now the young Earl of Mostyndale evinced the generosity of his disposition by at once undertaking the settlement of the debt due to Mr. Collinson;—so that the sheriff's officer and his two men took their departure from the ducal mansion.

The guests then began to disperse rapidly: but their departure was signalized by a silence solemn indeed when compared with the din and bustle attendant upon their arrival. Carriages were waited for patiently in the order that they came up, instead of being clamoured for by voice after voice, as is usually the case in the breaking-up of grand assemblies. The coachmen restrained the trampling of their horses to the utmost of their power: the steps of the carriages were not lowered and raised with the wonted clatter—nor the doors banged with the characteristic din. For every one remembered that the safety of the Duchess depended upon her remaining undisturbed;—and thus did the separation of that brilliant company resemble the mournful stealing away of a funeral procession, rather than the breaking-up of a grand entertainment.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE FATHER, THE SON, AND THE ATTORNEY.

No sooner had the last carriage rolled away from the door of Belmont House, than the Duke commanded the servants to hasten and extinguish the lights in the saloons and betake themselves with all possible despatch to their respective chambers. Beneath the air of mournful firmness which his Grace now wore, a nervous uneasiness might have been descried by an acute observer;—but it was natural enough that his soul should be profoundly troubled by the various impressions resulting from the occurrences of the evening. It was therefore with the increasing restlessness of impatience that he urged on the domestics to finish their preparations for retiring to rest;—and when the magnificent saloons, so recently blazing with light, were plunged in darkness, the Duke appeared to breathe more freely—as if he felt that he was now at last able to court a solitude congenial to his thoughts

or else to put into execution some project which he was entertaining.

Having seen that the lamps were extinguished in the state-apartments and that the household had retired,—and having also dispensed with any farther services on the part of his valet for that night,—the Duke returned to the library, accompanied by his son, who remained with him.

The moment they were alone together, the Duke seized the young Marquis nervously by the hand, and said in a low but hurried voice, "Charles, you have seen that misfortunes have this evening entered our house like an army. The desperate position of my affairs is now revealed to you in the fullest extent—and nothing but prompt measures can save me from ruin. "Do *you* dream of retiring to rest while such a tremendous calamity hangs over our heads?"

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed the young man, frightened as much by the manner as by the words of his sire. "I already knew that your affairs were embarrassed: but I little suspected they were so cruelly involved as one of the sad occurrences of this night has proved them to be. What can I do to assist you, my dear farther?—and is it possible that you have nerve and calmness sufficient to devote yourself to business of any kind, after the shocking event which has perilled the life of my mother-in-law?"

"Gladly—Oh! too gladly would I yield myself up entirely to the duty of watching by her bedside," responded the Duke, in quivering accents and with a painful excitement of manner: "but the crash of our fortunes must be averted—and there remain but a few hours for the accomplishment of that colossal undertaking!"

"Is your position, then, so very desperate?" inquired Charles, trembling all over, not only with compassionate interest on his father's behalf, but likewise with the suspense of painful apprehensions for his own prospects as the ducal heir.

"Alas! unhappy boy," returned his Grace in a tone of concentrated anguish, "the danger is at our very doors—on the threshold—and must be warded off at once. A dozen creditors will to-morrow send bailiffs hither—and if that crowning infamy should fall upon me——"

"Oh! tell me, then, how we can avert it?—tell me, my dear father, how I can assist you at once?" exclaimed the Marquis of Arden, now evincing a nervous impatience to follow his sire's bidding, whatever it might be. "Speak—I do not require rest—I could not close my eyes for a single moment——"

"Then let us not waste in words those instants which are now so precious," said the Duke, abruptly checking his son's broken ejaculations. "It is now one o'clock," he continued hurriedly, as he glanced at a time-piece upon the mantel;—"an hour past midnight! But no matter—you must steal forth quietly from the house—you must hasten to Bedford Square—and you must fetch Collinson hither as soon as possible."

"What! arouse him at this time of night?" exclaimed the young Marquis.

"Have I not already told you that the hours—the very moments—are precious?" cried the Duke, with an uncontrollable petulance. "Hasten, my dear boy—delay not," he immediately added in a gentler tone: "and if you tell the wily, money-making, selfish lawyer that I am now prepared to place all my affairs in his hands, he will not express any vexation at being summoned from his warm bed, even in the depth of this cold winter night."

"I will use all possible despatch," said the Marquis of Arden, as he hastened to quit the room.

"One word more, Charles," exclaimed the Duke, calling him back. "You must steal forth noiselessly—you must take the key of the front door with you—and you must re-enter the house on your return with equal precaution. If you do not find me *here*—in the library—when you come back, you can make Collinson wait, with the assurance that I shall not be long."

"But are you also going out, my dear father?" demanded the Marquis in amazement.

"No;—what made you think so?" cried the Duke, casting a strange look upon his son. "I shall retire to my own chamber—to examine and select some documents which Collinson will want to see——But here we are continuing to waste these moments which are precious as gold!" he suddenly ejaculated, as he stamped his foot impatiently upon the carpet.

"I am going, my dear father," said Charles; "and I promise you that all my movements shall be conducted with a noiselessness and a secrecy that will avert all risk of alarming the household."

"That is precisely what I require, my boy," exclaimed the Duke, seizing his son's hand and pressing it with fervour.

The young Marquis then hastened from the library; and in a few moments he stole forth from the mansion, with the key of the front-door secured about his person.

But scarcely had Charles thus taken his departure, when the Duke enveloped himself in a cloak, put another pass-key into his pocket, and likewise quitted the dwelling in the same noiseless and stealthy manner.

An hour afterwards—while the clocks were striking two—the Duke of Belmont returned home. As he cautiously and carefully let himself in at the front door, the light of the hall-lamp fell upon his countenance, which was ghastly pale;—and his hands trembled so nervously that he could scarcely withdraw the key from the lock or close the door without making it jar. Leaving his hat and cloak in the hall, he crept back to the library;—and a murmur of satisfaction escaped his lips when he found that his son had not yet returned from Bedford Square. It was evident from his manner that he himself had been detained abroad longer than he had anticipated, and that he was fearful the Marquis should have got back before him; hence his relief on discovering that such was not the case.

Having thrown some coals upon the fire which had nearly burnt out during his absence, the unhappy nobleman began to pace to and fro with a nervous agitation which he vainly endeavoured to conquer. Half-an-hour passed—and still his son returned not. The Duke's uneasiness became intolerable: his impatience and his suspense constituted in themselves the most lancinating tortures. It was evident that so much depended upon the arrival of Collinson!

At length a sound like that of footsteps stealing along the passage, reached the Duke's ears: he

stopped short in his agitated pacing to and fro—he listened with suspended breath—and in a few moments the door of the library was opened gently. His Grace now breathed with comparative freedom once more as he hurried forward to welcome Mr. Collinson, and to thank his son with a rapid but meaning look for having thus successfully executed the commission entrusted to him.

"And now, my dear boy," said the Duke to the young Marquis, "you may retire to your own chamber; for you must doubtless stand in need of rest—and my interview with Mr. Collinson will be a long one."

An expression of disappointment immediately spread itself over the handsome countenance of the Marquis of Arden. It was evident that he had expected to be taken entirely into his father's confidence and to be permitted to assist at the business-transactions which had led to the summoning of Mr. Collinson to the mansion. He felt hurt and annoyed that any reserve should now be displayed towards him, after the readiness and zeal which he had exhibited to do his sire's bidding: and he moreover considered that, as the only son and heir, he had a sort of right to be present at any proceedings which regarded the desperate fortunes of the house of Belmont!

All these thoughts were vividly and unmistakably reflected in the expression which seized as it were upon his features when the Duke gave him that delicate yet decisive hint to withdraw.

"My dear boy," said his Grace, in an imploring tone, "you will know everything to-morrow: but I beseech you to leave me with Mr. Collinson now."

Charles made no reply, but abruptly quitted the room:—and his father stood gazing uneasily for a few moments in the direction of the door which had just closed behind him. Then suddenly recovering his self-possession, he turned towards Collinson, whom he requested to lay aside his cloak and take a seat near the fire.

This gentleman was about fifty years of age, and possessed one of those hard-featured countenances which, with their cold and implacable look, bear unmistakable evidences of a money-making disposition. Cool, calculating, and inexorable, Mr. Collinson's mind was proof against all tender sympathies and philanthropic feelings: it was tanned, hardened, and encrusted with all the worst associations of an intense selfishness which never lost sight of the main object. He had commenced life as an errand-boy in a lawyer's office: by dint of self-improvement, he qualified himself to become a copying clerk;—and, scraping together as much money as he could by all unprincipled though safe means and slimy ways, he was enabled to article himself to his employer. In due course he took out his certificate as an attorney; and his sharp practice soon brought him clients and paved the road to a colossal fortune. His pecuniary avarice being thus gratified, though by no means altogether appeased, he at length found leisure to imbibe and encourage loftier aspirations;—and having made himself a wealthy man, he became an ambitious one. At the period, therefore, when we introduce him to our readers, his mind was bent upon exchanging his bachelor condition for the married state. Not that he felt lonely in his "single blessedness," or languished for domestic enjoyments: but he was resolved to relieve what he felt or fancied to be the inconveniences of his plebeian extraction by a matrimonial alliance with some patrician family. The consequence was that for the first time in his life he was bent upon an aim which had no pecuniary object in view: on the contrary, being well aware that no titled heiress would bestow her hand upon a plain attorney of very questionable reputation, he was quite prepared to receive any portionless daughter of the aristocracy who would consent to accompany him to the altar.

We have already stated that Mr. Collinson was about fifty years of age, and hard-featured. He was not, however, absolutely ugly: for his teeth were well preserved and white—his dark hair was only just beginning to take the shade of an iron gray—and his eyes were naturally fine, though the habits of his life had rendered them sinister in expression. He was short and thin, with a very partial stoop acquired from long years of close application to the desk;—and all his movements were characterised by a remarkable activity, though his discourse was stamped with the slowness of a cool deliberation which was a habit that seldom or never deserted him. Keen, shrewd, gifted with a remarkable prescience, and utterly unprincipled, Mr. Collinson was just the man to push his way successfully onward amidst the mazes of an artificial world and a vitiated condition of society.

In manners he was not exactly vulgar; because he possessed a wondrous facility of rendering his conduct imitatively plastic to the influence of surrounding examples. In other words, he was too keen an observer not to be able to shape his bearing and model his procedure according to the etiquette prevalent in those circles to which his wealth and the necessities of his aristocratic clients had constituted a passport of introduction. He was not, then, precisely vulgar: and yet he was often forward, familiar, and arrogant. His prosperity made him vainglorious: his wealth rendered him boastful, supercilious, and presuming;—and in order to appear completely at his ease at the tables or in the saloons of select houses, he would throw into his manner a presumptuous freedom which he mistook for independence. In the same way was it that his personal decoration bordered somewhat upon the extravagant: his waistcoats were of flaming colours—and he wore as much jewellery as he could possibly accumulate for such display.

Such was Mr. Collinson, whom we have thus minutely described, because he is a character destined to play no insignificant part on the stage of our story.

Flinging off his cloak and taking the chair to which the Duke pointed, the lawyer began alternately to rub his hands and spread them out over the fire,—while he apologised for having kept his Grace waiting, on the ground that he was absent at a party when the Marquis of Arden called at his house. This assertion was verified by the fact that Mr. Collinson was in full evening costume;—and he had not therefore been subjected to the inconvenience of rising from a warm bed in order to obey the Duke's summons.

"My son has doubtless explained to you the terrible incidents which have occurred here this evening?" said his Grace, inquiringly.

"Yes, my lord—and I heartily sympathise with you on account of the ruffianly outrage perpetrated

No. 5.—The Seamstress.

upon the Duchess," returned Collinson. "Ah! she is a splendid woman—a splendid woman! I like her amazingly. But who would have thought that Lavenham could be guilty of such a deed?—and what on earth could have been his motive? A sudden access of madness, I suppose: or else some insulting conduct which her Grace must have very properly resented, and which goaded him to the fury of a savage vindictiveness. But as for that other affair—Solomon's visit, I mean—your Grace cannot be angry with me if I took the only step——"

"Pray allow me to speak, Mr. Collinson," interrupted the Duke, who had been evidently wrestling against poignant emotions while the lawyer was giving deliberate utterance to his remarks on the tragic incident of the conservatory.

"I shall not say another word until your Grace has spoken fully," observed the lawyer, now taking a pinch of snuff from a magnificent gold box set with brilliants.

"You are aware," resumed the Duke, "that several of my creditors intend to adopt extreme measures to-morrow. Mr. Solomon the officer told me this much. Some months ago you hinted at certain terms upon which you would be disposed to assist me out of my embarrassments: but I declined—perhaps foolishly—to accede to your proposal. I admit that I even rejected it with rudeness and with hauteur;—and I now apologise for my conduct. You have however been sufficiently avenged by the measures you adopted a few hours ago to recover the amount due to you."

"It was not through vengeance that I acted, my lord," said Collinson, seeing that the Duke paused as if for a reply. "I never obey any other impulse than that of my own interest. Vengeance is either above or beneath me, I know not which. At all events, I never practise it. The step which I took was simply and solely instigated by a desire to recover my money;—and I confess that I acted precipitately, because the alarming nature of the embarrassments closing in around your Grace, was no secret to me."

"Well, I am glad to hear that you entertain no vindictive feeling towards me, Mr. Collinson," resumed the Duke of Belmont. "You remember what I told you when you submitted certain terms to my consideration a few months ago?"

"Your Grace expressed astonishment at what you were pleased to call my unbounded presumption and startling impertinence," responded the lawyer, in his characteristic coldness of voice.

"I did not mean *that*, Mr. Collinson—I did not mean *that!*" exclaimed the Duke, overwhelmed with confusion. "I wished to recall to your mind the reasons which I alleged—the hopes I held forth——"

"I remember well everything that your lordship advanced upon the occasion referred to," said the attorney, playing with his watch-guard. "Your Grace stated that in a few months your son would be of age; and that on attaining his majority he would join your Grace in cutting off the entail of the estates and giving such securities as would satisfy all your creditors. Whereupon I represented, in answer thereto, that inasmuch as your Grace had already effected a similar transaction with the late Duke, in reference to a considerable portion of the estates, the release of the remaining portion by the consent of your son would not produce sufficient to meet all your Grace's liabilities. Your lordship can now inform me whether any subsequent examination into the matter has elicited facts calculated to refute my assertion."

"On the contrary, Mr. Collinson," replied the nobleman, "I find, alas! that you took the really correct and proper view of the matter."

"And therefore if your Grace's son, now that he is of age, should do for you what you did for your father," said the attorney, "the whole of the estates must inevitably be brought to the hammer, and the ducal house of Belmont will be ruined?"

"Such indeed is the case," murmured the nobleman, with difficulty stifling a profound sob.

"Then your lordship's only chance is to obtain a sum of money, by hook or by crook, to settle pressing matters, and devote all your attention to the improvement of the estates, so as to raise their revenues and thus make them produce an income for yourself after paying the interest to the mortgagees?"—and as Mr. Collinson thus laid bare the naked truth, with the merciless chill of a business-like candour, he took a huge pinch of snuff.

"You have stated the case exactly," rejoined the Duke. "If I could obtain a hundred thousand pounds for a couple of years, I should be saved."

"Humph! 'tis a large sum," observed Collinson. "But how can I assist your Grace?—the estates offer no farther security at present; and it is worse than useless to get the Marquis of Arden to sacrifice the portion entailed upon himself."

"You would not then—I suppose—that is to say," faultered the Duke, "you have doubtless thought better of the proposal you made me some months ago——"

"No, my lord: I have not thought better of it," said Mr. Collinson. "But what on earth can that proposal have to do with your Grace's desire to borrow money for two years? My offer was direct and simple. I proposed on my part to place a hundred thousand pounds in your lordship's hand, without receipt, security, or acknowledgment: in plain terms, to *give* your lordship a hundred thousand pounds—on condition——"

"Yes, yes—I know the condition full well," exclaimed the Duke, with the hasty accents of a man who anticipates a disagreeable subject. "But what I wished to propose was a modification of the terms in this manner: that you shall lend me a hundred thousand pounds upon my own security, for two years—and that if at the expiration of the two years I fail to repay the loan, you shall be entitled to insist upon the fulfilment of the *other* condition——"

"Two years—two years," repeated Mr. Collinson, in a musing tone: "the period is full long! I am now fifty—it is high time——"

"But you are a man who may still call himself in the prime of life," interrupted the Duke; "and, indeed, you do not look near so old as you tell me that you are."

"I thank your Grace for the compliment," said the lawyer, with a scarcely perceptible accent of irony in his tone. "A hundred thousand pounds is a large sum to lay out in such a manner, unless it procure the immediate gratification of some cherished object. Will your Grace be candid with me, and explain what chance you may have of repaying

the money at the expiration of the two years, so as to avoid the fulfilment of a condition which I know is very unpalatable to your lordship? Come, let us deal frankly together and treat the matter in a business-like way."

"I will do so," responded the nobleman, scarcely able to subdue the disgust which he experienced for himself and the repugnance which he entertained towards the man with whom necessity compelled him to drive a hateful bargain. "I am well aware that the sum I have demanded will only settle immediate and pressing liabilities, and leave some twenty thousand pounds for the improvement of the estates. I do not therefore deceive myself so far as to imagine that the estates themselves, after paying the interest to the mortgagees, will yield anything like the surplus requisite to meet your claim at the expiration of two years. But in the interval I *do* hope that one of my daughters will become the loved and honoured wife of some nobleman who will not hesitate to assist me in any emergency that may arise."

"I thank your Grace for this remarkable candour," said Collinson, now speaking in a tone of undisguised sarcasm. "Your lordship condescends to make use of me as a most convenient tool——"

"I was endeavouring to prove that you have every possible certainty of being repaid your money," exclaimed the nobleman, now fearing that he had indeed been too explicit and that Mr. Collinson would rather have depended upon the fulfilment of the *other* condition which had been alluded to. "At all events you are safe between the two alternatives."

"Granted!" was the lawyer's ejaculation. "But as your Grace has chosen to modify my proposition, as I originally made it some few months ago, I must take leave to modify in turn your lordship's stipulations as you have explained them now."

Thus speaking, Mr. Collinson rose from his chair by the fireside and took a seat at the writing-table. Then, folding down the margin of a sheet of foolscap in the true professional style, he proceeded to pen the conditions which he sought to impose upon the Duke.

While he was thus occupied, his Grace walked to and fro in the library in an agitated manner: and in the course of a quarter of an hour he consulted his watch a dozen times. Mr. Collinson paid no attention, however, to his impatience, but continued to write with the deliberations of a man who is engaged in an important transaction. He paused several times to take a pinch of snuff; and on those occasions the Duke stamped his foot with a species of concentrated rage at even the few moments' delay thus caused. At last, the quarter of an hour having expired, Mr. Collinson threw down the pen and handed his Grace the document which he had drawn up.

With a nervous trembling of the entire frame did the Duke of Belmont run his eyes over the conditions categorically detailed: then, as the pallor became more ghastly upon his cheeks, he flung the paper from him, exclaiming, "I never will consent to those terms!"

"In that case," said Mr. Collinson, with his wonted imperturbability of tone, "our interview is at an end. I wish your Grace good night—or rather good morning:"—and he moved towards the door.

His fingers were upon the ivory handle—it was already turning in his grasp—when the Duke sprang forward and caught him by the arm.

"Stop!—we must not part immediately," exclaimed his Grace, profoundly agitated. "At all events, let us talk the matter over."

"Be it so," said Mr. Collinson, returning towards the fire.

"Is that your *ultimatum?*" demanded the Duke, pointing towards the paper.

"It is, my lord," was the phlegmatic reply. "You know that I am a thorough man of business and that my mind is made up in a moment. It is made up now."

"But you cannot insist upon such outrageous conditions?" urged his Grace, with a wild mingling of indignation, anguish, and reproach in his voice and manner.

"I *do* insist upon them, my lord," answered Collinson: "that is to say, if I am to be a party in this transaction."

"You are taking an unworthy advantage of my position," said the unhappy nobleman, almost wringing his hands. "You place me completely in your power—you become as it were the arbiter of the destinies of my two daughters. Oh! Mr. Collinson, pause—reflect—re-consider the *one* point upon which we are at variance in the terms respectively proposed——"

"I *have* reflected, my lord—and, so far as I am concerned, there is nothing to re-consider," said the lawyer, with that coolness which is so provoking towards a man who is excited.

"Malediction!" murmured the Duke; and turning away, he began to pace the room once more, like a chafed lion in his cage: but at the expiration of a few minutes, he abruptly accosted the lawyer, exclaiming, "If I agree, when will the money be forthcoming?"

"The moment the banks are open—at nine o'clock," was the response: and Mr. Collinson took snuff with an air of indifference, although he was chuckling inwardly all the time, for he saw that the victory was his own.

"Are there no other terms upon which I can obtain the money?" asked the Duke, his wavering becoming every instant more and more apparent.

"None that I am aware of," replied Mr. Collinson.

"Will *you* advance me fifty thousand—only fifty thousand—upon the joint security of myself and Lord Arden?" demanded his Grace.

"Not a penny, my lord—not a penny," was the rejoinder.

"Then I must accept your proposal—I must yield to your conditions," exclaimed the nobleman, giving utterance to the words with a great effort, and then appearing to deplore his own want of moral courage in having uttered them at all. "At half-past nine o'clock, Mr. Collinson, I shall expect you here with the money——"

"And the agreement," added the lawyer. "Instead of going to bed on my return home, I will sit up and prepare it. Shall I bring one of my clerks to witness it?"

"Yes—yes," responded the Duke, as a sensation of faintness came over him: for he felt as if he had

already consented to sign his own death-sentence. "Good night—good night."

"Or rather good morning, my lord," responded the lawyer;—and he then took his departure.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE DAY AFTER THE BALL.

At half-past eight in the morning the Duke issued from his bed-chamber; and proceeding to the apartment of the Duchess, he knocked gently at the door, which was immediately opened by Clementine, the French lady's-maid. She placed her finger upon her lip, as much as to imply that the Duchess was sleeping and should not be disturbed;—and the Duke, after hesitating a moment, beckoned her to follow him into the ante-chamber.

Clementine accordingly closed the door of communication between the boudoir and sleeping apartment, the arrangements of which have already been described in a previous chapter;—and, wondering what the Duke could have to say to her with an air of so much mystery, she followed him to the ante-chamber belonging to that suite of rooms.

"How is her ladyship this morning, do you think, Clementine?" inquired the nobleman: "at least, so far as you are enabled to judge?"

"Her Grace has slept well, my lord," was the reply. "The medical gentleman remained with her Grace, as you are aware, until nearly four o'clock; and it was a good sign that they considered themselves justified in leaving her for a short while. The surgeon returned half-an-hour ago and was pleased to find that her Grace was slumbering so tranquilly. He will come back again presently with the physician."

"And you will doubtless continue to attend upon your lady, Clementine?" said the Duke, inquiringly.

"It will be my duty and pleasure to remain as much as possible with her Grace, my lord," was the answer.

"Good!" exclaimed the nobleman. "You are an excellent young woman—and I have confidence in you. It is therefore my wish that you *do* remain as much as you can with your lady. Her Grace will require all your care—all your attention;—and you may rest assured of being well rewarded. Day and night must you stay with her, Clementine," added the Duke, with a marked emphasis; "and to none other of her Grace's attendants must you yield up your post by her bed-side. This is my command—my wish—my entreaty:—do you comprehend?"

"Yes, my lord," returned the Frenchwoman, supremely flattered by the trust thus reposed in her. "I promise your Grace that I will not quit my dear lady even for a moment, until she be out of danger."

"That is precisely what I require," said the Duke. "And you will not fail to watch attentively for the moment when her Grace shall recover the faculty of speech—so that you may instantaneously communicate the fact to me."

"I will remember all your lordship's injunctions," responded Clementine.

"Not only must you keep watch for that purpose," continued the Duke,—"but likewise to catch the very first murmur that may escape from her tongue as the herald of the reviving power of speech. Now, do not forget to come or send and fetch me to her Grace's chamber the moment her energies and faculties appear to be recovering from the shock which they have experienced."

"Your Grace shall be obeyed in everything," rejoined the abigail.

The Duke then reiterated his promises of reward and descended to the breakfast-parlour: while Clementine hastened on tip-toe back to her lady's chamber.

"Ah! it is no wonder that his Grace is anxious to be the first to catch whatever may fall from her lips," thought the Frenchwoman within herself, as she contemplated the pale but beautiful countenance of the sleeping Duchess. "This affair is involved in the deepest mystery—and his Grace is perhaps jealous and suspicious of his splendid wife. But why should Lavenham endeavour to make away with her? Ah! she is doubtless innocent, poor thing!—and her assassin was driven to desperation because she repulsed him. Yes—that must be the true version of the affair. They say that Mr. Lavenham has lent the Duke no end of money;—and he certainly has been very intimate at the house. But I never saw or heard of the slightest thing at all wrong between him and her Grace. He always treated her with the utmost respect; and he seemed remarkably fond of Lord Arden, who is not her son at all. He was a friend to the family in all respects, up to the terrible moment that he committed this awful deed. But the Duke is anxious to hear the first words that her ladyship breathes when she recovers the use of her speech. No such thing, my lord—no such thing! The first person shall be a certain Mademoiselle Clementine—and that's myself! If there's any mystery in the affair, I'll find it out somehow or another."

And the abigail smiled complaisantly as the current of her thoughts led to this satisfactory determination.

In the meantime, as we have already said, the Duke of Belmont had descended to the breakfast-parlour, where he was shortly after joined by his son, the Marquis of Arden. Lady Mary Meleombe, the Duke's younger daughter, was somewhat better, but unable to leave her chamber; and Lady Clarissa remained with her sister. The Duke and his son were therefore alone together;—and an evident embarrassment prevailed on either side. For the young Marquis had not forgotten the manner in which he had been excluded from the deliberations between his father and Mr. Collinson: while the Duke remembered that he had promised his son the fullest explanations, which he was however by no means inclined to give.

"May I ask," said Charles, at length breaking the long silence which had followed the usual morning greetings, "whether your lordship's interview with Mr. Collinson was productive of satisfactory results? I presume that I may make this inquiry without being considered indiscreet, seeing that I am *somewhat* interested in the affairs of the house of Belmont."

"Wherefore this ironical way of addressing me, Charles?" demanded the Duke, in a tone of mingled impatience and reproach. "*Somewhat* interested! Of course you are interested——"

"And therefore I could not understand the motive which led to my exclusion from a conference of

so important a nature," interrupted the young nobleman, still exhibiting a certain soreness at the treatment he had experienced and which he was just at the very age to resent, even against his own father.

"Charles," said the Duke of Belmont, after a long pause, during which he reflected upon the best means of satisfying his son,—"your own good sense ought to tell you that it would be an ordeal of painful humiliation for a father to avow his extravagances, his follies, and his errors, in the presence of his child. You did not of your own accord offer to spare me that humiliation; and I was therefore compelled to throw out the hint which led you to leave me alone with Mr. Collinson last night."

This dexterous defence on the Duke's part accomplished the desired effect; and the Marquis of Arden suddenly saw the whole affair in a new light. Instead of his having any complaint to make against his sire, he now felt that it was he himself who had acted indiscreetly and unkindly by even for a moment evincing a desire to remain as the witness of a scene fraught with humiliation for his parent.

"Forgive me, my dear father, for my conduct," exclaimed the young Marquis, seizing his sire's hand and pressing it to his lips.

"Say no more upon the subject, Charles," returned the Duke, thus graciously doing what the Government sometimes does—namely, vouchsafing a pardon where no offence has been committed. "I am happy to inform you that my interview with Collinson was as satisfactory as I could have expected, and that the threatened ruin is averted."

"These are indeed joyous tidings!" exclaimed the Marquis, his handsome countenance lighting up with the animation of happiness. "I have inquired concerning my dear mother-in-law this morning; and I find that she has slept tranquilly. Heavens! what could have induced Mr. Lavenham to enact the part of a cowardly assassin?"

"It must have been a sudden access of delirium, to occasion fits of which he has been subjected for many, many years past," responded the Duke, in a low, deep tone. "Alas! my dear Charles, he is more to be pitied than blamed;—and when I proclaim this fact—I who am the husband of his victim—you and your sisters must not be reluctant to view the occurrence, fearful though it be, in the same charitable light."

"On the contrary, my dear father," said the young nobleman, "it gives me the most unfeigned pleasure to hear that such palliation does actually exist for a deed which otherwise would wear the aspect of an unaccountable and mysterious atrocity. I have ever regarded Mr. Lavenham as a kind and generous friend: I have loved and revered him as my god-father;—and you are no stranger to the fact that he has made me the most munificent presents at various times. But as if all that were not enough to convince me of the regard which he entertains for me, he has given me the assurance that at his death I shall find myself named the sole heir to his vast wealth. Such generosity on his part could not fail to make a deep impression upon my mind; and it is now with a proportionate amount of satisfaction and delight that I hear you proclaim him to be an object of sympathy and commiseration, rather than of loathing and abhorrence."

"Such is indeed the fact, Charles," observed the Duke; "and I must leave you to give the necessary explanations to Clarissa and Mary, so that they may learn to look upon poor Lavenham as the victim of a cruel misfortune, rather than as the responsible perpetrator of a tremendous crime. I shall instruct Collinson to appear at the police-office presently, and make similar representations to the magistrate; and you, Charles, will do well to attend on my behalf and offer corroborative evidence."

"That duty shall I perform cheerfully, after all you have told me," replied the Marquis of Arden.

At this moment a domestic entered the room to inform his Grace that Mr. Collinson had arrived with his head clerk, and that they had been shown into the library.

"Do you wish to be present at our interview, Charles?" demanded the Duke, well knowing what the reply would be.

"Assuredly not, my dear father," exclaimed the young nobleman.

The Duke pressed his son's hand in approval of this filial behaviour, and then hastened to the library.

Mr. Collinson's clerk produced the deed which his master had drawn up, and a duplicate of which he handed to the Duke of Belmont. He then proceeded to read the original, the nobleman following him attentively in the perusal of the counterpart. When the clerk came to that clause which specified the particular conditions as Mr. Collinson had detailed them, the Duke winced visibly, as if beneath the infliction of a poignant torture. But he made no observation;—and Mr. Collinson took snuff with an air of complaisant indifference.

The reading of the document was concluded; and his Grace proceeded to affix his signature. His hand trembled: but his lips were firmly compressed, as if to keep down the emotions which struggled to find a vent. Mr. Collinson likewise signed the deed;—and, this being done, he counted down upon the table the sum of one hundred thousand pounds, the principal portion being in Bank notes, each for a very large amount.

"I must now get your clerk to go and settle the claims of certain individuals who are in a position to adopt extreme measures against me," said the Duke. "Here is a list of their names and addresses."

The clerk received the paper together with the sum requisite to liquidate the amounts due to the creditors particularised therein;—and he forthwith took his departure to execute the commission thus entrusted to him. The Duke then gave Collinson certain instructions relative to the course that he wished to be adopted with regard to Mr. Lavenham;—and the lawyer, having promised to fulfil the commands thus enjoined, likewise took leave of his Grace.

At twelve o'clock precisely on that day, Julius Lavenham was placed in the dock at the Marlborough Street Police Office, charged with an attempt to assassinate her Grace the Duchess of Belmont. The prisoner, though deadly pale, was apparently firm and collected. He looked neither to the right nor to the left: but maintained his eyes fixed upon the countenance of the magistrate. And yet a keen observer would not have failed to

notice that there was a certain vacancy in this settled gaze, and that the unfortunate gentleman was not in reality contemplating the features of the functionary on whom his looks seemed to be settled. From time to time, too, there was a certain nervous quivering of the lips, which were instantaneously compressed in order to subdue that evidence of internal emotion.

The court was crowded to excess: for the occurrence had produced an immense sensation at the West End of the town, and a myriad rumours of the most conflicting character were afloat. No legal adviser had been retained for Mr. Lavenham: but Mr. Collinson appeared on behalf of the Duke of Belmont. The Marquis of Arden entered the court shortly before the commencement of the proceedings; and the magistrate requested the young nobleman to take a seat upon the bench. While complying with this invitation, Charles threw a glance of mingled sympathy and encouragement upon the prisoner: but the unhappy man noticed it not—or if he did, he gave no look of recognition or acknowledgment in return.

The case was opened; and the charge against Julius Lavenham was made in the usual manner. Several nobles and gentlemen who were present at Belmont House on the previous evening, deposed to all that they knew of the occurrence in the conservatory. Their evidence amounted to this: that the entertainment was suddenly interrupted by a piercing scream—that they rushed to the hot-house—that the Duchess of Belmont was lying upon the floor, weltering in her blood—and that Julius Lavenham, with a fruit-knife in his hand, appeared to be on the point of escaping by means of a glass-door which stood wide open. It was likewise shown that the fruit-knife was stained with blood; and the medical testimony proved it to have been the instrument whereby the wound was inflicted.

The physician and surgeon, having established this fact, were called upon to report relative to the present condition of the Duchess;—and they declared that although the wound was not mortal, and that there were even hopes of her Grace's eventual recovery, a long time must nevertheless elapse ere she could possibly be expected to give those explanations that would throw a light upon the mysterious occurrence.

"In that case," said the magistrate, "I must remand the prisoner from time to time, until the depositions of the Duchess of Belmont can be taken."

All eyes were now turned upon Mr. Lavenham, whose countenance suddenly indicated by its workings that a fierce struggle was taking place within his soul. But the storm was speedily subdued, as if by the exercise of an iron determination on his part: and in a voice which, although low and measured, trembled not, he said, "If any additional testimony be needed, my own accusing voice shall supply it. I am guilty!"

The thrill of a painful sensation ran through the court: but almost before it had subsided,—while, in fact, the chords which those words had touched, were still vibrating to every heart's core,—the prisoner continued in a somewhat less calm and measured strain.

"Yes—I am guilty," he said: "and the sole atonement which I can now make to the Duchess of Belmont, is to spare her the pain of being compelled to appear in the witness-box of a criminal tribunal. No proceeding on my part shall in any way impede her progress towards recovery: and therefore, when she returns to consciousness and is advancing towards convalescence, her Grace shall not be destined to experience the shock of being told that when her health will permit she must appear in a court of justice to bear evidence against the assassin. For this reason, then, do I at once admit that I am guilty. And let me add, in justice to the noble lady whom I have so diabolically outraged, that her fair fame must not be subjected to the slightest suspicion. The guilt has been all mine own! For years have I loved her—madly loved her: but never until last night did I venture to insult her ears by breathing into them the tale of my unhallowed affection. She acted as a virtuous woman, who is devoted to her husband, could only act in such a case. She resented the flagrant insult which I had offered her: she commanded me to quit her presence forthwith, as the sole condition on which she would forbear from unmasking me in public. Maddened by disappointment—goaded to desperation by a keen sense of the position in which my insane conduct had placed me—and acting in obedience to an uncontrollable impulse, I snatched up a knife which lay near——and—you know the rest," added the unhappy man, his head suddenly sinking upon his bosom.

There was a strange but subdued murmur through the court,—a murmur in which horror at the man's crime and sympathy for his position, were perceptibly commingled: but all who heard him, and especially those who knew him, were well persuaded that he must have been labouring under some terrible fatality to have perpetrated so shocking a deed.

"I must beg to state to your worship," said Mr. Collinson, "that his Grace the Duke of Belmont, for whom I have the honour to appear, acquits the prisoner of any premeditation, and is indeed well assured that he could only have acted in obedience to a sudden access of insanity. This view of the case is borne out by the circumstance that Mr. Lavenham has frequently been troubled with fits of delirium, which, evanescent though they be, render him utterly irresponsible for his proceedings while they last. I think it right to make this statement——"

"Which I am here to corroborate," exclaimed the Marquis of Arden, springing from his seat. "I should as soon have thought to hear that my own father had committed this crime as that Mr. Lavenham was guilty of it!"

The prisoner now glanced towards the young nobleman for the first time during the proceedings;—and in that rapid look which he threw upon his god-son, there was a singular and indescribable expression. But the next moment his eyes were averted again;—and his heaving chest bore evidence to the violence of the sob that convulsed him while he subdued it.

"Inasmuch as the prisoner has pleaded guilty to the charge imputed to him," said the magistrate, "there is no necessity for a remand; and I therefore commit him to Newgate, to take his trial at the ensuing assizes."

The moment this decision was pronounced, Mr.

Lavenham turned abruptly from the dock—the ushers and policeman cleared the way for his egress—and he hastened out of the court, as if he were anxious to escape from the gaze of those who thronged in such numbers there.

## CHAPTER XII.

### MUTUAL CONFIDENCE.

It was about a week after the occurrences just related;—and if we peep into Miss Barnet's chamber, one evening at about six o'clock, we shall find that young person and Virginia Mordaunt seated at the tea-table, where the former naturally presided in her quality of hostess. For she had invited the seamstress to pass the evening with her and have a pleasant chat;—and inasmuch as Virginia had been toiling hard for the last three or four days with the work that she obtained through Miss Barnett's good offices, she was not sorry to indulge in a few hours' recreation.

The tea-table presented an appearance of neatness harmonizing with the general aspect of Miss Barnet's chamber. The metal tea-pot was polished to a degree that made it look like silver: the cups and saucers, sugar-basin, and milk-jug were arranged with due precision upon the tray;—and a new cottage-loaf, a seed-cake, and a small pat of fresh butter constituted the fare. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate: the curtains were drawn over the window;—and the mellow light shed by a candle-lamp in the middle of the table, enhanced the air of humble comfort which characterised the room.

As Virginia glanced around, she could not help envying Julia the possession of such a neat abode: that is to say, she did not experience the sentiment of envy in its evil meaning—much less was she jealous of the comparative prosperity of her friend;—but she wished that she herself was as comfortably situated. Not but that she still entertained some very distant misgivings relative to the source of this prosperity,—misgivings as vague and undefinable to her comprehension as the unknown terrors of those presentiments of evil which so frequently steal into the human mind without any apparent cause. Besides, Virginia was of so candid, pure, and confiding a nature, that she could not easily be induced to think ill of one who had behaved so kindly to her;—and she therefore did all she could to hush those uncertain suspicions which nevertheless, and in despite of herself, continued to float dreamily in her mind, but without making any vivid impression.

The contrast between those two young females was assuredly great, and might now be especially noticed, seated as they were alone together in friendly companionship. The one was the personification of a luxurious sensuousness: the other was the impersonation of the tenderest sensibilities;—the one was a glowing, ardent, impassioned Hebe-like creature, whom the libertine would covet as a mistress: the other was a retiring, bashful, ingenuous, and Sylphide being, whom the true admirer of woman's angelic qualities would glory to make his wife:—the one was a true descendant of Eve after the fall, when the diadem of innocence and immortality had been dashed from the brow of the mother of the human race, leaving her the only charm of her external graces: but the other resembled Eve while yet in the garden of Eden and before the forbidden fruit had stained the virginal purity of her lips.

Such were the different and antagonistic lights in which Julia Barnet and Virginia Mordaunt were to be regarded,—the former calculated only to minister to the luxurious longings of the man of pleasure—but the latter adapted to become the ornament, the honour, and the happiness of a good man's home. Whether the virtues of our orphan heroine will conduct her to that enviable destiny, will appear in the sequel.

Miss Barnet did the honours of her tea-table in the most friendly manner. She was a young woman without any ridiculous affectation: and she did not look down with the air of a patroness upon the orphan seamstress whom she was entertaining in her comfortable room. If she despised anything in reference to Miss Mordaunt, it assuredly was not her poverty—but her virtue: and as she contemplated the sweet countenance which was impressed with an air of innocence as natural as that of a child, she thought within herself that the *poverty* of the young seamstress would not be long ere it broke down every barrier that protected the *virtue!*

"Now that we are seated so comfortably and in such a friendly manner together, my dear Virginia," said Miss Barnet, when the repast was concluded, "you shall tell me as much as you choose relative to your past history. For you are so young to be an orphan and so completely friendless in the world: although, be it understood, my dear girl, I mean to prove a friend to you to the utmost of my power——"

"You have already, Julia," observed our heroine, hastily wiping away the tears which had begun to trickle down her cheeks at the mention of that orphan state the bitterness of which she had been doomed to feel so keenly. "Had it not been for you, I do not know what would have become of me. But you were asking me concerning my earlier history; and the friendship you have testified towards me, merits my fullest confidence. Listen, then—and I will enter upon a narrative which has so many features of varied interest for me, dull and tedious as it may perhaps appear to you."

"On the contrary," exclaimed Miss Barnet, drawing her chair closer towards the fire;—"I am certain to sympathise with you in any feelings that the details of your history may engender, because I already entertain a very sincere friendship for you. And now proceed, my dear girl: I am all attention."

"My father died when I was quite an infant," began Virginia; "and my mother never mentioned to me the station of life which he filled. She never spoke of him of her own accord: and if I occasionally ventured a question upon the subject, she would reply laconically and immediately direct the conversation into another channel. And very, very seldom was it that I ever did recur to that topic: for she was an excellent, kind, and indulgent parent towards me—and I would not for worlds have wilfully caused her the slightest affliction. I was her only child—and she loved me tenderly. Three years have elapsed since she was snatched away from me—and at the time of her death I was only fifteen. But, though too young to be thus aban-

doned to a state of orphanage, I was nevertheless old enough to retain a vivid impression of everything that had taken place during the last few years of my poor mother's life. She was not rich —far from it: but she was in comfortable circumstances. Otherwise she would not have been able to give me a respectable education. We inhabited a small house at Pentonville; and the furniture, which was neat though plain, was my mother's own property. From the earliest period that my memory was susceptible of the impressions made by the ordinary circumstances of life, I recollect that a gentleman was accustomed to call upon my mother at particular intervals. Regularly as quarter-day came round, did this gentleman make his appearance; and my mother as invariably seemed to expect him—for she never omitted to be at home on those occasions. In the same unchanging manner, too, did she receive him alone in the parlour, an established habit as regularly leading me to retire to my own chamber the instant his well-known knock was heard periodically at our door. He was accustomed to remain about two or three minutes—never longer; and I of course suppose—although my mother never gave me any information upon the subject—that this gentleman was some professional agent who paid her a quarterly allowance. For any little out-standing accounts that there might happen to be, were invariably liquidated so soon as he had taken his departure. But all this is mere conjecture: for I never learnt who he was—nor did he give any name to the servant when he paid his regular visits. He merely knocked at the door—inquired if Mrs. Mordaunt were at home—and then walked into the parlour as a matter of course. Two or three times, however, I caught a glimpse of his countenance; not that I ever gave way to any culpable sentiment of curiosity with regard to that gentleman—much less thought of playing the part of a spy in respect to anything connected with a mother whom I loved so devotedly. It was purely through accident that I beheld him on those occasions: once when the maid-servant opened the front door as I was issuing from the parlour in order to retire to my own chamber—a second time, when he passed by the window at which I happened to be standing as he came a little earlier than usual—and a third time, when I was returning home from executing a little commission for my mother and he was just descending the steps of the street-door. On each occasion he bowed politely and looked at me with a certain degree of attention: but he never once addressed me in a single observation."

"But you would know him again, were you to meet him anywhere?" said Julia, inquiringly.

"Yes—amidst a thousand persons, or at the farthermost parts of the earth," replied Virginia, with the warmth of certainty as to the answer she was giving. "But I fear that it would be productive of no benefit to me, if I were to encounter him," she added in a mournful tone: "because his visits to the house ceased when my poor mother died—and therefore I must conclude that whatever the motive of those visits might have been, it extended not beyond her lifetime. Three years have now elapsed since that dear parent's death took place; and the catastrophe was all the more terrible because it occurred with such appalling suddenness. We had partaken in the evening of our wonted frugal supper—and we sate up half-an-hour later than was our custom, because my mother had become interested in a book of travels which I was reading to her. I never remembered to have seen her more cheerful or in better spirits. It was eleven o'clock when we retired to our respective chambers; and she embraced me with her wonted tenderness as she bade me 'good night' at the door of my room. Ah! who would have thought that in the depth, and silence, and moonshine of that lovely night, the Angel of Death was stealing into a happy home to bear away the spirit of one of its occupants and leave the other to all the maddening affliction of that sudden bereavement? Yet so it was? I remember that on retiring to my own chamber I paused for a few minutes at the window, ere I closed the curtains, to contemplate the tranquil splendour of that starlit night. The heaven was of a deep blue, stretching like a vast canopy studded with gems, over the entire earth;—and the crescent-moon was pure and cold as silver. It seemed to me as if angels were looking down upon the world from those far-off planets; and my spirit received hope, and confidence, and inspiration from the thought. Never, never can I forget the thrill of ecstatic pleasure which shot through my heart as I felt that all the good genii of other spheres were holding their protective shields over the denizens of this, and that the Almighty would vouchsafe his mercy and his love to those who besought his grace. Under the influence of such feelings as these did I kneel down to pray: and the outpourings of my mingled gratitude and intercession were longer and more fervid than they had ever been before. You will pardon me, Julia, for dwelling upon such circumstances: but the impressions of that evening, trifling as they may appear to you, have become seared as it were with red-hot iron upon my brain."

"Go on—go on, Virginia," said Miss Barnet, much moved and still more deeply interested by the young maiden's narrative, so artless and so touching.

"I am no fanatic, Julia," continued Miss Mordaunt, in a low voice that was plaintive and tremulous as some woodland melody of nature's own creation: "much less am I a hypocrite. But I believe that there is something consolatory, soothing, and encouraging in prayer: and even if this be only the work of the imagination, the effect is still the same. On that memorable night of which I am speaking I retired to my couch happier if possible than I had felt for a long time. My dreams were cheerful as my sleep was refreshing: not a suspicion—not a presentiment of evil was commingled with those visions. When I awoke in the morning, the sun was already throwing its pensile rays between the curtains into my chamber; and I saw that it was later than the hour at which I had been wont to rise. My toilet was therefore performed hastily; and I descended to the parlour in the expectation of finding that my mother had already risen. But she was not there; and the servant said that she believed her mistress must be still sleeping, as she had just knocked at her bed-room door without obtaining any answer. Far from anticipating the tremendous affliction that was in store for me, I ascended to my mother's chamber and knocked gently: but no response was given. I knocked louder—but still

No. 6.—The Seamstress.

without the desired effect. Then was it for the first time that an unknown terror, dim and vague as a shadowy form seen amidst the darkness of night, took possession of me;—and the infection of my alarm was speedily caught by the servant. The door of my mother's chamber was fastened inside, and we could not open it. Louder and louder did I knock: but still no reply was given. I implored my mother to answer me; and when I paused to listen, all was silent as the grave. Maddened by the excruciation of the terrors which now swayed me, I resolved upon having the door broken open. A carpenter was sent for; and during the few minutes which elapsed ere he came, I sate down upon the stairs and wept the bitterest, most burning tears that ever flowed from my eyes. My mind was now made up to the worst; and all the horrors of my orphan lot expanded before my mental view, like a rapid succession of hideous phantasmagorian scenes. At length the carpenter came—the door was forced open—and then a mortal tremor seized upon me as I essayed to cross that threshold which now seemed to me like the entrance to a sepulchre in which all hope was buried. The carpenter and the servant seemed to hang back in consternation: for the awful gloom of death was already filling the air of that house! Summoning all my courage to my aid, I entered—and a single glance flung through the opening of the drapery confirmed all my worst apprehensions. There—in that couch to which she had retired apparently full of health and spirits—lay the inanimate form of my mother! The rending shriek which burst from my lips proclaimed the dreadful truth to those who still lingered upon the threshold;—and the servant sprang forward to receive me in her arms as I staggered back beneath the weight of intolerable affliction. But in obedience to a sudden impulse, I threw myself upon the corpse of my parent, and gave vent to all the passionate wildness of my grief. The carpenter ran to fetch a surgeon;—but medical aid came too late—Oh! far too late. My mother had been dead many hours: the vital heat had already abandoned her form, leaving it cold as marble—and as marble, pale! Her spirit had evidently quitted its mortal tenement so tranquilly that not even the trace of a death-pang was observable upon the calm and placid countenance, which would have appeared to be reposing only, but for that marble pallor!"

Virginia paused: for her voice had become broken and scarcely audible with the profound sobs that convulsed her bosom—and the tears were now raining down her cheeks. Julia Barnet, more deeply moved than ever in her lifetime she had been before, ministered the kindliest consolations; and, when the re-awakened affliction of the orphan girl had found a sufficient vent, she became soothed.

"Did you ever learn the cause of your mother's sudden death?" inquired Julia, in a soft and gentle tone.

"The medical man accounted for it by natural means," responded Virginia, her own voice still continuing tremulous and broken. "Oh! my mother was too good a woman to have dreamt of self-destruction!" she exclaimed with a sudden anxiety to rescue her revered parent's memory from the slightest suspicion on that score. "She was buried: I saw her remains consigned to the deep and silent grave;—and when my ears caught the dreadful sound of the earth thrown upon the coffin ——O God! it seemed as if all the vital cords were snapping asunder one after the other in my heart and in my brain! In a frantic condition was I borne from the churchyard: and for some months I hovered as it were between utter madness and some lucid intervals of reason. At length I began gradually to grow calmer and more tranquil;—and the necessity of Christian resignation dawned in by degrees upon my soul. The servant then ventured to hint that I should look into the state of my affairs;—and I proceeded to examine my mother's desk to ascertain whether she had left any documents of importance or written instructions for my guidance. But there was not a single paper which threw the faintest light upon these matters which it was so necessary for me to know thoroughly. The sources of her income—the name and address of that gentleman who was wont to visit her,—all, all these important details were buried in profound mystery. I now learnt from the servant that the gentleman alluded to had called one day—at the proper time indeed for his periodical visit—but while I was confined with delirium to my bed. He had seemed much astonished at hearing of my mother's death—made some brief inquiries concerning myself—and then abruptly took his departure without another word. He left no money, nor gave the slightest intimation of an intention to return at any future time. This conduct on his part was full of evil omen. It proved that if he really were an agent or a friend who was accustomed to pay my mother a quarterly stipend, the allowance was not to be continued to me. But anxiously and even hopefully—or rather despairingly, I know not which—did I linger on in expectation of the arrival of the ensuing quarter-day. It came—it passed; and the stranger-gentleman appeared not! My utter friendlessness was now made apparent beyond all possibility of doubt;—and I found myself involved in serious difficulties. My mother's funeral had absorbed nearly all the money which I discovered in the desk;—and during the months which followed, I had subsisted chiefly by incurring debts with the tradesmen who were wont to supply the household. No alternative now remained but to dispose of the furniture to settle the liabilities which had been incurred;—and when this was done and the debts discharged to the uttermost farthing, I had but a few pounds left, besides a bed, a table, a few chairs, and some other trifling necessaries. Of course I gave up the house and parted with the servant, who had been a good friend to me, but whom my circumstances would not permit me to retain any longer. Then I took a small chamber, to which I removed and endeavoured to obtain needle-work. But day after day brought its renewed disappointment;—and frugally—sparingly—almost starvingly as I lived, my little reserve of money was growing less and less. Ah! Julia, how bitter, bitter were the scalding tears which I shed when, wearied and dispirited, I returned home after a day's anxious wandering in search of employment! Had my poor mother been alive, I could have borne it all—oh! cheerfully borne it all: for we should have mingled our tears together—and at least she would have been *there* to give me her blessing! But I was alone—alone in the world—an orphan and friendless;—and I used

to pray to heaven, in the anguish and bitterness of my spirit, that I might be taken away from this earth on which there was not a hand to succour me, nor an eye to look kindly upon me, nor a lip to breathe a word of solace in my ears. Death, so terrible to some, would have been so welcome to me! For it was in the solitude of my chamber that I experienced a full sense of all the dread loneliness of my condition; and there were moments when I would cover my face with my hands and endeavour to persuade myself that it was all a hideous dream and that it was impossible for me to be so thoroughly wretched as I fancied I was! I asked myself how I had sinned against heaven to deserve such tremendous afflictions,—I who have never trodden upon a worm, much less done an injury to a single human being in existence! Oh! when I think of all I suffered—all the anguish I endured for the first year after my poor mother's death, I am amazed that I could have ever survived the rending tortures of that affliction!

"Poor Virginia!" murmured Miss Barnet, taking her young friend's hand and pressing it warmly: for the orphan was now weeping bitterly again. "You have indeed suffered severely—severely! But do not despair—do not give way to despondency. Take the world as you find it—and bend to all the circumstances of life. It is impossible that you can fail to prosper in the long run: you carry a fortune in your countenance. But with the needle alone ——Oh! no—never—never!"

"Tell me what you mean, Julia," exclaimed Miss Mordaunt, suddenly wiping away her tears, and speaking with an earnestness as if she were resolved to venture a desperate query in order to elicit a response that should clear up some mystery, of the truth of which she however entertained a glimmering suspicion.

"I will be candid with you, Virginia," said Miss Barnet, after a few moments' hesitation. "You need not tell me any more of your history: I can divine the rest. How you were forced to part with the greater portion of the little articles that were left to you after the sale of your furniture,—how you were compelled to shift from place to place as circumstances dictated,—how you have been struggling against difficulties until you moved into this house a few weeks ago and were accidentally thrown in the way of Mrs. Jackson who has made a profit of your toil to sustain herself in indolence,—how all these things have happened to you, I can well understand: for those successive circumstances constitute the history of thousands of poor friendless creatures like you. With a slight variation here and there, perhaps, all this portion of *your* narrative is *mine* also: but I have advanced a step farther than you in the career of the seamstress."

"And that step?" ejaculated Miss Mordaunt, with a cold shudder passing over her like a presentiment.

"In plain language, my dear friend," returned Miss Barnet, stooping forward and whispering the response in a low tone,—"you have hitherto retained your virtue—whereas I have lost mine!"

The veil fell from the young maiden's eyes,—that veil which until that moment had remained drawn between her suspicions on the one side and the fatal truth on the other,—that veil which had so far served the artless candour and the confiding generosity of her character as to prevent her misgivings relative to her new friend from expanding into the broad glare of a settled conviction.

Her first impulse was to start from the chair and fly the presence of one who had just betrayed her own shame,—yes—fly, as she would from temptation! But some feeling, as unaccountable as it was indomitable, transfixed her to her seat;—and the remembrance of her deep obligation to Miss Barnet, and likewise the thought that this young female had most probably been made the victim of some cruel circumstances over which she had no control, flashed simultaneously to the mind of Virginia.

"You must not be shocked at me—you must not even think the worse of me for what I have told you," said Julia, partially reading the thoughts which were traversing her young friend's imagination. "Look here, Virginia," she continued, in an impressive and almost solemn tone: "and listen attentively! I did not make society as it is: I was born into it such as it is—I was compelled, willing or unwilling, to yield to the circumstances arising from its false, its vitiated, its unjust condition and influence. I would have remained virtuous if the world had allowed me. But it would not. Poverty—cold—disappointment—hunger—crushing toil—and rags,—these are enemies which strike at the most rigid virtue with the fury of a battering-ram. A far stronger edifice than mine would have given way. For I, too, have known what a cheerless garret is—without fire in the long, long nights of winter: I, too, have experienced the hardships of oppressive labour, and the horrors of starvation! I have worked as severely and arduously as you—I have worked, indeed, till my back has ached and the pain has spread all over my body, just as if I had been beaten with rods! I have worked, Virginia, until my eyes have grown dim, and my brain has reeled, and life seemed ebbing away from my heart! I have worked in the cold until my limbs have been rigid as if with paralysis—until my fingers have been so benumbed that it appeared as if they might be chopped off with a hatchet and yet cause no pain. I have wept, too, over my work—oh! I have wept such bitter, scalding tears that it is a wonder my eyes were not burnt out of their sockets and my cheeks seamed all down! And I, too, have prayed, Virginia—have prayed for release from that accursed state of mingled thraldom, and destitution: aye—and I have done more, Virginia—yes—more than you—for I have seriously and steadily looked Death in the face for long, long hours together when I have contemplated suicide!"

"O horror! horror!" ejaculated the young seamstress, covering her countenance with her hands, as if to shut out some fearful spectre from her view. "Will such a fate ever be mine?—am I to pass through the same tremendous ordeal?"

"How much of the same destiny is already known to you, poor girl?" asked Miss Barnet, in tones of the deepest and most unfeigned commiseration. "Ah! do not deceive yourself, my dear friend: it is better that you should learn the whole dreadful truth at once! Already—yes, already—are you advancing at a headlong pace towards the precipice which must swallow up your virtue, your innocence, your compunctions, and your faith in heaven, at the same time! You have work now—just for the moment: but how wretchedly is it paid! And then

only consider to what a slender thread it hangs. A slackness in the custom at the shop of my friend's employers—or the discovery that my friend gives me this very work which I hand over to you—or her sudden death, or loss of situation, or removal to a better place,—oh! how many chances have you against the continuance of that work, my poor Virginia. You think yourself wretched now: but believe me when I tell you that your condition may become ten thousand times worse. One evening—it was on a cold winter's night—I had been toiling hard for three days to finish a dress—I was starving—all my limbs were like ice—and I took home the work. The shutters of the shop were put up: the people had failed that day. A bailiff who was in possession under a writ of seizure, received the dress from me and told me that there was no money—that I must make a claim to the official assignee and take my chance with the rest of the creditors. Conceive my position: it was awful! Goaded to desperation, I stretched out my hand in the street to implore such alms as God might send me through some charitable person. But the hand that was outstretched in the hope of receiving the pittance of benevolence, was suddenly touched by the gold of the tempter. I was famishing—I had no means of paying my rent, and I knew that it was useless to return to my miserable garret without the sum due to a merciless landlady. Now, could the strongest-minded woman resist the temptation? I did not!"

"Alas! my dear friend," murmured Virginia, taking Miss Barnet's hand and pressing it with even a sisterly warmth,—"I was just now disposed to blame you: but at present I commiserate you—deeply, deeply commiserate you!"

"You need not do it now, Virginia—it is too late!" exclaimed Miss Barnet. "My destiny has been chalked out, and is being pursued! I fell—and ever since that time I have been happier. Yes—I have learnt to laugh at shame and ridicule virtue—aye, and mistrust religion. I could not make up my mind to die for virtue's sake: and so I live in comparative comfort on what priests and prudes may denominate the wages of vice. Well—but these wages are better than starving virtue—and human nature is too frail to hesitate long between the alternatives. Let those who blame me, act justly and blame the system of society. I am one of its victims—not one of its modellers. The modellers of society are the rich, the wealthy, and the indolent great;—and the poor, miserable, starving workers are the victims. All these thoughts have been engendered in my mind by hours and hours of reflection upon my own circumstances and my own experience. Go and gaze through the brilliantly-lighted windows of the great mansions at the West End of the town, and watch the forms of the dancers as they throw their shadows upon the curtains while bounding past: then say to yourself that the gorgeous robe and elegant dress of every high-born lady there is stained by the life-blood and infected by the pollution of the poor seamstresses who made them all!"

"Just heaven: this picture is indeed too true!" exclaimed Virginia, wringing her hands. "And is there no hope for any unfortunate being of that oppressed class who may resolve to remain pure and spotless?"

"Hope for the virtuous seamstress!" ejaculated Miss Barnet, with a bitter laugh. "No, no, Virginia—ten thousand times no! Ah! we met to have a pleasant and agreeable conversation: but the discourse has taken a sad and fearful turn. And never, never have I been so much moved by profound feelings since the day on which I plunged into the abyss of what the world calls *shame*. Your own history first touched a cord which long had slumbered in my soul;—and the vibration, which went to the deepest confines of my being, aroused all the latent associations that slept in the profoundest cells of my memory. But I will confess to you the whole truth, Virginia: I will keep nothing unrevealed with regard to myself. In plain terms, then, I am now receiving the visits of a young gentleman who is handsome as an angel. I only know him as Mr. Osmond: but I have reason to believe that he is something higher in the social sphere. However, I do not annoy him with questions on that point, because he is kind and good to me: and, after all, it is only a suspicion on my part. He is not very well off: but he allows me enough to live in the manner which you see. Sometimes I do a little work for amusement's sake: but not often. I had so much of it—too much—when I was toiling sixteen hours a-day for a crust! Mr. Osmond has not been to see me for the last week: but he has written me a kind note to assure me of his continued attachment;—and moreover I am not jealous. I know that I am handsome—and when he is weary of me, I shall not be long in finding another friend. That is my history!"

And when Virginia took leave of Miss Barnet soon after ten o'clock, she retired to her own chamber with a deeper experience in the world's ways and a sadder state of feeling than she had known for a long, long time past.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### A PERILOUS ADVENTURE.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon of the following day, that Miss Mordaunt issued from the lodging-house in Tavistock Street, to take home a dress to a lady residing in Spring Gardens. This was a portion of the work which she had received through the kind agency of Miss Barnet: but Mrs. Robinson, the forewoman who thus privately gave Julia materials to be made up, had requested that this particular gown should be taken direct to the lady for whom it was intended. By rights Miss Barnet ought to have conveyed the dress home, as Mrs. Robinson was altogether ignorant that Julia gave out the work to another person: but that young lady was expecting a visit from Mr. Osmond, in consequence of a note which she had received in the morning—and she accordingly despatched Virginia with the dress.

Our heroine passed rapidly along Tavistock Street, with the band-box in her hand;—and in a few minutes she turned into the Strand. Her looks were more than usually pensive—her countenance was very pale: for her conversation with Miss Barnet on the preceding evening had made a deep impression upon her mind. The purity of her soul had not been diminished: but her experience had undergone a material expansion. She loved virtue

as much as ever: but she now trembled lest an inexorable destiny should force her footsteps aside from the straightforward path which she hoped to be enabled to pursue. Her confidence in herself was not precisely weakened—because no impure aspirations had been kindled in her soul by the revelations of Miss Barnet: but she dreaded lest she should sooner or later find herself placed betwixt the dread alternatives—suicide or loss of innocence!

Oh! it is shocking, shocking to think that the chastity of that young creature should have been even so far outraged and insulted by having such reflections as these forced upon her contemplation. And yet she could not shut those thoughts out from her mind: no struggle of which human nature is capable, could exclude the ideas which her own perilous position thus irresistibly conjured up. She endeavoured to fix her thoughts upon her mother's image—and then upon those incidents that were best calculated to engross them: such as the tragic occurrence at the Duchess of Belmont's eight days previously, and the subsequent committal of Mr. Lavenham on a charge of murder. All these particulars she had read, with amazement and sorrow, in a newspaper which Miss Barnet had lent her: and whenever the incidents recurred to her mind, she invariably murmured to herself, "I cannot believe that the kind-hearted gentleman who was so good to me, could possibly have been guilty of such a deed!"

But we must now follow the young maiden as we find her pursuing her way along the Strand towards Spring Gardens,—her eyes bent modestly upon the pavement over which her beauteous feet moved with such glancing lightness,—and her whole bearing indicative of the modesty that is anxious to escape observation. And it was in consequence of this bashful reserve on her part that she failed to notice the circumstance of her being now followed by that same handsome young gentleman who had accosted her a week previously in Grosvenor Square.

This young gentleman, as the reader is well aware, was none other than the Marquis of Arden;—and he was just issuing from a banking-house in the Strand, whither he had been to obtain the money for a cheque given to him by his father, when he instantaneously recognised the lovely seamstress who was passing at the time. Although the Marquis was much weighed down in spirits, on account of the lamentable events which had so recently occurred, an ejaculation of joy burst from his lips as he caught sight of that sweetly interesting countenance: for it appeared as if an angel of light had suddenly crossed his clouded path.

But so absorbed was Virginia in her own reflections that she heard not the exclamation of pleasure, although it was uttered close to her ear: nor, indeed, did she observe the young Marquis at all. There was a charm about her, plainly apparelled and retiring in manner though she were, that operated like an attractive spell upon the heart of the youthful nobleman;—and without any definite object in view—that is to say, without entertaining any settled intention regarding her, he immediately began to follow her footsteps, although he had an appointment to keep elsewhere.

There had been a levee at St. James's Palace that day,—one of those trumpery and nauseating scenes which form the delight of a frivolous, vain, and ostentatious aristocracy;—and the carriages were just bearing away the various personages who had been present at the gew-gaw show of contemptible pomp and display. The neighbourhood of Charing Cross was therefore busy with the passage of those vehicles,—some bearing their titled owners towards Whitehall, and others conveying bloated aldermen and bedizened sheriffs back into the City.

Absorbed in her reflections, Virginia was incautiously traversing a thoroughfare thronged with public and private vehicles of all descriptions, when cries of alarm suddenly burst upon her ears—followed by the close trampling of horses' hoofs, and then the plunging of the animals themselves. Wildly she glanced around—and the next moment she was struck down by a blow dealt her on the shoulder by the head of one of the restive horses belonging to the carriage of a civic authority. A shriek burst from her lips—the band-box rolled away to a little distance—and ejaculations of alarm echoed on the footway on either side of the street. But at the very instant when the destruction of the young maiden appeared inevitable, beneath the hoofs of the plunging horses, the Marquis of Arden sprang to her aid with the swiftness of an arrow shot from a bow. Gallantly daring the same peril which menaced the prostrate Virginia, he tore her as if it were from the ground—clasped her in his arms—and rushed with her into the nearest shop. A policeman who was passing at the time, hastened to pick up the band box, which fortunately was uninjured;—and the crowd that they had collected for a few minutes, speedily dispersed on ascertaining that the poor girl had received no serious hurt.

The shop into which the Marquis of Arden had hurried with his almost inanimate burthen fortunately chanced to be that of a chemist; and restoratives were therefore immediately administered. Virginia soon recovered: but no pen can convey an adequate idea of her mingled amazement and alarm when her beauteous blue eyes rested upon the countenance of the handsome young nobleman. A painful confusion brought back the vital colouring to her cheeks all in a moment;—and then she as suddenly became pale again, while her whole form trembled like an aspen-leaf. The chemist, mistaking her emotions for the mere effects of the extreme terror which she had just undergone, hastened to mix some soothing cordial;—and the instant his back was thus turned, the Marquis of Arden said in a low, tender, and hurried whisper, "Do not be afraid of me! Have I not risked my life to save your's?"

A consciousness of ingratitude struck like a remorse to the soul of Virginia;—and she hastened to apologise in subdued, low, and broken murmurs, for not having immediately expressed her heartfelt thanks to her deliverer.

"Do not attempt to excuse yourself, I implore you," said Charles, every vein thrilling with rapture, as that soft voice wafted its tones of tremulous melody to his ears, and as the carnation blush returned to the maiden's cheeks. "It would be impossible for you to offend me;—and had I received a mortal injury in the attempt to rescue you, my expiring breath should have been laden only with the language of love. Ah! now you are angry with me——"

For Virginia had started resentfully as he gave utterance to those impassioned words: and then, the very next moment, she threw upon him a reproachful and deprecatory glance, as much as to say, "It is ungenerous to take advantage of the immense obligation under which you have laid me."

"Pardon me, I implore you," whispered Charles, full well comprehending the meaning of that eloquent look.

All this rapid interchange of words and varying excitement of feelings scarcely occupied a minute; at the expiration of which the chemist turned again towards Virginia and bade her swallow the mixture which he had just been compounding. She did so, and immediately afterwards rose from the chair in which her gallant young deliverer had placed her: but the chemist enjoined her to rest for a few minutes longer—and the voice of professional authority in which he spoke compelled her to obey. At this moment the policeman entered the shop with the band-box; and the Marquis of Arden instantaneously presented him with a sovereign for his trouble.

The officer expressed his thanks and withdrew;—and when the eyes of Charles were again turned upon the seamstress, he saw that this generosity which he had shown on *her* behalf, had deepened the blush of confusion upon her cheeks. He also felt confused: for he knew not what to say in order to relieve the sentiment of shame which the natural delicacy of Virginia's mind experienced on beholding her deliverer thus display on her account a munificence which she was not in a position to return. In the bewilderment of his own feelings he threw down another sovereign as a recompense to the chemist for the trouble occasioned;—and taking up the band-box, he presented his arm to the maiden to conduct her out of the shop.

Blushing and trembling with a confusion that threw all her ideas into a perfect chaos, Virginia mechanically took the proffered arm of the Marquis, whose name and rank were however still unknown to her: but scarcely had she thus obeyed the instinctive impulse of courtesy, when she perceived that her companion held the band-box in his hand.

"No, no!" she exclaimed suddenly: "I could not think of submitting you to such a humiliation;"—and abandoning his arm, she snatched the band-box from him with the abruptness of a nervous excitement.

"You will at least accept my arm and permit me to escort you in safety through the crowded streets?" said Charles, fixing upon her a look of deep and touching reproach.

"You are overwhelming me with obligations," murmured Virginia, as she once more laid her hand lightly upon his arm: for the thought suddenly flashed to her mind that in another moment the scene would wear a singularly ridiculous aspect in the eyes of the chemist.

To put an end, therefore, to the extreme awkwardness of her position in that respect, the young maiden accepted the escort of her deliverer, to whom she moreover entertained a natural sentiment of gratitude that forbade any discourteous abruptness on her part.

"Do you now experience any ill effect from the recent accident?" inquired the Marquis, the moment they issued from the chemist's shop—and the tone in which he spoke was respectful and tender.

"None, I thank you—that is to say, only a slight pain on the shoulder," responded Virginia, her heart fluttering like a bird in its cage—for she was agitated with the most conflicting feelings,—an anxiety to separate from her deliverer, and yet a fear of seeming ungrateful to one whom she owed her safety, if not her life.

"Yes—the horse struck you upon the shoulder with his head as he was plunging violently," said the Marquis. "But I thank God it was no worse!"

"My deepest gratitude is due to you, sir, for your generous succour," returned the maiden, trembling with embarrassment and perplexity. "That debt I can never pay you: but the money you expended on my behalf—*that* at least I must endeavour to return——"

"Good God! can you think of such a thing?" exclaimed the young Marquis, in an impassioned tone: then, without giving the seamstress time to reply, even if she were able at the moment to find words for an answer, he said, "You had every reason the other day to think ill of me: but I implore you not to imagine for a moment that I intended to offer you an insult. Oh! you must permit me to explain my conduct on that head, even though the explanation itself should recall a look of resentment to your countenance. But I was so struck on that occasion by your appearance, that I was not the master of my own actions; and with a respectful admiration did I accost you——"

"Oh! sir, you surely are unaware how painful this discourse must be to my feelings!" interrupted Virginia, in a tone of earnest appeal. "You have behaved generously to me—most generously—most nobly: do not—do not mar the effect of such truly gallant conduct by addressing me in a language to which I can not—dare not listen."

"But if I were to speak to you in the language of an honourable passion," exclaimed the Marquis of Arden, enthusiastically, "would you not at least hear me with courteous attention and think seriously of my proposal?"

"Our stations in life, sir, are evidently so different," responded Virginia, in a tone of decision, "that I could not possibly flatter myself you were doing otherwise than paying me some passing compliment. And lest you should have misunderstood my character," she added, with a flush of virgin pride upon her soft cheeks, "I beg you to learn at once that such language is most distasteful to me."

"It is because I *do* understand your character, sweet girl," said the young Marquis, "that I am now addressing you in this manner."

"My business lies in this direction, sir," exclaimed the seamstress, suddenly abandoning the arm on which her hand had all the time reposed with a scarcely perceptible pressure. "You will now permit me to thank you once more for your kindness, and to take my respectful leave of you."

The halt had occurred at the corner of Spring Gardens; and the young nobleman felt that he could not prudently insist upon accompanying the maiden any farther.

"One word—one single word more," he exclaimed, seizing her hand and pressing it warmly. "You

will give me credit for the most honourable intentions — the most sincere motives — in beseeching you to afford me an opportunity of rendering my character, my disposition, and my views better known to you. I do not ask you to permit me to visit you——"

Virginia started—blushed deeply once more—and abruptly withdrew the hand which the young Marquis had for a few instants retained in his own.

"Oh! how unfortunate I am!" he cried: "I have offended you again. But I take heaven to witness my sincerity when I declare that such was not my intention! What can I do—what can I say, to convince you, sweet girl, that I have become inspired with feelings towards you such as I never knew before? How can I secure your esteem?—how win your friendship?"

"By permitting me to proceed upon my errand, sir," replied Virginia, in a cold tone: and she was turning away, when her heart smote her with a sudden pang—for she felt, or at least thought, that she was behaving with ingratitude towards a young gentleman who had risked his life to save her own. She accordingly extended her hand to him, saying in a tremulous voice, "Do not think me ungrateful, sir—do not fancy that I am unmindful of the immense obligation I owe you: but be generous—and look upon me as a friendless orphan having no other fortune in the world than her own good name!"

There was a deep and touching pathos in her looks, her tone, and her manner as she thus feelingly addressed the young Marquis;—and, as he beheld the lovely girl, blushing and trembling in his presence, and with delicacy, softness, and sensibility characterizing every feature of her interesting countenance, he forgot his rank—his position—his family, and yielded only to the impulse of his enraptured soul.

"If it be a crime to love you, sweet girl, then assuredly am I very culpable," he said, in a low but fervent tone; "and if the offer of an honourable affection be insulting to you, then must I at all risks dare your displeasure. Do not think lightly of what I say—do not regard my words as a mere passing compliment——"

"I must not listen to you any more!" exclaimed Virginia, her voice and manner showing that she was deeply moved: and she hurried away.

But at the next moment he was by her side again.

"We cannot part thus!" he said, in a tone of decision. "Not for worlds will I attempt to follow you—not for worlds insult you by endeavouring to ascertain your abode. But I must see you again, sweet girl—my happiness depends upon it—and I implore you not to plunge me into despair."

Virginia was naturally confiding, artless, and unsuspicious of evil: and indeed the young nobleman meant none at that moment. He had not paused to analyse his own feelings: but he was hurried along by an irresistible tide of emotions such as he had never experienced before. The sincerity of his language and the ingenuousness of his manner failed not to produce their influence upon the maiden: and indeed, she would have been something less or something more than woman, had she remained altogether insensible to the earnest pleadings of that handsome and fascinating youth to whom she already lay under such deep and signal obligations. She accordingly paused once more, and remained a prey to the embarrassment and perplexity of a cruel indecision.

"What do you require of me?" she at length asked, with eyes bent down and with blushing cheeks.

"That you will repose in me such confidence as a sister may place in a brother," replied Charles; "and that you will afford me the pleasure of escorting you for a walk in the neighbouring park to-morrow—or next day—or whenever it may please you."

"The day after to-morrow," murmured the young maiden, "at the same hour, I will pass this way."

And she fled precipitately: for scarcely had the words issued from her lips, when she was struck by a remorse that went to her very heart's core, as if she had just been perpetrating a crime!

## CHAPTER XIV.

### MEDITATIONS.

HAVING discharged the commission which had taken her to Spring Gardens, Virginia Mordaunt retraced her way to Tavistock Street;—and on arriving at the house in which she dwelt, the young maiden proceeded to the chamber of Miss Barnet. For she had resolved to communicate to her friend all that had just occurred, and solicit her advice how to act in respect to the appointment which, in the perplexity of her ideas and the agitation of her feelings, she had made with her youthful deliverer.

But the moment that Virginia knocked at the door of Miss Barnet's chamber, this young female came forth, apparelled in one of those elegant dresses which she had displayed to our heroine on the first occasion of their acquaintance;—and, placing her finger upon her lip with an arch expression of countenance, she said in a subdued tone, "I can't ask you in, Virginia dear, just at present; because I am expecting a certain person."

"I beg your pardon for intruding upon you, Julia," observed Miss Mordaunt: "I fancied you were disengaged—and——"

"And you meant to drop in and have half-an-hour's chat with me?" exclaimed Miss Barnet, suddenly finishing Virginia's sentence for her. "Well—so you should—and most happy would I be: only Mr. Osmond sent me a note this morning, promising faithfully to call in the afternoon—and indeed, I am somewhat surprised that he is not already here."

"Well—another time," observed the young seamstress, thereby meaning that she would defer to a future occasion whatever she had to communicate to her friend: and she hurried up to her own chamber.

The garret was not quite so cheerless as when we first introduced our readers thither: for a handful of fire was now burning in the grate—and by the help of a few sticks, Virginia made it blaze up sufficiently to boil the water for her tea. Then she spread her little table, and sate down to the frugal meal.

But although she had eaten nothing since an early hour in the morning,—for breakfast and tea were the only two repasts which the poor seamstress was enabled to allow herself,—yet she experienced no appetite now; and the beverage which she was wont to find alike so cheering and so refreshing, was suffered to grow cold in the cup while she was absorbed in a profound reverie. The incidents of the afternoon naturally engrossed her attention. She blamed herself for having given that promise to meet the handsome unknown again—for a stranger, be it remembered, he was to her: and yet, on the other hand, she felt that she could have scarcely acted otherwise. He had rescued her from a fearful danger—perhaps from a dreadful death—at the risk of his own life: he had then liberally and generously opened his purse on her behalf;—and he therefore had some claim upon her gratitude. But did that claim encroach upon her maidenly prudence, when it was asserted in the form of a request to be allowed to meet her again?

This was the point. And still—and still the confiding, ingenuous, artless Virginia fixed her thoughts long and earnestly upon the fact that her youthful deliverer had pleaded honourable motives: and she blushed—oh! she blushed, even in the solitude of her own chamber, as she called to mind the impassioned words he had addressed to her and the looks of enthusiastic sincerity which had accompanied that language. Then she grew ashamed at having allowed her thoughts to dwell upon all this;—and she felt vexed with herself on account of the secret sensation of pleasure which the train of those reflections was gradually and almost imperceptibly exciting in her soul. But notwithstanding all her endeavours to turn her meditations into another channel, the image of that handsome youth would keep recurring to her mind;—and she caught herself in the act of blushing a dozen times in the course of as many minutes, during which she was insensibly led into a review of all the details of the afternoon's adventure.

Thus, the longer she reflected upon the *one* grand point—whether she should keep the appointment, or not—the more difficult did she find it to come to any positive decision. For as she reviewed every feature in the conduct of her youthful deliverer towards her, she could not help being struck by the mingled tenderness of manner, sincerity of tone, and delicacy of proceeding which he had exhibited towards her; and she was accordingly led, alike by her purity of soul and her natural good sense, into the following train of reflections:—

"Were I a lady dwelling in a nice house, and under the protection of parents or friends, *he* would have been led by the usages of society—nay, even compelled by the laws of ordinary courtesy and good breeding—either to escort me home after the accident, or at least to have demanded permission to call on the following day. This privilege would then afford him the opportunity of obtaining an insight into my disposition, and developing his own to me;—and, under such circumstances, should I be justified in refusing his honourable addresses? No: and the result would be—if he were indeed sincere, and if my own inclinations were not repugnant—that I should become the wife of a good and affectionate young gentleman. But my sad position is the true cause of turning the current of events into another channel. He knew that I was only a poor seamstress—that I had no home where I could receive him without injury to my good name—and that it was equally impossible for me to call upon him. It was therefore an extreme delicacy on his part that prompted the solicitation for that interview which I have promised to grant. If his intentions be truly honourable, he has no other mode of avowing them and of convincing me of their sincerity. And how can they be otherwise than sincere? He is too young—too generous—too noble-hearted, to be an accomplished deceiver; and moreover, I would fly from him, as if from a pestilence, were he to whisper a syllable that I ought not to hear. But, then—on the other hand—I know him not even by name: he is a total stranger to me——Ah! I recollect—that unfortunate and kind-hearted Mr. Lavenham called him *Charles!* His Christian name, then, is Charles. But I likewise remember that Mr. Lavenham observed to him, with a marked emphasis, that there could not possibly be one single reason why he should endeavour to form an acquaintance with me, whereas there were a thousand reasons why he should *not!* No—assuredly, I must not keep that appointment!"

And involuntarily heaving a profound sigh as she came to this conclusion, Virginia Mordaunt rose from her seat with the haste of one who endeavours to escape from a train of reflections to which she dares trust herself no longer; and having put away the tea-things, she took her work—resumed her chair—and began to ply her needle with as much diligence as possible.

But, despite of all her endeavours to force her thoughts into other channels, they would persist in sliding insensibly back into their natural course;—and again did she find herself reviewing all the incidents of the afternoon and re-considering all the arguments which her prudence, her delicacy, her good sense, and her inclinations, had severally and respectively conjured up for or against the keeping of the appointment.

"Mr. Lavenham might have entertained fears that Charles,"—and she blushed deeply as she caught herself pronouncing that Christian name even with the silent voice that was speaking her thoughts in the profundities of her soul,—"that Charles could not be influenced by honourable motives in seeking my acquaintance. And truly Mr. Lavenham had a perfect right to adopt that idea from the apparently rude and insulting course which Charles was *then* pursuing towards me. But perhaps the young gentleman was judged harshly? Yes—he must have been: for did he not ere now insist upon explaining his conduct of the other day?—and has not the delicacy of his behaviour this afternoon confirmed the truth of his declaration that he was incapable of offering me an insult? Oh! he pleaded so earnestly that we should meet again: there was such sincerity in his language—in his looks—in his whole manner——And then, did he not passionately conjure me not to drive him to despair? Oh! if he should really love me—and if any cruelty on my part——"

But Virginia, awaking with a sudden start from this profound reverie, instantaneously checked the current of her thoughts: and while she felt that her cheeks were burning with the blush that was upon them, she also became aware that some new

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chord was vibrating with an unknown pleasure in her heart.

For, oh! in the channel which her meditations had been insensibly suffered to take, the word *Love* had for the first time in the maiden's life occurred in connexion with herself: and although she was startled for a moment by the new voice which had thus given a whispered evidence of its being in the depths of her soul, yet at the next instant she felt her heart thrilling with the soft melody of the pleasing sound. For there is a magic in the idea as well as in the name of Love, which exercises its influence upon even the purest mind: and the very first moment the suspicion of either loving or being beloved takes inception in the female heart, the world around and all its circumstances begin to appear in a new light. *Then* does there indeed seem to be something worth living for,—something that promises recompense for all the cruellest struggles against vicissitude and woe,—something, in fine, which, along the vista of past sorrows and present uncertainties, affords a glimpse of a paradise even in this world!

Yes—and it was that magic name of *Love* which Virginia, unconsciously and insensibly led on by the current of her reflections, had breathed unto herself,—whispering it like a word that stole by a heavenly inspiration into her mind, and accompanied by a celestial ray which illumed that mind at the same moment and made it sensible of the phase of indescribable bliss on which it was entering.

With drooping arms the maiden held in her hands the work upon which she had been so diligently engaged until that instant:—and relapsing into a reverie as profound as it was irresistible, she suffered her imagination to wander upon the enchanted grounds of the future. Building up castles on the golden sands of a realm of her own creating, she was led to fancy herself already emancipated from the crushing thraldom of her real position—wooed and courted by a youth as generous-hearted as he was handsome—next becoming the happy bride of him who loved her thus devotedly and whom she loved in return as tenderly and as well—and then settling down into all the placid enjoyments and tranquil pleasures of domestic life. Oh! it was a truly elysian dream amidst the mazes of which that poor girl's imagination now wandered:—alas for her that it should ever have known an awakening!

And there she sate, giving way to the irresistible current of her reflections—or rather borne along in the sea-shell chariot which imagination was wafting upon the bosom of the silver streams that flow with musical sound through fancy's fairy land,—there she sate, while the fire died away in the grate and the candle was burning down into its socket; and the stern, cold realities of the world around her being forgotten, she was roving in the ideal realms of a brain created future.

Oh! how rudely—how cruelly was she recalled to herself by a tap at her door: and the sound, though low in reality, struck her with all the violence of a thunder-shock. She sprang to her feet: all her golden visions were dissipated as quick as the eye can wink; and she found herself as it were face to face once more with the lean, gaunt, hideous spectre of Misery!

The knock was repeated: for a moment she pressed her hand forcibly to her brow, in order to steady her thoughts; and the next instant she hurried to open the door.

"I began to think you had gone to bed, Virginia," said Miss Barnet, as she entered the chamber: "and yet I saw the light between the crevices of the door. But I suppose you had fallen asleep?" she added, as she observed the cheerless grate, and the candle with an immensely elongated wick.

"What o'clock is it, Julia?" inquired the maiden, as with trembling hand she remedied the latter inconvenience by means of the snuffers.

"Nearly nine," returned Miss Barnet: and it now struck Virginia that there was an accent of mingled bitterness and vexation in her friend's tone.

"Has anything annoyed you, Julia?" she inquired, her suspicion receiving apparent confirmation from the troubled looks of Miss Barnet.

"To tell you the truth, I am in a terrible rage," responded this young female, her eyes flashing fire. "You know that I have been expecting Mr. Osmond—that it was his own appointment—and that I waited at home at his express desire, conveyed to me by letter? Well, he has not made his appearance at all: and he has only just sent a hurried note of apology, without mentioning any cause, and likewise without saying when he will come. Now, is not this enough to provoke me?"

A sudden feeling that was akin to disgust rose up in Virginia's mind towards Miss Barnet. Was it that the new sentiment which had taken birth in her own pure soul had shed a light upon her comprehension in a particular respect, and so far enlarged her experience as to enable her to understand and appreciate all that there was revolting, indelicate, and repulsive in the idea of a young female decking herself out with meretricious gaiety to receive the man who pensioned her? Yes—assuredly, some such feelings as these sprang up in Virginia's mind, as her eyes settled upon Miss Barnet apparelled in one of her most gaudy dresses.

"I ask whether this is not enough to provoke me?" repeated the young woman, as Virginia did not immediately reply to the observation.

"I am truly sorry that you should have experienced any cause for annoyance, Julia," said Miss Mordaunt, her conscience reproaching her for what she believed to be a sentiment of ingratitude towards one who had rendered her the most important services.

"And yet you speak coldly, Virginia," cried Miss Barnet, observing a sort of constraint in the manner of her friend. "Has anything unpleasant occurred to *you*?"

For an instant the young seamstress hesitated how to answer. She had resolved to make a confidant of Julia relative to all that had taken place in the afternoon: but some scarcely definable sentiment of repugnance to breathe her secret to the ears of such a person, now sealed her lips. It was in truth the delicacy of an incipient love essentially pure and æsthetic, revolting from the thought of blending even the outpouring of its confidence with the grossness of feelings entirely sensual. The chaste spirit of Virginia shrank from a closer and more intimate contact with Julia's polluted being:

and although the young maiden could not have defined to herself the real cause and meaning of this delicate antagonism, she nevertheless yielded to its secret influence.

"Do not tell me that I speak coldly to you, Julia," she exclaimed, after that instant's hesitation, and catching at the readiest means of evading a reply to the query which had been so directly put to her. "Am I not under the deepest obligations to you——"

"Well, I am glad to hear that you meant nothing unkind, Virginia," interrrupted Miss Barnet. "I dare say it is because I myself am in an ill-humour, that I fancied something like coldness on your part. But I wish I knew where my Osmond lived: I would hasten and demand an explanation. Ah! Virginia!" she added with a profound sigh,—"I never was jealous until this evening—and now I do feel that I love that beautiful youth—and my mind is filled with misgivings. He never treated me so indifferently before!"—and Miss Barnet burst into tears.

The generous soul of Virginia Mordaunt was now deeply moved; and she said all she could in the way of solace to her afflicted friend. But she nevertheless experienced the while a certain repugnance amounting almost to an actual loathing, at the idea of making any positive and direct allusion to that illicit connexion which subsisted between Miss Barnet and her Mr. Osmond. She felt that it was a matter of which she herself should know nothing,—an affair which never ought to have been revealed to her ears, and to which anything that she did not say in its disfavour might seem like encouragement.

"Well, it is of no use to make myself miserable about the business," exclaimed Miss Barnet, wiping her eyes. "We shall see what time will bring forth: and if Osmond does not come and offer a very satisfactory apology in the course of to-morrow or next day, I shall know what to think and how to act. Thank my stars, I am handsomer now than when I first knew him. And yet," she added, with another profound sigh, "I do really love him."

She paused for a few moments—surveyed her countenance with complacent admiration in Virginia's broken piece of looking-glass—and then smoothed down the rich masses of her raven hair.

"Well, I wish he had come!" she exclaimed, with another sigh: then, turning towards the young seamstress, "I am quite unsettled this evening, and shall go to the theatre at half-price. If you will accompany me, I will treat you."

"No—oh! no," cried Virginia, shrinking from the thought of visiting such a scene of gaiety with no better protection than that of Miss Barnet. "I thank you sincerely, Julia—but I much prefer continuing my work."

"Well, then, I shall go alone," said the dark-eyed young woman: and bidding Virginia "good night" she quitted the chamber.

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE MEETING.

GENTLE reader, have the kindness to remember that Virginia Mordaunt was very young and but little experienced in the wickedness, duplicity, and deceits of this world,—that she had not as yet seen enough of life to destroy all the freshness of that sublime confidence which belongs as it were to the very nature and disposition of the youth of both sexes,—that she owed a debt of deep gratitude to her deliverer, whose handsome appearance and fascinating manners were only too well calculated to strengthen the favourable impression which his gallant conduct had made upon a mind naturally tender and susceptible,—that he had emphatically avowed the most honourable intentions, and had invoked her assent to another interview by the sanctity of that respect which a brother would manifest towards a dearly-cherished sister,—be pleased to remember all this, gentle reader,—and likewise bear in mind the not less important fact that some still small voice had whispered the name of Love in the secret depths of Virginia's soul;—and then you will not be surprised if you hear us declare that on the day and at the hour specified, the young maiden bent her steps towards St. James's Park.

Although it was in the month of January, the weather was remarkably fine. The air was crisp with a frosty chill: the ground was hard as pavement;—and there was just a sufficient gleam of the declining sun to give a brightness to the atmosphere. The evergreens in the Park, the ornamental water with its picturesque islands, the greenness of the grass-plots, and the general appearance of a verdure that defied even the stern hand of winter, formed a scene that would have proved refreshing to the eye of the maiden, were not her mind so occupied with conflicting thoughts that all her senses were absorbed in her reflections and all her looks were turned inward.

Her gentle breast was heaving and sinking with quick undulations, while every pulse worked with a feverish celerity: her lips were parted with suspense, and revealed the teeth that appeared like two strings of pearls in contrast with moist coral. She was a prey to a painful nervous excitement: and yet her step was slow and uneven with the hesitation which constituted an under-current of feeling amidst the various emotions that were contending in her bosom. For while some impulses urged her forward, others prompted her to turn back: while one voice in her soul whispered flatteringly and agreeably of the approaching interview, another seemed to give utterance to the words of solemn warning. Thus was it that with fluttering heart, quick-beating pulse, animated countenance, and yet with laggard steps, the young maiden entered the enclosure of St. James's Park.

Scarcely had she passed the gate in the iron-railings, when the hasty and furtive glance which she threw about her, encountered the joyous and impassioned look of her youthful deliverer: and in another moment he was by her side. Her hand was instantaneously seized and pressed warmly in his own; while some words of mingled tenderness and gratitude were breathed in her ear. But she had no power to withdraw her hand, and no faculty to comprehend the language in which the young Marquis expressed his fervid thanks that the appointment had been kept: a confusion that was not altogether unmixed with pleasurable sensations, had fastened upon her like a spell;—and when she began to recover from that strange bewilderment and was enabled to collect her thoughts, she found herself

leaning upon the arm of her handsome companion, who was conducting her into the least frequented walk of the spacious enclosure.

"You have conferred upon me a happiness which I hardly dared anticipate," said the young nobleman, his musical voice sounding low and tremulous as he bent his head slightly down towards the maiden: "and I promise you that I shall know how to appreciate this confidence which you have reposed in me."

"And you do not think the worse of me for taking this step?" murmured the seamstress, in a hesitating tone.

"The worse of you!" exclaimed Charles. "Oh! no—no! How was it possible that I could have an opportunity of telling you all I feel, unless you had consented thus to grant me an interview?"

"Nethertheless, I must assure you, sir, for my own sake," continued Virginia, "that it was not without an effort I could persuade myself there was no impropriety in this proceeding. I have argued the point over and over again—sometimes arriving at one resolution, and sometimes at another: and even at the last moment I hesitated still."

"But you decided in favour of my happiness at last!" observed the young nobleman, in a voice expressive of ardent gratitude. "Had you not come," he continued, in a more solemn manner, "I should have been driven to despair: for you have made upon my mind an impression which never, never could be effaced, were I to live for ages. Now understand me well: because if I explain myself fully, you will be the better able to judge of my sincerity. I move in a sphere where beautiful women abound; and you would not believe me for a moment were I to declare that I never saw an angel in female form more beauteous than yourself. But you *may* believe me when I assert that never have I encountered a being whose retiring, modest, and bashful loveliness was so calculated to rivet the purest and most enduring affections. There are beauties which dazzle and bewilder—and there are others which hold the senses spell-bound as it were while the influence of their presence lasts: but removed from the splendours of the former, and the fascinations of the latter, the effect speedily dies away, as the glory and the warmth of the sun are felt only so long as you bask in its rays. But there is that unobtrusive, retiring loveliness which hangs like a charm about its possessor and stamps its image upon the heart of its admirer——"

"You must not talk to me thus," murmured Virginia, holding down her blushing countenance as she leant upon her companion's arm: "I feel that I am doing wrong to listen to you. Besides, you know nothing of me—and I cannot believe——"

"You cannot believe that it is possible to love you without instituting all manner of inquiries concerning you beforehand?" exclaimed the young Marquis, repudiating the idea with a fervid scorn. "Ah! if your character were not depicted in your countenance, you would be less lovely than you are; —and if your disposition were not to be read in every lineament of your face, I should not have been so irresistibly attracted towards you. Oh! I am certain that your position is not a happy one: and it will be the proudest and most joyous moment of my life when I can raise you to independence and place you in that sphere of which nature has formed you to be the embellishment. But while I am thus addressing you, I remember that I do not even know by what name to call you——"

"Virginia Mordaunt," said the young seamstress, her whole being thrilling and trembling with the mingled hopes and fears which the impassioned language of her youthful admirer had raised up in her breast,—hopes such as a gentle maiden could not fail to experience under such circumstances, and fears lest they never should be realised.

"Virginia—sweet Virginia!" cried the Marquis, rejoicing that the object of his infatuation possessed a name which was alike so beautiful and so appropriate. "Ah! permit me to call you simply *Virginia*—and not cold and formal *Miss Mordaunt:* and you shall address me as *Charles* in return. But can you—will you love me?" he suddenly demanded, with an unaffected eagerness to obtain an assurance on that head.

"Your conduct towards me has already established large claims upon my gratitude," returned the maiden, in a subdued and tremulous tone: "and I will not be so false or so foolish as to declare that all you have now been saying to me has produced no impression upon my mind."

"Then you think you can love me, Virginia—dear Virginia?" said the youth, in a whispering tone, that was full of tenderness.

*Dear Virginia!*—Oh! never, never had her name sounded so softly musical and so deliciously sweet to her ears, as now when spoken by that voice which was in itself a combination of feminine harmony with masculine depth,—a voice belonging to that very period of existence when it possesses the male intonation without the roughness of a more advanced age—and therefore when it is best adapted to penetrate with all its metallic richness of sound into the very depths of a woman's soul!

Nor was this influence lost upon Virginia. For that tender mention of her name struck a chord which vibrated to her heart's core. She felt that the words "*Dear Virginia!*" were a more touching and thrilling avowal of love than could possibly be conveyed in a thousand elaborate and well-rounded sentences. In giving utterance to those two words, the music of the young nobleman's voice invested her name with a singular and ravishing charm;—and the endearing tenderness of his manner was in itself full of the eloquence of passion. It was impossible to suspect his sincerity—his faith—his truthfulness: the enthusiasm of his words was as different from the cold sophistries of the deliberate seducer as the respectful admiration of his looks contrasted with the devouring regards of sensuality which he himself had been accustomed to fix upon other women.

*Dear Virginia!*—Oh! she saw that she was beloved!—with a woman's instinct, young and artless though she were, she felt that she was indeed dear to that handsome young man—and it suddenly seemed to her as if they had known each other and been intimate for years!

"Tell me, dearest Virginia—do you think you can love me?" he said, once more putting the question, but with a deeper tenderness alike of epithet and tone. "Look up—and tell me that you can love me!"

And the maiden, with every pulse thrilling at

that word "*dearest*" which had just been addressed to her, *did* raise her blushing countenance: and though her feelings hushed the syllables that rose to her lips, yet did the Marquis of Arden read the wished-for response in those eloquent blue eyes which blended their looks with his own. Yes—those beauteous orbs spoke in silence to his soul—and their language was the unmistakable confession of a reciprocal love!

Yes: quickly as this change had been wrought in the heart of Virginia—rapid as had been her learnings in the lessons of love—the sentiment was not the less deeply rooted in her bosom. A few days—almost a few hours had done it all: but then, had she not been placed in circumstances the influence of which no young girl can be exposed to with impunity? That adventure which at once laid her under so vast an obligation to the young Marquis—then the mingled generosity and delicacy of his conduct, so closely following up that chivalrous gallantry which made him peril his life for her sake then the effect of her own meditations upon the course which she should adopt towards the handsome youth—and now the tenderness of his looks, the music of his voice, and the enthusiasm of his language,—Oh! surely, surely, all these influences were more than sufficient to win the soft affections of a young and confiding girl, at that age when no selfish calculations nor voluptuous sensualities had penetrated like a serpent into the Eden of her heart.

We said that Charles had conducted his fair companion into the most secluded walk in the Park. There were not many persons in that avenue at the time; and therefore the lovers—for such they indeed now were—had escaped any unpleasant observation during the interesting discourse above detailed. Virginia was now leaning more confidently upon the arm of the handsome youth to whom she had given her love: that is to say, her hand reposed upon that arm with a more perceptible pressure than on the former occasion when they were together.

And she was happy—Oh! supremely happy: although it appeared to her as if she were walking in a dream. The other day, and she had not a friend in the whole wide world: *now*, she had more than a friend—she was wooed by one who promised to make her his wife! Ah! was this fairy vision destined to endure?—would it continue until all its associated hopes should be fully realised? The sequel will show: but in the meantime the young Marquis is breathing to the maiden's ears those words of fervent love and golden promise which are so welcome to the heart that beats with its first virginial affection!

"I have already assured you, dearest one," said the youth, his eyes pouring forth floods of tenderness—while the maiden, with all the innocence of a fond reliance and ingenuous confidence, turned her heavenly countenance up towards his own,—"I have already assured you, dearest one, that never did aught in female form make such an impression upon my soul as your modest loveliness. And it is because I feel that I could not be happy without you,—it is also because I shall experience the most lively joy and the proudest of triumphs in raising you from a position of dependence and toil to one of prosperity and competency,—it is for these reasons that I long to conduct you to the altar as my bride. It is true that I move in a sphere where this marriage may excite some astonishment: but when I present my young and lovely wife to the circle of my friends, they will be impressed with no other conviction than her worthiness to attain that rank. Tell me, then, dearest Virginia, whether you have relatives or friends to consult:—tell me also what I can do to render you happy and place you at your ease until that day when you will consent to accompany me to the altar. Tell me, in fine, all that concerns yourself——"

But at this moment an ejaculation of mingled astonishment and rage struck upon the ears of the lovers: and raising their eyes, they beheld Miss Barnet confronting them in the pathway.

"Osmond! is this you?—and, Ah! you little traitress—you deceitful Virginia!" exclaimed the infuriate young woman, gesticulating violently, while her cheeks were scarlet with passion.

"Osmond!" echoed Virginia, a fearful suspicion flashing across her brain: then, turning towards her lover with looks full of anguish, she cried, "No—no! it cannot be! You are not——"

But the infuriate manner in which Miss Barnet now continued to level the bitterest reproaches against the young man, carried to the tortured soul of the seamstress the wretched conviction that her lover was indeed none other than the paramour of her friend.

"O heaven! have mercy upon me!" murmured the poor seamstress, suddenly abandoning the youth's arm and staggering for support against the iron railing which fenced the pathway.

"Virginia—do not judge me harshly—hear me, I implore you!" exclaimed Charles, regardless of the bitter invectives which Miss Barnet was levelling against him.

"No—no—it is all over between us!" cried Virginia, in a voice penetrated with the anguish of cruel disappointment: and, suddenly gathering all her strength and all her presence of mind, she fled precipitately from the spot.

The young Marquis, maddened by the scene, was about to rush after her: but Miss Barnet seized him by the arm—clung to him with all her force—and was not to be shaken off, save by a degree of violence which Charles, goaded to desperation though he were, was incapable of exhibiting towards a woman.

"Leave me, Julia—unhand me—I implore you to let me go!" he cried; "and I will behave munificently towards you."

"Traitor!—villain!" exclaimed Miss Barnet, clinging to him with the tenacity of a tigress: "you shall not have another opportunity of making love to that hypocritical minx!"

"Julia—I command you—I beseech you," cried the Marquis: "hear me——"

"You will not move me either by threats or prayers!" interrupted the enraged Miss Barnet. "There! people are approaching—Virginia has disappeared—and now will you be reasonable?"

"Yes—but permit me to say one word to that young creature whom it appears you know," exclaimed Charles;—"and then I will devote my attentions to you."

"You cannot catch her up—she has fled precipitately—she is out of sight," persisted Miss Barnet, still clinging tenaciously to the arm of the young

Marquis. "If you choose to struggle with me, be it so—but you will expose yourself——"

"Yes—'tis too true!" cried Charles, in a tone of bitter vexation, as he saw the correctness of Julia's remark. "But henceforth everything is at an end between you and me," he exclaimed, as he led her abruptly into a diverging path, so as to escape the observation of the persons who were now approaching near.

"What have I done to offend you?" demanded Julia, now bursting into tears, but still clinging firmly to the young nobleman's arm. "Because I discover you in company with that deceitful chit whom I have befriended, and whom I fancied such a paragon of virtue—such a perfect example of chastity and innocence that she could not look a man in the face——"

"Ah! she is all that I believed, then!" cried the young Marquis, whose bitter annoyance was somewhat mitigated by this tribute so spontaneously paid to the virtue of the seamstress. "I suppose that she lives somewhere near you—perhaps in the same house——"

"I am sure I do not know where she lives," interrupted Miss Barnet, pettishly: "and if I did, I should not be fool enough to tell you. Come, Charles," she added coaxingly, "say that you are sorry for what has happened—promise that you will see Virginia no more—and let us be friends."

The young nobleman was about to give a stern refusal to this entreaty, and follow it up by dissolving his connexion with Miss Barnet then and there, —when the thought flashed to his mind that it was only through her means he could possibly hope to discover the place of Virginia's abode: for that Julia was acquainted with it, he was well able to judge from her words and manner when so petulantly asserting the contrary. He accordingly resolved to adopt a scheme of cajolery with his mistress, and by assenting to reconciliation, worm out of her in the course of a few days the information which he despaired of gleaning in any other way.

Having thus accomplished a triumph, as she flattered herself, over her rival, and having graciously vouchsafed her pardon to her lover for his infidelity, Julia now insisted that he should escort her to some place of amusement. But the Marquis, fearful of being recognised by any of his numerous acquaintances, and unwilling to endanger the convenient incognito of "Mr. Osmond," would not concede to the young lady's demand. On the other hand, she was in no humour to take a refusal; and there was every prospect of another "scene" in the park, when Charles fortunately suggested a compromise in the form of a *tete-a tete* dinner at some hotel where such accommodation might be readily obtained without the risk of impertinent surmise or special notice. Miss Barnet assented to the proposition; and away they sped together, through the now deepening gloom of the winter's evening.

The nobleman expected that his mistress, when duly plied with good things and flattery, and under the influence of champagne and cajolery, would suffer herself to be wheedled out of the particular information which he was anxious to acquire at her hands. But in this hope he was completely disappointed;—and, having passed several hours in her company, he separated from her between ten and eleven o'clock without having succeeded in his object.

Vexed and dispirited, the Marquis of Arden returned to Belmont House—while Miss Barnet, well primed with champagne, hastened home to Tavistock Street, burning to vent her wrath against poor Virginia.

But if the young nobleman had *his* disappointment on this occasion, Miss Barnet was likewise doomed to experience *her's:* for, on reaching the house where she dwelt, the first tidings which met her ears were to the effect that Miss Mordaunt had returned home some hours previously in a state of considerable agitation—that she had sent for a broker to whom she disposed of the few miserable articles of furniture which she possessed—and that, having paid her rent, she had taken her departure, no one knew whither!

"On bidding me good bye," said Jane, the servant-girl, "she cried very much, poor thing! I I asked her if anything unpleasant had occurred: but she sobbed so, that I thought her heart would break. She could not find words to give me any explanation, even if she had intended: but she pressed my hand warmly, and hurried away, carrying her few necessaries in a little bundle. Ah! poor girl—she quite made my heart bleed for her!" added the servant, with tears running down her cheeks.

"And did she leave behind the work that I procured for her?" inquired Miss Barnet, whose feelings as a jealous woman of narrow mind prevented her from sharing in the sympathy that the servant-girl experienced for the unhappy seamstress.

"Yes," replied Jane: "she gave the parcel to me; and I placed it in your room. Ah! she is a thoroughly honest and good girl," added the servant, with a profound sigh. "But——"

And shaking her head in ominous expression of doubt whether the maiden's virtue would survive temptation and poverty, the good-natured Jane slowly descended to the kitchen.

On the other hand, Julia hurried up to her own chamber, where she found all the materials which she had procured from her friend Mrs. Robinson for Virginia Mordaunt to make up. In the middle of the packet was a small note, sealed, and addressed to "Miss Barnet." The contents ran as follow:—

"As I would not for worlds lie under the imputation of ingratitude towards yourself, and still less be suspected of impropriety of conduct, I beseech you to demand from Mr. Osmond a full explanation of all the circumstances which concern myself. Perhaps he may already have been generous enough to volunteer such an explanation: but if not, I beg you to solicit at his hands those details which, if truly given, must fully exculpate me in your eyes. I do not leave Tavistock Street from any dread of encountering *you:* but for motives of a far different character.

"Your afflicted but grateful friend,
"VIRGINIA MORDAUNT."

"Well, perhaps she is not so much to blame as I thought at first," said Miss Barnet, tossing the note into the fire: and she then began to prepare for retiring to rest.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE FRENCH FEMME-DE-CHAMBRE.

It was about six o'clock in the morning, on the day that followed the incidents just related; and Mademoiselle Clementine, the French lady's-maid, was watching by the bed-side of the Duchess of Belmont. The heavy drapery was drawn over the windows—a fire blazed in the grate—and wax-candles were burning upon the mantel: for, as the reader will remember, it was in the depth of the winter season when darkness still hangs over the hemisphere at that hour.

Clementine was clad in a warm wrapper; and a Parisian cap set off her dark hair and her interesting countenance, which had all the vivacity and archness of expression peculiar to the French *femme-de-chambre*. Even when alone or unobserved, there was a certain coquettish air about Mademoiselle Clementine which formed a part of her very nature;—and so accustomed was she to enhance her personal attractions by the elegant neatness and tasteful gentility of her attire, that she was not to be deterred from the observance of this habit by even the cares and duties associated with the sick-room.

Ten days had now elapsed since the dreadful event that had consigned the brilliant Duchess of Belmont to the couch which she still occupied as an invalid, and by the side of which Clementine was now watching. She had progressed from a condition of alarming peril to one of comparative safety, in a manner that had exceeded the most sanguine expectations of her medical attendants: but although consciousness had returned, the powers of distinct and intelligible articulation had hitherto remained suspended.

Relative to this point the Duke of Belmont had exhibited an anxiety which had more and more piqued the characteristic curiosity of Mademoiselle Clementine. Sometimes he would sit for hours together by the side of the couch, gazing upon the pale features of the invalid;—and, as she fully recognized him, mysteriously significant and strangely expressive were the looks which they were wont to fasten upon each other. Without appearing to observe them, Clementine had narrowly watched this conduct on their part;—and she was sufficiently skilled in the reading of the human countenance to be enabled to notice that while the looks of the Duchess were usually fraught with an air of plaintive appeal or earnest entreaty, those of the Duke were filled with a melancholy that was sombre and yet forgiving.

Clementine was not present when his Grace visited the Duchess on the first occasion after the return of consciousness. But she had listened at the door; and she had caught the murmuring of the long whispers which the Duke was evidently breathing in the ears of his wife. A few moans and an occasional sob had indicated the disturbed feelings which filled the bosom of the Duchess;—and Clementine thought within herself that there must be secrets of deep and even fearful interest between the ducal couple.

Having paused for a moment to glance at these circumstances, we may now resume the thread of our story, in its proper course, and recal the attention of our readers to the morning on which we find Mademoiselle Clementine watching betimes by the couch of her invalid mistress.

The Duchess of Belmont was sleeping: and therefore it was not necessary that Clementine should have risen thus early from the sofa whereon she was in the habit of passing the night while in attendance upon the wounded lady. But she had risen because the Duchess had given utterance to a few words in the uneasy dream which was evidently disturbing her; and although the French abigail had not been able to catch the sense and meaning of those words, yet she saw that the power of speech was reviving on the part of her mistress. Anxious, therefore, to be the first to catch whatever might intelligibly fall from the lips of the Duchess, Clementine had risen noiselessly from the sofa: then, as her Grace appeared to relapse into an easier slumber, and silence once more set its seal upon her mouth, the lady's-maid leisurely and quietly adjusted her toilet to that elegant morning *negligée* which we have already described.

But scarcely had Clementine performed her ablutions, arranged her hair, and put on the elegant cap and the tasteful wrapper, when the Duchess turned uneasily in her couch once more;—and the name of Julius Lavenham fell murmuringly from her lips. Those were the first words which she had articulated with an intelligible clearness;—and, noiseless as a ghost, did Clementine place herself by the side of the couch. With suspended breath she leant over her mistress, ready to catch whatever else might drop from that tongue which now appeared to have recovered the faculty of giving verbal expression to the thoughts that were uppermost in the mind of the sleeping lady.

As the light fell upon the countenance of the Duchess, it appeared that her cheeks were slightly flushed: but at first Clementine thought that this was only the oscillating flames of the fire playing reflectively upon the features of her mistress. A longer and close contemplation however proved that it was indeed the flush of vital colouring which now tinged those cheeks hitherto so pale;—and the deepening uneasiness which marked the noble lady's slumber, showed that in her visions she was a prey to thoughts of no pleasurable nature.

But, hark! she speaks again! A few words, falling low and murmuringly from the lips that move slightly to give them articulation, are caught by the ear of the attentive Clementine. Then a deep silence pervades the room, broken only by the irregular and agitated breathing of the Duchess: for Clementine herself is breathless with listening suspense. In a few minutes her Grace speaks again: louder and more strongly articulated are the syllables which now escape her tongue. Then all is silence once more. But, heavens! what a secret have these last words made known to Clementine! Amazed, bewildered, and horrified, she staggers back a few paces and sinks into the arm-chair by the side of the couch. There seems to be a droning hum in her ears—a vague ringing in her brain—a tingling in all her veins—a thrilling throughout her limbs. She sees the whole adventure of the conservatory in a new and most unexpected light: its aspect is altogether changed;—the entire mystery is cleared up—and she is astounded and overwhelmed by the elucidation.

The Duchess speaks again;—and once more does Clementine listen attentively. The words to which her Grace gives utterance, are few—disjointed—and spoken painfully; but they are comprehensive enough, and sufficiently plain to ratify the impressions which her former murmured revealings had made upon the mind of the Frenchwoman. Brief though they be, an entire history is contained in their meaning: they confirm the clue previously afforded to the reading of a narrative which struck Clementine to be interesting as a romance and terrible as a night-mare. Ah! the curiosity of that abigail had indeed experienced a wild and strange gratification;—and she suddenly found herself in possession of a secret which——

——But we must not anticipate: and therefore we will pursue the regular thread of our tale, by observing so soon as the French lady's-maid had learnt that tremendous secret,—so soon, also, as she had recovered from the startling and astounding effects of this most unexpected discovery,—she drew the morning-wrapper closely around her form and hurried away to the apartment of the Duke. His Grace had already risen—for *he* too slept uneasily, as well as his invalid wife;—and on receiving from Clementine the hurried intimation that the Duchess had given utterance to articulate words, he became visibly excited. But the Frenchwoman was now well able to comprehend the reason of that excitement; and it was therefore no difficult matter for her to appear as calm and composed as if nothing extraordinary had occurred.

With a feverish impatience and a nervous suspense did the Duke put several hurried questions to her; how many minutes had elapsed since the Duchess had first spoken?—whether the sense and meaning of her words had been caught and understood?—whether her Grace was awake, or speaking in her slumber?—and if Clementine had come away the instant that the articulate syllables had reached her ears?

The abigail, assuming an air of the most truthful sincerity, responded that her Grace had only spoken a few words of unimportant meaning,—that it was with the vagueness and incoherency of a dream those syllables were uttered,—that she had lost not an instant in hurrying to acquaint the Duke with the circumstance,—and that the Duchess was still sleeping at the moment when she left her Grace's chamber. This was the colouring wherewith Clementine now chose to invest the matter: for the time had not yet come for her to make use of the stupendous secret which accident had so strangely revealed to her ears!

But all the while she was giving these varnished and distorted explanations, the Duke fixed upon her an earnest and scrutinising look, as if he sought to penetrate into her very soul. The Frenchwoman, however, kept her countenance admirably;—and the nobleman appeared satisfied that she was telling the truth, without either misrepresentation or suppression. He accordingly thrust a bank-note for fifty pounds into Clementine's hands,—telling her at the same time that it was a reward for her attentions towards the Duchess;—and having bade her seek her own chamber and take a few hours' rest, of which he pretended to think she must stand much in need, the Duke repaired to the apartment of his wife.

The Frenchwoman did not follow him: on the contrary, she hastened to adopt the counsel he had given her;—for she knew full well that nothing which might take place between the noble couple, could add any important materials to the stock of information she had already succeeded in acquiring. She therefore repaired to her own bed-chamber on an upper storey, while the Duke of Belmont proceeded to the apartments of the Duchess.

He found her Grace just awaking from the uneasy slumber and disagreeable visions in which she had been wrapped;—and it was indeed true that she had recovered to a considerable extent the faculty of speech. What now took place between the Duke and his invalid wife, we are unable at present to explain: suffice it to say that their discourse was long—frequently interrupted by tears and sobs on either side—and broken by intervals of physical prostration on the part of the Duchess.

But when that interview terminated, their countenances and their minds were evidently more serene;—and the temporary agitation which her Grace endured, had totally subsided by the time her medical attendants were announced.

From that day forth her health continued to improve even more rapidly than before. The wound healed fast—her physical energies revived—and all danger of a relapse disappeared. Her husband spent many hours by her bed-side;—and Clementine observed that his manner was most affectionate towards her. On the other hand, the Duchess appeared to receive his attentions with a sort of pious resignation, rather than as proofs and evidences of an attachment that was welcome to her: she never repulsed them—but she assuredly gave no sign of courting them. The calmness of a fixed and settled melancholy took possession of her;—and even when she was declared convalescent, she seemed to have renounced all idea of ever returning to the pleasures, gaiety, and bustle of the realms of fashion—and to have been led by the influence of circumstances to a fixed resolution of withdrawing from the world as much as it was possible for a lady in her exalted position to carry such a design into execution.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE SENTENCE.—THE VISIT.

Two months and upwards had now elapsed since the tragic and mysterious adventure of the conservatory at Belmont House; and the April Sessions of the Central Criminal Court were drawing near. But so soon as the unfortunate Mr. Lavenham, who in the meantime had remained a prisoner in Newgate, received the intelligence that the Duchess was entirely convalescent, he sent for his legal adviser and addressed him in the following manner:—

"I believe that until the day comes when it is my intention to plead guilty to the charge laid against me, I am at liberty to dispose of my property in any way that I may think fit. Well, such being the case, I intend and propose to assign the enjoyment of all my worldly possessions to the Duchess of Belmont, as the only possible atone-

No. 8.—The Seamstress.

ment which I can now make for the fearful outrage which, under the influence of some shocking and unaccountable aberration, I committed against that noble lady. But I am desirous that you should draw up the deed of transfer in such a manner as to settle the property so completely and stringently upon her Grace, that it may never become liable to seizure by her husband's creditors. Moreover, as I hold mortgages to a large amount upon the estates of the Duke of Belmont, I have determined that the interest and benefit which I now possess therein shall likewise be transferred to the Duchess. But in all these bequests, I make this limitation, or rather reserve: that her Grace shall only enjoy a life interest in the property, without the power of incumbering, mortgaging, or in any manner making away with it; and at her death the whole of this property shall devolve upon the Duke's son, the Marquis of Arden, or his heirs. Do you comprehend me?—and can all this be done legally and conveniently?"

"It can," replied the lawyer.

The deeds were prepared accordingly;—and a few days before the trial Mr. Lavenham affixed his name and seal thereto.

The Sessions commenced; and on the fourth morning the unhappy gentleman was placed in the dock and arraigned in due form. The court was crowded to excess: but none of the Belmont family were present. Their attendance was rendered unnecessary by the fact that Mr. Lavenham had resolved to plead guilty; and neither Charles or his father, much less the Duchess, had any inclination to witness proceedings of a character so painful to their feelings. Mr. Collinson however appeared on the Duke's behalf; but merely for the purpose of causing those statements which he had previously made at the Police Office, to be urged upon the notice of the bench.

The lapse of nearly ten weeks had produced a great alteration in the personal appearance of Julius Lavenham. His cheeks were pale and sunken—his eyes had lost their fire—his hair was streaked with many threads of silver. That robust vigour of form which made him what is termed a fine man, had yielded to waste and emaciation;—and his shoulders had acquired a slight stoop, as if he were physically as well as mentally bowed down by the weight of misfortune. A murmur ran through the crowded court as he entered the dock: but it was an universal expression of sympathy towards one whom his equals regarded as a generous friend and excellent companion, and whom the poor loved and blessed for his illimitable charities.

Mr. Lavenham appeared to be profoundly moved by that demonstration of kindly and compassionate feeling towards him;—and he passed his hand rapidly across his eyes, the lids of which had suddenly grown moist with tears. Then, summoning to his aid all the presence of mind which he could command, he stood erect in the dock—with his looks fixed upon the Judge, and his thoughts apparently concentrated in the solemn proceeding of which he was the object.

Amidst a profound silence on the part of the assembled multitude, Julius Lavenham was called upon to plead;—and in a firm tone he responded, "GUILTY." There was a brief pause, during which the stillness that prevailed was more than solemn—it was awful. A painful—a disagreeable—an ominous sensation appeared to seize upon all present,—as if every one were for the moment identifying himself with the prisoner in the dock. But that silence, so dead and sinister, was suddenly broken by Julius Lavenham himself;—and, in a voice that was so clear that not a word was lost, although its tone was low, he addressed the Judge in terms similar to those which he had used at the Police Court. His aim was to effect the complete exculpation of the Duchess of Belmont from even the faintest or slightest imaginings of injurious suspicion;—and as he proceeded in his address, his words and looks became inspired with all the animation of that chivalrous fervour which prompted the proceeding on his part.

He ceased—and a murmur of approbation ran throughout the justice-hall—a murmur which not even the presiding functionary endeavoured to suppress. When silence was restored, a barrister, who had been instructed by Mr. Collinson, r se and represented to the Judge that Mr. Lavenham was a gentleman well known for his boundless philanthropy and extensive benevolence;—that he was subject to temporary fits of mental alienation, under the influence of which only was he capable of the deed now charged against him,—and that several noblemen and gentlemen were present to testify their regard for his character and moral worth. The learned counsel proceeded to state that the Duke and Duchess of Belmont, so far from bearing any animosity towards the unfortunate prisoner, strongly and earnestly recommended him to the humane consideration of the court;—and the barrister concluded by observing that not only had Mr. Lavenham sought to atone for his offence by pleading guilty thereto and giving the fullest and completest explanation of the motives and feelings which prompted him at the time, but he had likewise transferred the whole of his property for the immediate use of the noble lady whom he had injured, and for the prospective benefit of the son of that husband whom his conduct had outraged.

The learned counsel sate down amidst a hum of applause; and the Judge proceeded to deliver his decision. He profoundly deplored the predicament in which an honourable and good man had been placed by the temporary alienation of his self-governing mental powers; and he considered that the atonement which the prisoner had endeavoured to make in every way, had morally expiated the offences. But the law could not regard the issue precisely in the same light;—and therefore the Judge found himself compelled to order that Julius Lavenham be detained in custody during the pleasure of the Crown. His lordship however intimated that this term of imprisonment would be short, and that at its expiration Mr. Lavenham would be handed over to the care of his friends.

The prisoner bowed—threw one rapid but expressive look of gratitude around upon that auditory which had given him its kindest sympathies—and then stepped down from the dock. In another moment he disappeared in the custody of the turnkeys of Newgate;—and thus ended the painful ordeal through which he had been compelled to pass.

During the period of his incarceration in Newgate

previously to the trial, Mr. Lavenham had received many indulgences at the hands of the governor—especially that of being separated from the other prisoners;—and this privilege, which was vouchsafed in consequence of the impression that he was a criminal merely through an access of mental aberration, was continued to him after his trial. He was accordingly allowed to occupy a small chamber attached to the infirmary; and books and writing-materials were ordered to be supplied him under the discretionary supervision of the chaplain.

It was about noon on the second day after Mr. Lavenham had appeared in the dock at the Old Bailey, that a turnkey entered his prison-room and informed him that a young female desired to see him. Mr. Lavenham requested that she should be admitted; and the moment the visitress was ushered into his presence he recognised the seamstress to whom he had afforded his protection on the occasion when she was accosted by the Marquis of Arden in Grosvenor Square.

Trembling and in tears did Virginia Mordaunt enter the room where Mr. Lavenham was confined;—and the moment the hurried glance which she threw upon him showed her how much he was altered, she experienced a shock as powerful and as profound as if it were some near and dear relative whose unhappy position she was compelled to deplore. For the grateful and generous soul of the poor maiden was cruelly affected by the misfortunes of one who had breathed kind words and poured forth salutary counsel in her ears;—and the ravages which care had evidently made upon the victim of those misfortunes, touched the tenderest chords of sweet Christian sympathy that vibrated to her heart's core.

"Virginia—Miss Mordaunt—is this you?" exclaimed Mr. Lavenham, who not only recollected the interesting countenance but likewise the name of the young seamstress: and taking her hand, he was about to thank her for this visit, all the kind intent of which he understood in a moment,—but his emotions overpowered him—his voice was suffocated by the feelings which rose as it were into his very throat—and the workings of his countenance proved how deeply he was affected.

"Mr. Lavenham, you will pardon the boldness—the impropriety, perhaps, of the step which I have taken," said Virginia, in a broken voice and with tears running down her cheeks; "but I felt an indescribable longing to come and see you—some unknown feeling prompted me——"

"Excellent girl!" exclaimed the prisoner, pressing her hand warmly in his own: then, turning abruptly away, he raised his handkerchief to his face and a sob was wafted to the maiden's ears.

"Oh! sir—then you are indeed as unhappy as I feared!" murmured Virginia, tottering to a seat. "But you will pardon me for thus intruding——"

"Pardon you, my dear girl—for I speak to you as a father!" cried Lavenham, turning again towards her; "how can you ask me to pardon an act of the most touching kindness? I understand your sweet disposition—your truly Christian character, Virginia;—and I am rejoiced—yes, unfeignedly rejoiced at this conduct on your part—because it makes me think better of a world which I had begun to hate, to despise, and to fear."

"I am glad that you are not angry with me for intruding upon you, sir," resumed the seamstress, her countenance brightening up somewhat through her tears. "I trembled to take this step; and yet, as I have already told you, some inscrutable feeling prompted me to visit you, if only for a moment. For I longed to tell you that I never, never from the first believed you to be guilty——"

"Ah! what do you say?—what do you mean, Virginia?" exclaimed Mr. Lavenham, with a sudden start, as if the words of that innocent young creature had touched the tenderest or else the most painful fibre in his heart: and he now contemplated her with a look so earnest, so intent, and yet so singular in its expression, that she felt alarmed and abashed.

"I hope that I have not offended you, sir?" she said, with a glance so touchingly deprecatory that Mr. Lavenham was again melted even to tears.

"No, no—you have not offended me, my dear girl," he exclaimed: "how is it possible that you could offend me by believing in my innocence. And, ah! it would grieve me to the very soul to destroy that belief in your pure and artless mind: for it seems as if an angel were looking at me through your eyes and speaking to me with your voice! Nevertheless, Virginia," he added, in a tone that suddenly became profoundly solemn, "I am compelled by an imperious sense of duty——"

"No—do not destroy that faith which I have in your rectitude—your humanity—your guiltlessness," interrupted Virginia, with a species of hysterical excitement. "You are innocent—I know you are innocent—something tells me that you are—and no persuasion can induce me to believe the contrary. Some fearful combination of circumstances has made you a victim: and although I cannot fathom the mystery, nor even try to do so—yet am I assured that you are guiltless;—Oh! yes—you are guiltless;—and it is because you are so, that I fancied it would be pleasing and soothing to your soul if there were one human voice in the world to breathe that conviction in your ears."

"Virginia, let us change the subject," said Mr. Lavenham, profoundly moved. "We will talk about yourself: and therefore you will permit me to ask you whether you are happy and comfortable——"

"Yes, yes—oh! yes," exclaimed the seamstress hastily. "But we will not touch upon anything regarding myself: for my sole purpose in coming hither was to show you that I am not unmindful of the generous treatment I experienced at your hands——"

"Generous treatment!" echoed Lavenham. "Poor girl! I merely protected you against insult——"

"And you gave me advice which I shall never forget, sir," added the young maiden with a strong emphasis upon her words. "Ah! your kindness on that occasion touched me profoundly; and it appeared as if I should be ungrateful, had I not yielded to that impulse which prompted me to penetrate thus into the dreadful place where they have imprisoned you. And now tell me, sir—tell me," continued the seamstress, in a tone of earnest entreaty, "whether there be anything that I can do for you? The only way in which I could possibly serve you, would be to call upon your friends—im-

plore them to rally around you—investigate all the frightful circumstances——"

"My dear girl, you must not talk thus!" said Mr. Lavenham, in a tone which evinced the pain that the young creature's words afforded him.

"Ah! pardon me—pardon me once more," she cried: "I did not mean to afflict you."

"I know it—I feel it, my dear girl," responded Lavenham, hastily. "My fate is determined—my destiny must be accomplished! And yet it is sweet to receive the sympathy of a being so pure-minded and so innocent as you. One word, Virginia—only one word more touching yourself!" he exclaimed, taking her hand and contemplating her with a sort of paternal regard. "You must permit me to assist you in establishing yourself comfortably in the world. Unfortunate though I am—shut out henceforth from the very pale of society though I must be,—yet I am not altogether friendless nor moneyless. My solicitor has certain funds of mine in his possession: and those shall be devoted to your benefit."

"Not for worlds—not for worlds!" ejaculated Virginia, with an impetuousness which she had never manifested before. "Do you suppose that I was influenced by selfish motives in coming hither? Ah! Mr. Lavenham you have wounded me to the very quick!"—and she burst into tears.

"My dear Virginia, compose yourself—tranquillize your feelings!" exclaimed the prisoner. "It is now for me to implore your pardon—and yet I did not intend to afflict you. But I told you on the first occasion when we met, that I would not lose sight of you—that I would not forget you. And it was my intention to have found out your abode—to inquire into your position——"

"Enough of this, sir, I beseech you!" said Virginia, wiping away her tears: then, rising from the chair, she observed with all the touching sweetness of her melodious voice and her innocent looks, "You will give me credit, sir, for the real motives which have brought me hither?"

"Heavens! I never suspected them, Virginia!" exclaimed Mr. Lavenham. "But you must not depart yet—we cannot separate in this manner! From the moment that I first saw you, I experienced an interest in your welfare—and that feeling has become so strong, that even at the risk of offending you, I must persevere in my original intention of placing you beyond the reach of poverty and temptation."

"Farewell, sir—farewell!" cried Virginia, hastening towards the door.

"No—do not depart yet!" exclaimed Lavenham, springing forward to detain her. "You must look upon me as a father——"

At that instant the door opened, and the turnkey entered with the prisoner's dinner.

"Farewell, sir," repeated Virginia; "and may God Almighty bless you!"

"One word—one single word!" cried Lavenham.

But the seamstress was already hurrying precipitately down the stone staircase;—and the prisoner was not allowed to cross the threshold of his chamber.

A minute afterwards Virginia Mordaunt was sallying forth from the sombre gaol of Newgate, when she was startled by hearing her name pronounced by a well-known voice;—and the next instant her hand was seized and pressed with enthusiastic fervour in the grasp of the Marquis of Arden.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### ANOTHER MEETING.

VIRGINIA was so completely taken by surprise at this encounter that for a few moments she remained rooted to the spot—speechless—and with her hand unresistingly abandoned to the fervid grasp of the young nobleman. She gazed upon him also with a kind of vacant bewilderment, as if she knew not precisely what course to adopt: and then, as she beheld his eyes fixed with impassioned ardour upon her countenance, a burning blush suddenly suffused her cheeks. Snatching away her hand at the same instant, she said with all the firmness of a recovered presence of mind, "We are henceforth strangers to each other, sir!"—and she sped along the Old Bailey.

But the Marquis of Arden was almost immediately by her side; and in a few rapid but earnestly imploring words he besought her to grant him a hearing.

Virginia paused: and looking him steadfastly in the face, she said, "Mr. Osmond, an unprotected and friendless girl entreats you to molest her no more. Surely, surely you will not disregard this appeal?"

"Oh! do not refuse me the opportunity of explaining myself, Virginia!" cried the young nobleman, with an excitement that alarmed her. "You know that I love you—and you cannot prove inexorable! And now the very appeal which you have made has touched me to the quick: because you tell me you are friendless and unprotected. Virginia, Virginia, will you not accept the love—the hand of one——"

"Leave me—I implore you to leave me!" murmured the maiden, not only softened by the earnestness of the youth's manner, but also terrified lest his excitement should attract unpleasant notice from the passers-by.

"By heaven! I will not leave you thus, Virginia," exclaimed Charles. "For weeks past have I been endeavouring to find out your abode: never for a single instant has your dear image been absent from my memory;—and now that accident has led us to meet again, I am resolved that we shall not part until I have at least gathered from your lips whether I may indulge in the fondest hope, or sink down into the darkest despair. Take my arm, then—let us walk together—otherwise we shall soon become the objects of disagreeable notice."

"I will comply with your request, sir," answered Virginia, coldly: "but merely for the reason which you have stated."

She accordingly took his arm—and he led her slowly along the street.

"You were coming out of that dreadful place where poor Mr. Lavenham is confined?" observed Charles, now suddenly remembering that they had met at the door of Newgate. "What on earth could have taken you thither?"

"I went to see the gentleman whom you have named," replied Virginia, in a firm tone; "be-

cause he spoke kindly to me one day—you doubtless recollect when and where?—and also because I deem him innocent."

"Innocent!" echoed the young nobleman, struck by the strangeness of the remark. "Yes—innocent so far as the temporary loss of all power of self-control can constitute innocence: and therein I perfectly and cordially agree with you. But that his hand struck the blow there is no doubt—there can be no doubt——"

"We will not discuss the subject, Mr. Osmond," interrupted the seamstress. "Be pleased to recollect that my time is most precious to me—and if you will only act generously and suffer me to pursue my way alone——"

"No, no—I will not leave you yet—I swear I will not," exclaimed the Marquis of Arden. "You must and shall hear me, Virginia;—and I therefore beseech you not to force me into what may seem a persecution——But, Oh! it is impossible," he cried, in a tone of vexation, "that you can have tutored yourself to hate and abhor me. Tell me—tell me, Virginia—do you hate me?—do you repent of that moment when you suffered me to believe that you loved me——"

"Oh! Mr. Osmond, you cannot have forgotten how cruelly the dream to which I had yielded for an instant, was interrupted!" murmured the seamstress, far from unmoved by the evidences and assurances of affection which had greeted her ears and glided into her heart during the last few minutes.

"Virginia," said the Marquis of Arden, in a low but impressive tone, "I shall not attempt to deny the intimacy which had for some short time subsisted between myself and Miss Barnet. But, innocent and pure as you are, even you yourself, Virginia, must be aware that young men are not altogether immaculate until they begin to love with a sincere, holy, and honourable affection. Such was my case. Before I saw you, I never knew what love was. There is as much difference between the sentiments which I entertain for you and those which I experienced towards Miss Barnet, as there is between the immortal soul and the mortal tenement of clay which it inhabits in this world. And now let me tell you something, which, could I prove it, would leave you no alternative but to pardon me. Nevertheless, I hope that you will put faith in the statement which I am about to make. Know, then, that in the morning of the very day on which I rescued you from the feet of the plunging horses, I had written a note to inform Miss Barnet that I should see her in the afternoon; and I was on my way to her abode, when the incident occurred which had so nearly proved fatal to you. All my thoughts—all my ideas—all my feelings then became absorbed in that meeting with you: and after you had promised to see me again, I shrank with an inward sense of loathing from the appointment which I had made with Miss Barnet. I already loved you—sincerely, tenderly loved you:—I purposed to make you an offer of my hand, as I had previously given you my heart;—and I felt that I should be guilty of an act of flagrant perfidy and even gross indelicacy towards you, Virginia, were I to keep that appointment with a mistress. I therefore returned home, to ponder upon your image—to reflect upon all that had taken place that afternoon—and to indulge in delicious hopes for the future;—and it was not until some hours had elapsed, that I bethought me of sending a brief note to Miss Barnet, telling her that she need not expect me. In fine, I was already determined to dissolve that connexion forthwith;—and now, I ask, whether my conduct deserves not to be viewed with a lenient eye?"

"Yes—it is true—all true!" murmured the seamstress, her heart palpitating with emotions of pleasure.

"Ah! you know that I am telling you the truth, then?" exclaimed Charles, joyfully. "Thank heaven! there is hope for me yet—and you do not hate me, Virginia—dear Virginia?"

"Hate you——Oh! no, no!" cried the maiden, all the fondness of her soul reviving towards that handsome young man whose words she could scarcely hear and the ardour of whose looks she could scarcely encounter with impunity.

"Then, if you do not hate me, you can perhaps love me?" asked the nobleman: and without waiting for a reply, he said in a graver tone, "Now that we have met again, Virginia, I am glad that we should have been temporarily separated on account of a feeling of so much delicacy on your part. Yes—the course which you adopted on discovering the connexion between Miss Barnet and myself, is another and more striking proof of the innocence of your character—the propriety of your notions—the chaste rectitude of your own conduct. And let me assure you that after you fled so precipitately on that occasion when our dream of bliss was so unfortunately broken in upon, Miss Barnet said enough to convince me that you were all I had believed you to be——a model of virtue——"

"Ah! she did me at least no injustice then?" said Virginia, touched by what she supposed to be a good trait on the part of her late friend.

"She did you every possible justice, Virginia," returned the Marquis of Arden;—"and I feel more proud of you—I know that I can love you more devotedly—than if you were one of the titled or nobly-born damsels who glitter in the most brilliant spheres of society."

Virginia threw upon her handsome companion a look of mingled fondness and gratitude; and in his eyes she read all the fervour and sincerity of that love which he had proffered her.

"Now, my dearest girl," he continued, "I see that you have pardoned me—that you have confidence in me—and that you do not hate me. But when will you be mine?—when shall I lead you to the altar?—when shall I be blest by becoming your husband, and acquiring the legal privilege of protecting you?"

Virginia was now overwhelmed with confusion. She knew not what answer to give. On the one hand her inclinations prompted her to leave everything to the persuasion, pleasure, and discretion of her lover: but on the other side, she felt all the imprudence, if not the impropriety of so hurriedly and so precipitately yielding to the enthusiastic ardour of a youth with whose character and position she was so completely unacquainted. She therefore paused—she hesitated; while her heart fluttered nervously as an affrighted bird in its cage.

"You do not answer me, Virginia?" said the young Marquis, in that low tone of fondness which

carried such a gush of exquisite feeling to the soul of a woman who loves for the first time and yet knows so little of what love is. "Ah! I comprehend you, my dearest girl—I can read what is passing in your mind. You do not know me: or rather you know so little of me——"

"Nor do you know me more than I know you," interrupted Virginia, as the idea struck her;—"and yet you have generously offered me your hand! All that you do know of me is that I am a poor, friendless, orphan girl—that at present I am forced to toil hard for the bread I eat—and that my good name is my only dowry. Well, sir, if you are contented to make me your wife——But, oh! I cannot think that your relatives and friends will ever countenance me!" she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting herself with bitterness, as if the thought threw a blight upon the sanguine hope that she had entertained an instant before.

"Do not give way to thoughts which need not trouble us now, Virginia," said the Marquis of Arden. "You are all that is dear—all that is adorable in my estimation:—and I care nothing for friends or relatives—nothing for the opinion of the world! Tell me, then, my well-beloved Virginia——"

"Oh! do not press me any farther now," interrupted the maiden, in a faltering tone. "I must have leisure to collect my ideas—to weigh all that you have said or that my own mind has suggested: and therefore——"

"We will meet again to-morrow?" cried the young nobleman eagerly. "Yes—tell me—promise me, dearest Virginia, that we shall meet again to-morrow?"

The maiden murmured the affirmative response;—and after some hesitation and reflection, she agreed that the appointment should take place at noon in the Regent's Park. It was not however without much reluctance that the Marquis of Arden consented to separate from her even for the brief space of four-and-twenty hours: but he was compelled to tranquillize himself with the positive pledge which he exacted from Miss Mordaunt to the effect that nothing should induce her to disappoint him on the morrow;—and with this understanding the lovers took leave of each other.

But wherefore had Virginia Mordaunt fixed upon the Regent's Park as the place of meeting for the ensuing day? Because, on leaving Tavistock Street in the precipitate manner already recorded, she had betaken herself to a humble though respectable lodging in Camden Town, which is close to the Regent's Park;—and there she had since remained. During the interval her needle had procured her a scanty subsistence;—but she was nevertheless grateful, because she had not failed to obtain full employment the whole time, thanks to the good offices of her new landlady. And yet how often—oh! how often, had she found herself dropping her work and giving way to the many painful reflections which would steal, like a spectral procession, into her brain: how often, too, was that work moistened with her tears!

But now a brighter prospect appeared to be opening to the view of this fair young creature;—and as she tripped lightly back on her long, long walk home to Camden Town, after her interview with him whom she still knew only as Charles Osmond, she could not prevent herself from yielding to those fond hopes and softly pleasing dreams in which the young heart will ever indulge when it loves for the first time.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE APPOINTMENT.

The day was bright, and cheerful, and even warm, with the gently smiling weather that often characterises the April of our English climate. Nature, like a charming widow who lays aside her mourning by degrees and as gradually assumes the ornaments which become her, was beginning to cast off the sombre garb of Winter and don the gayer apparel of Spring. The trees were putting forth their verdure: the early flowers were disclosing their variegated beauties. Brighter grew the green of the meadows: purer and clearer the rivulet and lake. Cheerily hopped the innocent bird from bough to bough: more stately was the progress of the swan on the limpid water.

The morning shower had sprinkled the earth with its liquid pearls; and the sunbeams were reflected in the tears which Nature had shed in joy, and not in sorrow. The fruit-trees covered the garden-walls with their myriad blossoms: the peach and the nectarine shoots were displaying their beauteous floral colouring. There was a freshness, an elasticity, and a vigour in the very air, which seemed to renovate the invalid—cause the old to feel young again—and inspire the strong and youthful with a sensation of enduring health such as may be supposed to belong to immortality.

Cheering in sooth was the delicious April day to the seamstress as she escaped from her close room and entered the Regent's Park. Her lungs appeared to expand—her heart to dilate—and her step to become more elastic than ever. Hope and love, too, tinted her cheeks with the hue of the rose-bud: her eyes were bright, though soft and melting;—and her moist red lips seemed the portals whence came a breath as fragrant as the air with which it commingled.

Never had Virginia Mordaunt felt in better spirits since the time when she possessed a dear mother whom she loved and by whom she was beloved so well. There was something propitious in the weather: the sunny smiles of Nature appeared to shine as much for her as for any other of God's creatures. And youth, too—Oh! youth is the time for hope;—and the April of our own native clime seems congenial with the Spring season of our existence. The pure and chaste thoughts inspired by Virginia's nascent love, were like the early flowers peeping forth from the bosom of their mother, Earth; the halo of innocence which surrounded her, was as untainted as the sun-light that enveloped the scene. What though her heart fluttered?—'twas like the bird as he disported in yonder tree:—what though her bosom heaved and fell rapidly?—'twas like the ripples in the sunbeams, as the swan stirred the surface of the lake.

Joy to thee, dear maiden—and may happiness attend upon thy love! Thou hast already suffered much—too much—in this world, for one of thy ten-

der years, and gentle spirit, and kind heart: may'st thou soon enter upon a more pleasing path, fair girl! But shall it be so?—hath the evil genius of thy destiny done its worst? Oh! this, at the moment when we are following thee to the trysting-place of love, is beyond the range of prophecy. We hope—but we may not forecast. All that we can now do is to say again, God speed thee, sweet maiden:—and with this fervent prayer on thy behalf, we will yet follow in thy footsteps!

They met—that charming maiden and that handsome youth: they met, in the cheering sun-light—and in each other's eyes they read a language more eloquent than any that the tongue could speak. Never had Virginia appeared so truly beautiful;—and with rapture did the Marquis of Arden gaze upon her for several moments as he held her hand in his own. Then softly placing that hand under his arm, he led her into a retired walk;—and there they slowly paced to and fro, having eyes, ears, and thoughts only for each other.

"Dearest Virginia," said the Marquis of Arden, in that low melting voice which came like the rich tones of an organ upon the maiden's ear, "I am now assured that you love me—and I am happy! Firmly—Oh! firmly and devotedly do I believe that there is such a sentiment as love at first sight;—and more than that—I believe also that when two beings meet, whom heaven has destined for each other, the soul of one, if not of both, may experience a mysterious yet distinct revealing of the fact. Such at least was my case; for the moment that I first saw you, I loved you—and I accosted you with looks, and feelings, and words such as no other woman was ever the object of before. And when we met a second time—on the occasion which was so full of a terrific peril for you—a secret voice appeared to whisper in my soul that I was rescuing from danger or from death, the being who was destined to become my wife. We met a third time—and then I was happy, because I was enabled to tell you of my love and to hope that you loved me in return. But we were suddenly separated—and weeks elapsed until we met again yesterday. During that interval I thought of you by day—I dreamt of you by night. Much as I loved you before, I taught myself to love you with a deeper worship still. I abandoned all my wonted pursuits—neglected my friends—and wandered about for hours and hours together in the hope of encountering you. This was my employment day after day—week after week;—and my soul was already sick with disappointment when we met so providentially yesterday. And now tell me, dearest Virginia, are you glad that we have thus met again?"

"Your own heart can furnish my response," said the maiden, lifting towards her lover's countenance those eyes that were full of a melting tenderness.

"And have you never once thought of me during the long interval of our separation?" inquired Charles, in that tone and with that look which showed beforehand the nature of the answer which he hoped and expected.

"Yes—I thought of you often—very often, Charles," returned the seamstress, holding down her blushing countenance. "But I fancied that we should never meet again—and——"

"You were grieved at the thought?" exclaimed the nobleman. "Oh! tell me that you were afflicted at the idea?"

"I was—I was," replied the artless Virginia:—"and I wept, too—yes—I wept often—very often——"

"Dearest, dearest girl," cried the enraptured Charles: and, sweeping his eyes rapidly around to assure himself that they were unobserved, he caught her in his arms.

Then upon those lips which until that moment were virgin of man's caresses, did he imprint a long and fervid kiss;—and again and again did he press the beauteous girl to his heart, the transports of his own soul pouring with warm transfusion into her own.

For Oh! the cooling draught that slakes the agonising thirst of the wanderer upon Araby's scorching sands—the first glimpse of land caught by the eye of the voyager on the pathless ocean,—the earliest smile with which the infant babe rewards a tender mother's care,—the reprieve which is borne to the doomed one at the instant that he is ascending the steps of the scaffold,—the cry of victory in the ear of a general who knows that a nation's welfare depends upon the issue of the fight,—the shout of "a sail! a sail!" echoing through a ship that is sinking or on fire,—Oh! none of these can possibly be fraught with an ecstacy so elysian and so profound as the first kiss enjoyed by a pure and holy love!

For nearly a minute did Virginia, lost in the experience of that pleasure so new and so full of rapture, abandon herself to the fervid embrace of the young nobleman who adored her with so fond a worship: then, gently disengaging herself from his arms, she sank upon a seat covered with confusion and with blushes. Charles placed himself by her side—took her hand—and whispered in her ear, "Virginia—sweet Virginia—when wilt thou bestow this fair hand on me?"

The question suddenly aroused in the mind of the young girl all the reflections that had occupied her since she parted with Charles on the previous day until she met him again on the present occasion,—reflections which had been to some extent of an embarrassing nature. For she had no means to procure the fitting raiment of a bride;—and her natural delicacy revolted from the thought of accepting any pecuniary assistance from him until the nuptial benediction should have made her the sharer of his fortunes. On the other hand the painful conviction had been forced upon her mind that if she were even fortunate enough to continue in full employment, and if she were to work to the utmost tension of her energies, living all the while upon the barest necessaries to keep body and soul together, she would not be able to save enough to purchase the simplest bridal apparel under a period of many, many weary months—even if she should succeed in doing so at all!

These were the embarrassing reflections which now rose up in her mind, and which she had lost sight of since the moment she entered the park to meet her lover. The sudden cloud that rose upon her beauteous features and the pensive air which seized upon her the instant the young nobleman put the question that thus recalled these wildering thoughts to her memory, escaped not his notice: and as the eye of a lover is keen in observing all

variations of manner or countenance on the part of her whom he adores, so is his perception acute in penetrating the springs and causes of those changes. The truth flashed accordingly to the mind of the Marquis of Arden;—and he felt inwardly delighted —for he saw in Virginia's delicate reserve and maidenly pride on that particular point, another excellent and admirable phase in her character.

"Dearest Virginia," he said, pressing her hand warmly between both his own, "will you not treat me as a friend—or at least repose in me the confidence that a sister shows towards a brother—until I am permitted to call you by the tender appellation of *my bride?*"

"What do you mean, Charles?" inquired the maiden, throwing a hasty look upon her lover and then casting down her eyes as a deep blush suffused her countenance; for it instantaneously struck her that he had read the thoughts which were perplexing her at the moment.

"I mean, my angel," responded the Marquis of Arden, "that you will allow me all those little rights and privileges which an accepted suitor is invariably permitted to enjoy,—that we shall meet daily until the happy moment which will unite us for ever—that you will promise to receive a few trifling gifts as testimonials of my enduring love—and also that you will consent to bestow your patronage for the bridal apparel, ornaments, and so forth, upon such tradesmen as I may venture to point out, and who will be proud to serve the future wife of—of——"

The Marquis was about to reveal his rank: but he stopped short—for several motives chained his tongue in that respect. In the first place he was afraid that the timid and unassuming nature of the poor girl would shrink from the contemplation of an union with one whom the accident of birth had placed so highly above her; and therefore he fancied that it would be time enough to clear up all mystery on that head, when the bridal preparations had progressed too far and her affections were too much entangled to permit a retreat. Secondly, he was naturally anxious to guard against the possibility of his intended marriage with the seamstress reaching the ears of his family until the knot should have been indissolubly tied;—and thirdly, he was young and enthusiastic enough to cherish the romantic desire of keeping for the very morning of the bridal the revelation of that lofty rank to which he honestly and sincerely purposed to raise the humble and obscure Virginia Mordaunt.

He had therefore stopped short, we say, at the very instant when he was about to make known who he really was: but such was the confusion into which his fair companion had been plunged by her own embarrassing reflections and by the evident fact that Charles had read what was passing in her mind, that she did not perceive anything strange in the abruptness of his pause. For a few moments she struggled with the feelings that were agitating in her bosom: but they gained the mastery—and she burst into tears.

"Why do you weep, Virginia?—Oh! why do you weep?" demanded the young nobleman, once more straining her to his breast. "Have I said or done aught to offend you?"

"No—oh! no—far from it!" replied the maiden, in a faultering tone. "But now—at a time when other young women would have their parents, their brothers, their sisters, to aid them with their advice—I am friendless——"

"No — not friendless, Virginia!" exclaimed Charles, in a voice full of gentle reproach. "Have you not a friend in me?—and will you not treat me as a brother until I become your husband?"

"Yes—for you are all that is kind and good towards me," murmured the seamstress, smiling through her tears.

"Maledictions upon the wretch who would injure you, my angel—my adored one!" cried the enthusiastic Charles, as he gazed in rapture upon that countenance, which was so full of the sweetest and divinest beauty.

Of her own accord the maiden took his hand and pressed it in token of her gratitude;—and the young Marquis, availing himself of the increased confidence which was now established between them, spoke in the following manner:—

"Dearest Virginia, you have consented to become my bride; and that promise has filled me with unspeakable happiness. You will shortly become the partner of my fortunes, whatever they may be;—and should adversity overtake me, you will prove my ministering angel and my consoler. From this moment, then, must you be regarded as the sharer of all I possess—the participator in all the weal that may belong to my position, as in whatever woe my destiny may happen to have in store. Hesitate not, then, dearest one, to accept at my hands all that thy parents would give thee, were they now alive. Fortune does not always distribute her favours justly and impartially: else you would be one of the richest women in the world. I know not how to speak more plainly—for I appreciate and comprehend full well all the admirable delicacy, the ingenuous reserve, and the maidenly pride which belong to your nature. But you must receive everything I say in the same spirit in which it is uttered; and, as your future husband, you must consent to be guided by my counsel. Will you, then, meet me to-morrow, and after our interview act in accordance with a letter which I shall put into your hand?"

"I place my entire confidence in you, Charles," was the softly whispered reply.

The lovers then separated;—and Virginia retraced her way to that humble lodging whither the Marquis did not attempt to follow her, and the whereabouts of which he was likewise too delicate to demand.

On the ensuing day they met again;—and for upwards of two hours did they rove together in the park, exchanging tender vows and indulging in all the sweet discourse which is so welcome to the ears of those who truly love. When they parted on this occasion, the nobleman placed a letter in Virginia's hands;—and on her return home, she opened it with a trepidation for which she could scarcely account. It contained a Bank-note for a hundred pounds, and an earnest prayer that Virginia would not feel offended at the course which her lover had adopted in order to enable her to hasten the preparations for their bridal. The epistle was full of the most impassioned pledges of undying affection; and the whole proceeding exhibited a mingled delicacy and forethought well calculated to touch the maiden's tenderest feelings, without the possibility of wounding them.

THE DUKE OF BELMONT'S DAUGHTERS.

No. 9.—The Seamstress.

On the morrow the lovers met again;—and Virginia, without alluding in words to the generous conduct of her intended husband, nevertheless showed him by her manner and her looks how fully she appreciated the generous consideration of which she was the object. Day after day, during the next fortnight, did they meet in the park;—and on every occasion did they observe in each other fresh traits to demand their admiration and strengthen their love. At last Charles induced Virginia to accompany him as far as one of the fashionable streets at the West End; and there he delicately hinted his desire that she should select at some jeweller's establishment the ornaments which she fancied for her bridal. But to this proposal the maiden returned a decided negative,—assuring her lover that he would only cause her pain by placing her in a position that would tend any farther to remind her of her dependence upon his generosity. The Marquis persisted not for another moment: and ere they parted that day, he succeeded in winning from her an assent that their marriage should take place at the expiration of another fortnight.

Trivial as the little incident of the walk to the West End may now appear to the reader, it will shortly prove to have been not altogether unimportant. For while the Marquis of Arden and Virginia Mordaunt were proceeding along the fashionable street above alluded to, they were observed by Mademoiselle Clementine, the Duchess of Belmont's French lady's-maid;—and this prying abigail had no difficulty in recognizing the young seamstress whom she had seen on one occasion in Grosvenor Square. A feeling of rancorous jealousy took possession of Clementine: for she herself, even from her comparatively humble and dependent condition, had not only conceived a profound passion for the handsome Marquis, but had ventured to cherish the most exalted hopes and soaring aspirations with regard to this secret love of her's!

To be brief, Mademoiselle Clementine followed the youthful lovers at a distance which enabled her to watch their movements without being observed by them:—and her quick eye speedily convinced her that the delicate attention and respectful admiration paid by the Marquis to the seamstress, were not the traits of that conduct which a man would observe towards a pensioned mistress. Clementine therefore concluded that something more important than a mere passing amour was upon the *tapis;*—and she continued to follow the young couple, who were too much absorbed in their own affairs to dream for an instant of the possibility of being thus observed and pursued.

She saw them take leave of each other;—and when they had parted, she continued to follow Virginia until she discovered the place where the maiden resided.

## CHAPTER XX.

### THE DUKE'S DAUGHTERS.

The reader will be pleased to remember that nearly three months had elapsed since the splendid entertainment which closed in so sad and shocking a manner at Belmont House. During this interval the young, handsome, and accomplished Earl of Mostyndale had been a constant visitor at the ducal mansion; and his addresses were assiduously paid to Lady Mary Melcombe. Nor was this beautiful and amiable being indifferent to the many good qualities of her suitor;—and when he seized the golden opportunity to whisper the tale of love in her ear, her blushes confirmed the hopes which he had ventured to entertain. Yes—she loved him in return—and as there appeared to be no earthly barrier in the way of their happiness, Lord Mostyndale solicited and obtained the young lady's permission to communicate with her father upon the subject.

We may as well here pause to remark that the Earl was not the only frequent visitor at Belmont House during the last few weeks. Mr. Collinson had suddenly grown into a close intimacy with the Duke, and appeared to have what might be called "the run of the mansion." That is to say, he called when he chose—remained as long as he liked—and often stayed to dinner without any express invitation. The Duke treated him as a familiar friend;—and the ladies of the family dared not therefore display any annoyance at the frequency of his visits. Lord Mostyndale was however invariably cold, haughty, and distant towards the attorney;—for the Earl, naturally generous and strictly honourable, could not endure the society of a man whom report declared to have amassed a fortune by all kinds of slimy ways, and who frequently displayed in his discourse the utter selfishness of his character.

But Collinson did not appear to trouble himself about the frigid reserve with which the Earl of Mostyndale treated him. He seemed perfectly contented with the familiar footing which he had gained in the ducal mansion, and from which he was very well assured that neither the Earl nor any one else could dislodge him. If he called when the sisters and Lord Mostyndale were seated together in the drawing-room, he would not appear to feel that he was not wanted: but, behaving just as if he knew that he was a welcome guest, he would draw a chair close to either Lady Clarissa, or Lady Mary, as the phantasy might seem to strike him, and begin to converse with all the ease in the world upon the current topics of the day. Sometimes, if he saw that Lord Mostyndale was particularly attentive to the junior sister, he would actually thrust himself as it were in between them, and compel the young lady to listen to him: and this manœuvre he practised with an art so well glossed over, that it could neither be viewed with offended looks nor yet be denominated downright rudeness. On other occasions he would seem to take a pleasure in engrossing Lady Clarissa's attention, without paying any particular notice to Lady Mary;—and thus he appeared to arrogate to himself the right of monopolising the society of either sister according to his own good will and pleasure.

The Duchess of Belmont was very rarely present in the drawing-room when these little scenes took place. Since her recovery she had courted the solitude of her own suite of apartments during a considerable portion of each day;—and indisposition was likewise pleaded frequently as the apology for her absence from the dining-table. As for the Marquis of Arden, he seldom or never courted the society of his sisters: for when he was not walking with his beloved Virginia in the Regent's Park, he

was sure to be either rambling about alone, or else remaining shut up in his own room, pondering upon that love which had so completely absorbed his thoughts by day and his dreams by night.

We have already stated that Lady Clarissa was haughty, selfish, and envious; whereas Lady Mary was affable, kind-hearted, and amiable to a degree. The elder sister was bitterly jealous of any attentions paid to the younger;—and therefore when she observed that the assiduities of the Earl of Mostyndale were every day becoming more earnest, marked, and significant towards Lady Mary, her vexation and spite knew no bounds. But she was compelled to veil her malignant feelings as much as possible;—and these only became the more rancorous for want of a vent. At last, when she found that Lord Mostyndale really loved her sister and evidently intended to propose for her hand, she worked herself up to a pitch of perfect hatred towards that nobleman. She panted for revenge, yet knew not how to wreak it. By degrees she began to dwell upon the fact that Lord Mostyndale evidently detested Collinson; and she accordingly resolved on encouraging the lawyer's visits as much as possible, in order to annoy her sister's noble suitor. The attorney soon noticed the increasing friendliness of Lady Clarissa's manner towards him;—and the real motive was not likely to be misunderstood by one so wily, astute, and penetrating as he. Nor did he fail to take advantage of that conduct on her part which furnished so many opportunities of avenging himself for the coldness and reserve of Lord Mostyndale's manner towards him;—and without appearing to have any sinister motive in view, he made use of Lady Clarissa's ageney to cause that nobleman an infinity of petty annoyances.

Sometimes, when Lady Mary and Lord Mostyndale were seated together in a window-recess, conversing with the tongue and with the eyes as lovers are wont to do, Mr. Collinson would prompt Lady Clarissa to call the young nobleman to the table at which she might be seated, under pretext of soliciting his opinion relative to a drawing or a piece of poetry in her *Album:* and then, as Lady Clarissa artfully detained the Earl in conversation, Collinson would appreach Lady Mary and negligently drop into the chair next to her—thus taking her lover's place and preventing him from returning to it. Or again, Collinson would draw Lady Clarissa's attention to some passage in a standard poet; and then, if requested to read it aloud, the wily lawyer would throw that task upon Mostyndale's shoulders, under pretence that his lordship could render far greater justice to the sublime passage than his own humble capacity would possibly allow. By these and a hundred similar artifices, the pleasant *têtes-à-têtes* of the Earl and Lady Mary were constantly interrupted;—and while the nobleman was prevented by ordinary courtesy as well as by his own pride from suffering his annoyance to become apparent, the lawyer likewise concealed his triumph at this series of petty vengeance which Lady Clarissa's tacit complicity enabled him to wreak upon Lady Mary's noble suitor.

Disgusted with Collinson—sick of the little persecutions of which he was thus the object, but which were each individually too trivial or too well covered to notice openly—and beginning to read the malignant character of Lady Clarissa, Lord Mostyndale was led to hasten his suit somewhat with Lady Mary: and hence his resolve to demand her hand of the Duke after a comparatively brief courtship.

Accordingly,—having obtained the young lady's permission to that effect,—the Earl of Mostyndale one morning sought an interview alone with the Duke of Belmont;—and his Grace received him in the library. The noble suitor explained his hopes and aspirations in that frank, open, and candid manner which was natural to him;—adding that if he were fortunate enough to receive the Duke's assent to the match, he should be proud and happy to settle a handsome jointure upon the young lady whom he courted for a wife.

But while he was yet speaking, the Earl could not help remarking the singularity of the expression which gradually spread itself over the countenance of the Duke of Belmont,—an expression so strange and undefinable, that the young nobleman knew not whether it was one of joy or sorrow, and whether he was to regard it as an index of hope or despair. Still his Grace listened with a profound attention, and never once uttered a word during the whole time the Earl was addressing him. But when the latter had ceased speaking, the Duke turned slowly round in his chair—leant his head upon his hand, the elbow resting on the table—and immediately became buried in the deepest meditations.

"My dear Lord Mostyndale," he at length said, slowly raising his eyes and fixing them upon the countenance of the young nobleman, "I am agitated by emotions which I cannot explain to you. You have honoured my younger daughter with your preference—and you tell me that she loves you in return. But I did not require that assurance from your lips: as a father who anxiously watches over his children, I have not failed to observe the impression which your lordship has made upon her heart. And no wonder: for your lordship possesses every qualification suited to win the affections of one who is equally worthy of a sincere and honourable love."

"And yet your Grace, though pleased thus to speak of me, appears to hesitate?" exclaimed the Earl of Mostyndale, who was both grieved and surprised at the Duke's mysterious manner, which imparted an air of evasiveness to his language.

"I hesitate, my lord," said his Grace of Belmont, speaking in a troubled tone, "because I am placed in a cruel embarrassment."

"And that embarrassment?" demanded Mostyndale, quickly.

"I know not how to explain it," returned the Duke. "And yet I feel the necessity of unburthening myself, at least partially to your lordship. But am I to understand that whatever may transpire between us now, is strictly confidential and private?"

"I pledge your Grace my honour and word to that effect," said the Earl, marvelling more and more at the singular turn which the conversation was taking.

"I thank your lordship for that assurance," observed the Duke: then, after a brief pause, and speaking with an embarrassment which showed that it cost him an effort to give utterance to his

words, he said, "You love my daughter Mary—and you would doubtless make some sacrifice to obtain her hand?"

"Sacrifice?" echoed Mostyndale, with a painful bewilderment. "What in heaven's name does your Grace mean? I cannot even conjecture?"

"Suppose that it would cost you a large sum of money, my lord, to accomplish some aim on which your mind was set," said the Duke, a singular confusion gaining rapidly upon him,—"would you hesitate to make *that* sacrifice?"

"If I took a fancy to a particular horse or dog," replied the Earl, in a tone which was slightly accentuated with a disgust that he could not altogether restrain,—"I should not hesitate to give any reasonable sum in order to gratify the whim—although I take credit to myself for not being a man susceptible of any such silly longings or caprices. But when I think or speak of an amiable, accomplished, and beauteous young lady whom I am desirous of making my wife, I do not expect to treat the negotiation in a purely commercial and financial point of view."

"But if I, as your father-in-law, were to beseech a certain pecuniary succour at your hands?" said the Duke, driven by a sort of desperation to approach the main point as speedily as possible.

"What I might do cheerfully from motives of friendship," exclaimed the Earl, "I should spurn indignantly as a matrimonial stipulation. In plain terms, if your Grace wishes me to *purchase* your daughter, I can only say that grieved as I shall be to behold the destruction of my hopes and the blight of my first affections,—nevertheless, a sense of duty both towards the young lady and myself will force me to cut the matter short at once."

And Lord Mostyndale rose from his seat—took up his hat—and appeared to wait for the Duke's final decision.

"You know not—you cannot conceive how painful—how humiliating—how galling this scene is to my feelings," said his Grace of Belmont, in a low and tremulous tone, and with a manner that was full of entreaty. "But I am ruled by an imperious necessity——"

"Then your Grace has nothing of a more agreeable character to offer in reply to the proposal which I have ventured to make?" interrupted Lord Mostyndale.

"Oh! my dear young friend," exclaimed the unhappy Duke, clasping his hands despairingly,—"you will plunge my poor daughter into an abyss of woe—for she loves you—she loves you."

"And heaven knows how fervently I love her in return," said Lord Mostyndale, in a voice that was half stifled by emotion. "Nevertheless, I dare not sacrifice my own sense of propriety nor insult her delicacy by making the future Countess of Mostyndale an object of mean, paltry, debased money-trafficking. Of my own accord I proposed to settle a handsome independence upon your daughter: but beyond that——"

"My lord, there *must* be something beyond that," said the Duke, in a hollow tone and with a look of fixed despair. "Find me some one to lend me a hundred and twenty thousand pounds—and my daughter is yours."

"Oh! your Grace would do well to apply to that wealthy worthy, Mr. Collinson, who enjoys such a familiar footing in the house," observed Lord Mostyndale, unable to subdue his disgust and indignation at the mercenary proposal which constituted the Duke's *ultimatum*.

"Ah! Collinson—the wretch!" murmured his Grace, as he sank back in the seat from which he also had risen. "My dear Mostyndale, have pity upon me! You see before you a heart-broken man——"

"But I cannot forget that your Grace seeks to make your amiable and innocent daughter a marketable commodity," interrupted the Earl, with a coldness alike of tone and manner;—"and that mercenary feeling on your part has destroyed all the sympathy which I should otherwise have experienced for your Grace. I wish your Grace good morning."

And with a reserved and frigid salutation, the Earl of Mostyndale hurried from the library.

Not many minutes elapsed ere Lady Mary Melcombe heard that her lover had quitted the house immediately after the interview with her father;—and a presentiment of evil struck like a chill to her heart. Lady Clarissa could scarcely conceal her joy at a circumstance which was so full of sombre omen in respect to Lady Mary's happiness; and she volunteered to go to the library and sound her ducal father relative to the particulars of his interview with the Earl. But though racked by the most torturing suspense, her unhappy sister at once revolted against the indelicacy and impropriety of such a step;—and thus did a couple of hours pass away without affording any clue to a mystery that was harrowing the amiable and tender-hearted Lady Mary to the very quick.

At length a note was delivered to Lady Mary. She instantaneously tore it open—and her eyes ran with an almost electric rapidity over its contents. These were brief, but full of affection and of sorrow. The Earl informed her that he had duly communicated with her father, to whom he must refer her for an explanation of those circumstances which had suddenly and unexpectedly risen up as barriers to their union and enemies to their happiness. But Lord Mostyndale added that in order to afford Lady Mary a proof of his ardent love and devoted admiration, he would never solicit the hand of another so long as she herself should continue unmarried.

The young lady's cup of sorrow was not, therefore, of unmixed bitterness. There was a taste of honey combining with the gall;—and at the bottom of Pandora's box of many evils, hope still remained. The patrician damsel knew that she was beloved by Mostyndale; and this conviction was at least a partial anodyne for the wound inflicted by a cruel disappointment. Besides, her's was not the age at which the loving heart abandons itself altogether to despair;—and when the first effect of the shock had passed, she found solace and comfort in those portions of the Earl's letter which conveyed the proof of his unalterable love.

In the course of the afternoon Lady Mary received a message from her father, desiring her to join him in the library. The servant who delivered this message, intimated that she was to repair thither alone;—and Clarissa was sorely vexed at being excluded from the conference.

On finding herself in the Duke's presence, the

gentle Mary was unable to restrain her feelings;—and bursting into tears, she threw herself into her father's arms. The Duke wept also: but he said the kindest and most reassuring things to console his afflicted daughter;—and when they were both somewhat tranquillised, he asked her whether she had not received a letter from the Earl of Mostyndale.

The young lady unhesitatingly drew forth the billet from her bosom, and presented it to the Duke, who opened it with trembling fingers and proceeded to scan its contents with looks full of trouble and apprehension. But no sooner had he reached that passage which recorded the solemn pledge whereby Lord Mostyndale bound himself to his engagement with Lady Mary Melcombe so long as it should be her wish for it to remain unbroken, the Duke of Belmont's countenance suddenly lighted up with an expression of joy;—and snatching his daughter to his breast, he cried in a tone of fervid gratitude, "Despair not, my beloved Mary—despair not: for you shall yet be Countess of Mostyndale—despite the wretch Collinson!"

But the young lady heard not the concluding words of her father's ejaculation: for, overpowered by the delight with which the first portion of it so suddenly inspired her, she had fainted in his arms.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE NOBLEMAN AND THE FEMME-DE-CHAMBRE.

It was between nine and ten o'clock in the evening of the same day on which the last mentioned occurrences took place; and again do we find the Duke of Belmont alone in the library. His eyes were fixed upon a book which lay open before him;—but his thoughts were far apart from the contents of the volume that he seemed to be perusing. Presently a low knock at the door caught his ear;—and, in obedience to his summons to enter, Mademoiselle Clementine glided into the room.

The Duke started with a nervous trepidation: for it immediately struck him that this visit must have some connexion with the Duchess—inasmuch as it was quite unusual for her Grace's female dependants to become the bearers of any messages to him, this duty devolving upon the pages of the household. Therefore, when the Frenchwoman made her appearance, he naturally conceived that her object was of a private and confidential character.

"Your Grace will pardon me for the liberty I am taking," said Clementine, whose air and manner were full of mystery: "but it is absolutely necessary I should be favoured with your lordship's attention for a few minutes."

"Proceed, Clementine," exclaimed the Duke. "Is it concerning her Grace——"

"No, my lord," was the prompt interjection. "But my purpose closely regards your Grace's son, the Marquis of Arden."

"What of him?" demanded the Duke, impatiently. "Speak!"

"There is nothing that will suffer any additional harm by contemplating the matter coolly and tranquilly," continued the *femme-de-chambre:* "nor is there anything that may not be remedied or counteracted. I therefore beseech your Grace to subdue all unnecessary excitement and hear me patiently."

"I will do so, Clementine," said the Duke of Belmont. "And now proceed."

"Some time ago, my lord," resumed the abigail,—"it was about the middle of January,—indeed, now that I recollect, on the forenoon of the very day on which that sad occurrence took place in the conservatory——"

"Well, well—you need not allude to *that!*" exclaimed the Duke, sitting uneasily in his chair.

"No further allusion is necessary, my lord," observed Clementine: "but having once fixed the special date, I may at once inform your Grace that on the particular forenoon just mentioned, a young dressmaker called at the mansion. To do her justice, she is sweetly beautiful and looks innocent and modest enough. Well, my lord, I this day saw the Marquis of Arden and that same girl in company together."

"Is this all you have to tell me, Clementine?" exclaimed the Duke, his countenance suddenly lowering with displeasure. "I am well aware that young men *will* be young men—that is to say, they cannot be expected to prove immaculate;—and I do not pretend to interfere with my son's pursuits, so long as they reflect no disgrace upon the ancient family to which he belongs and the illustrious name which he bears."

"But your Grace has not heard me to the end," said Clementine, undismayed by the species of rebuff which she had just experienced. "If this were a mere passing affair of gallantry, I should not have attempted to constitute myself a spy upon the Marquis of Arden's actions—much less undertake to perform the part of tale-bearer. But as I am firmly convinced that there is far more in the affair than a transitory passion——"

"What on earth do you mean, Mademoiselle?" cried the Duke, his naturally pale cheeks now flushing with indignation. "Do you intend me to understand that the son and heir of the Duke of Belmont has any idea of marrying a dressmaker?"

"I think so, my lord," was Clementine's unabashed and cool reply.

"No: it is impossible!" exclaimed the nobleman, striking his clenched fist upon the volume that was spread open upon the table.

"Then, if your Grace be so well satisfied on that head," observed Clementine, with the same unvarying placidity of tone and manner, "I can have nothing more to say:—and she turned to leave the room.

"Stop!" cried the Duke. "It may be as well to look a little deeper into the matter."

"Such, at least, is my humble and deferential opinion," remarked Clementine as she turned again towards her ducal master.

"Be pleased, then, to explain yourself more fully, Mademoiselle," he said.

"I was about to inform your Grace," she accordingly, resumed, "that as I was proceeding along Regent Street this morning, to execute a few commissions for her ladyship, I observed the Marquis of Arden arm-in-arm with a young woman whom I instantaneously recognised to be the seamstress I had once seen in this house."

"Arm-in-arm with a dressmaker in Regent

Street—and in the broad daylight!" exclaimed the Duke, now becoming interested in the matter.

"Such was the fact, my lord," continued the *femme-de-chambre*. "The young woman was dressed with the utmost neatness—a neatness that indeed was not without a certain air of elegance. In plain terms, she looked quite lady-like—and no one, who did not know her, would have suspected that she was a mere needle-woman."

"But at all events it is most indiscreet for my son to parade his mistress thus publicly!" ejaculated the Duke, in a tone of vexation.

"I do not for a moment believe that she is his lordship's mistress at all," said Clementine. "Now your Grace is aware that the penetration of woman is far more keen in certain respects than that of man;—and your Grace does not require to be informed that this faculty of penetration is particularly acute amongst females of my nation and of my class," added Clementine, with a smile that displayed her beautiful teeth. "Well, my lord, thanks to that faculty, I came to the conclusion, after watching them for some time, that the young dressmaker is *not* the mistress of the Marquis of Arden. I observed them narrowly, although from a distance;—and the more intently I gazed, the more acute seemed to become my powers of penetration. Ah! my lord, there are a thousand little signs by which the pensioned mistress may be detected,—a myriad indications by which her position is revealed to the keen observer! A husband's demeanour towards his wife and a lover's conduct towards her whom he intends to make his wife, are as distinct as possible from the mutual bearing of a young man and his paramour."

"But if the paramour be naturally modest and reserved—and if she be sincerely attached to her lover?" said the Duke, inquiringly—although he was much troubled by all that had now fallen from the lips of Clementine.

"Still is it easy to perceive that she *is* a paramour," responded the Frenchwoman emphatically. "My lord, I watched that young couple narrowly. I saw them approach the window of a jeweller's shop: and the Marquis was evidently persuading his fair companion to enter it with him. Now, when a nobleman or gentleman proposes to a female to accompany him into a shop of that description, it can only be for one purpose—namely, to make her a present of whatever she may choose to select: and, under those circumstances, no mistress or paramour ever refuses the offer, I don't care how sincere her love may be. But this dressmaker *did* refuse—and persisted in her refusal, moreover—and gained the point likewise; and, even from a distance, I was enabled to notice that this refusal was urged with a delicacy and yet with a firmness such as no pensioned mistress ever *did* display or *will* display in this wicked world of our's."

"You really seem to attach an undue importance to the veriest trifles, Clementine," said the Duke, who was unwilling to admit even unto himself the full force of the abigail's reasoning.

"No, my lord:—I am a woman, and I observe with the eyes of a woman and judge with the experience of a woman also," answered the *femme-de-chambre*. "Besides, does your Grace imagine that I took no notice of the thousand-and-one signs by means of which an acute observer forms impressions and arrives at conclusions in such a case? The very way in which the young woman leant upon his lordship's arms—the delicate tenderness and respectful admiration with which he regarded her—the manner in which she received all the little attentions that a lover lavishes upon the cherished being who is to become his wife—the total absence of any looks of sinister meaning,—in fine, their mutual bearing, conduct, and demeanour, all convinced me that their connexion is neither illicit nor immoral. And more than this—I followed them as far as the Regent's Park:—and they separated at the gate leading towards Camden Town—the Marquis not even accompanying her to the door of her own abode, although she lives at no great distance from the spot where they thus parted."

"Ah! you followed her home, then?" said the Duke, interrogatively.

"Yes, my lord," replied the *femme-de-chambre;*—"and she dwells in a small, humble, but respectable-looking house. Now, then, does your Grace think that she is the Marquis of Arden's mistress? Would she not have a fine lodging, if she were?—and would he not have escorted her at least to her very door? But, no—all their proceedings were characterised by the strictest propriety and by an unmistakable delicacy. I stopped in the neighbourhood for a few minutes to make inquiries at one of the shops;—and I learnt that the people of the house where the dressmaker dwells, are of the highest respectability, although poor—and I also ascertained that the young woman herself bears an irreproachable character."

"What is her name?" asked the Duke of Belmont.

"Virginia Mordaunt," replied Clementine.

"Ah! a sweet pretty name," observed his Grace, in a musing tone. "But do you really and truly believe that my son contemplates such an insane proceeding as marriage with this obscure girl?"

"I am confident that such is his lordship's intention," answered the abigail. "He is evidently infatuated with her beauty;—and when your Grace recollects that so many noblemen have married actresses and such-like women, there's nothing astonishing if the Marquis of Arden should seriously propose to unite himself with a dressmaker."

"The idiot!" ejaculated his Grace of Belmont. "And now that I bethink me of my son's manner of late, I remember that it has undergone a great change. But this I attributed to certain grave and important considerations which family affairs have forced upon his mind," continued the Duke, in a musing tone. "Yes—his manner is changed—and he has evidently grown far more steady. For weeks past, he has returned home at regular hours—he has been much alone in his apartment—he has taken to reading—and he has refused all invitations to dinner-parties, balls, and soirées. Unhappy boy! does he mean to disgrace the proud name of Belmont?"

"I do not know, my lord," said Clementine, in a tone of remonstrance, "whether it be a disgrace for a young nobleman to wed a female without a title: but I certainly should advise your lordship to suffer me to adopt the necessary measures to put an end to the connexion which the Marquis of Arden has now formed."

"It is for *me* to adopt those measures, Mademoiselle," exclaimed the Duke, haughtily. "I will at once summon the Marquis hither and reason with him upon the folly of his conduct."

"In which case," remarked the abigail, curtly, "your lordship will only render the Marquis more obstinate and more resolute in carrying out his aims. Pardon me for reminding your Grace that the Marquis has attained his majority and may act as he thinks fit."

"True!" exclaimed the nobleman: then, after a brief pause, he said, "What course would you suggest, Clementine?"

"Will your Grace leave the matter in my hands?" demanded the abigail.

"Assuredly," was the immediate response. "You have already given such ample proofs of your keenness of penetration, your skilful tactics, and your extraordinary knowledge of human character, that I cannot possibly hesitate to entrust the whole and sole management of this very serious affair into your hands. You wish me, I presume, to appear to know nothing at all of the matter?"

"Precisely so," answered Clementine. "Nor is it necessary that her Grace should become acquainted with these proceedings."

"By no means," observed the Duke. "Her health is delicate—and it would be unwise to cause her the least vexation or annoyance. Have you anything more to say?"

"Yes, my lord—one word," replied the abigail. "My plan is already shadowed forth in my mind: but there is a means by which your Grace can aid it."

"Speak," said the Duke. "I shall only be too happy to further the design, whatever it may be."

"Will your Grace undertake to induce the Marquis of Arden and Lady Clarissa to accompany your lordship to-morrow in an open carriage for a ride round the Regent's Park, between four and five o'clock—and will your lordship also so contrive that the Marquis shall sit next to Lady Clarissa, and that the conversation shall take a lively turn so that they may appear in high spirits and laugh gaily?"

"I will guarantee to accomplish all this, Clementine," responded the Duke.

"Then your lordship need not doubt the success of my project," observed the *femme-de-chambre*,—"at least if Virginia Mordaunt be the pure-minded, simple, and artless girl I take her to be. But should my present tactics experience a failure—which is by no means probable—I shall not be at a loss for another device."

"I leave the matter altogether in your hands, Mademoiselle," said his Grace.

The Frenchwoman then quitted the library; and the Duke was left alone to meditate upon all he had just heard.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### TREACHERY.

On the following morning the Marquis of Arden and Virginia Mordaunt met as usual in the Regent's Park; and as the day was gloriously fine they rambled about for a couple of hours, the minutes flying as if on the pinions of the swiftest bird.

Ah! those were happy, happy days for the young seamstress,—when she was enabled to breathe the fresh air of heaven, in the companionship of one whom she had learnt to love with all her heart and all her soul, and who loved her so tenderly in return. And the colour had come back to her cheeks:—yes—the roseate hue of health was upon that sweet countenance;—and serene was the lustre that shone in her large eyes of deep and melting blue. The red of her lips had ripened into a more vivid richness;—and the pearly teeth were now full oft revealed in sunny smiles. O God! that treachery should have been at work to mar the happiness of this fair creature of such nymph-like beauty!

Yet so it was:—and as she was retracing her way homeward, at about one o'clock in the afternoon,—having just separated from her lover, with an understanding that they were to meet as usual on the morrow,—she encountered Mademoiselle Clementine. Virginia immediately recognized the Duchess of Belmont's lady's-maid: but the latter affected not to have an equally good memory with regard to the young seamstress.

Virginia gave a passing salutation and was continuing her way,—when Clementine stopped her, exclaiming, "Surely I have met you before, Miss?—and yet I cannot recollect where."

"I believe you belong to the household of the Duchess of Belmont?" said the maiden: then, having received an affirmative reply, she added, "You may perchance remember that I one day conveyed to her Grace a velvet dress from Madame Duplessy's?"

"To be sure!" ejaculated Clementine. "And now I recollect that you told her Grace your name was Mordaunt. Well, Miss Mordaunt—and how is the world using you? I am really glad to encounter you again—for on the occasion to which you allude, I felt considerably interested in you. But, upon my word, you are looking uncommonly well—and so sweetly pretty!"

"I am very well, I thank you," said Virginia, on whose cheeks the Frenchwoman's compliment deepened the roseate hues of health. "Has her Grace quite recovered from the dreadful wound which she received in so shocking a manner?"

"Entirely recovered, so far as the wound is concerned," responded Clementine: "but her ladyship's spirits——Ah! they seem to have fled altogether," added the Frenchwoman, shaking her head in a manner that was intended to create an interest in Virginia's mind and thus afford a pretext for continuing the discourse.

But Miss Mordaunt was no gossip: and moreover she was in a hurry to return to her lodgings and employ herself in that labour of love—the wedding-dress.

"I presume that you live somewhere in this direction?" said Clementine, perceiving that the maiden was anxious to depart and that she held out no encouragement to proceed in the commentary upon the matters concerning the Duchess of Belmont.

"Yes—my lodging is close at hand," replied Virginia. "Would you condescend to accompany me thither and rest yourself awhile—or partake of some refreshment?"

"I shall cheerfully avail myself of the opportunity of sitting down a little, and becoming better acquainted with you at the same time," said the treacherous Frenchwoman.

Virginia accordingly led the way to her abode; and Clementine was introduced into a small but neatly furnished chamber—for although the generous considerations of the Marquis of Arden had placed her at her ease in a pecuniary sense, she had not chosen to quit the house of the good people who had been kind to her, nor seek a better apartment elsewhere. She had therefore contented herself with making her lodging as comfortable as possible;—and that was the condition in which Clementine found it.

Upon the bed lay the half-finished bridal-dress, which was one where the good taste of Virginia had sought to unite elegance with simplicity;—and the moment the searching eyes of the Frenchwoman caught a glimpse of it, she beheld therein the confirmation of her suspicion that the Marquis of Arden really intended to make the humble seamstress his wife.

But scarcely had her previously-conceived opinion on the point experienced this ratification, when the thought flashed to her mind that it was singular the Marquis should have allowed Virginia to inhabit a lodging so incompatible with the position and rank to which he purposed to raise her;—and this reflection instantaneously gave birth to another—namely, that it was probable the young seamstress was still in ignorance of who her noble suitor really was. This latter thought appeared likewise to receive confirmation from a previous circumstance—which was, that when speaking ere now of the Belmont family, Virginia had manifested not the slightest confusion nor uneasiness.

"If," said Clementine to herself, "this young woman really knew that her lover was the son and heir of the Duke of Belmont, she would naturally conclude that the marriage was about to take place without the consent of her future husband's relatives and friends: and she would therefore have been troubled at encountering any one who belongs to the ducal household."

All these reflections flashed in a moment through the active mind of Clementine;—and still keeping her eyes fixed on the bridal-garb, she said, "You have a pretty piece of work there, Miss Mordaunt."

"Do you think so?" faultered the maiden, a deep blush mantling upon her cheeks, although her looks lighted up with a species of modest pride and joy at the thought that the wedding-dress was *her own*.

"Pray allow me to look at it," continued Clementine. "One is always interested, you know, in such raiment as this: and for my part, I never see a bridal-dress without sighing and wondering when my turn will come," added Mademoiselle, laughing. "Ah! it is indeed sweetly pretty!" she exclaimed, as the still blushing Virginia took her work from the bed and displayed it before the abigail's eyes. "But how charming you yourself would look in it, my dear Miss Mordaunt!"

Covered with a modest confusion—blushing more deeply, and now trembling visibly—but not with grief, nor even with the slightest presentiment of evil—Virginia threw back the dress upon the couch and proceeded to place some refreshments upon the table—an occupation to which she thus suddenly turned in order to veil her embarrassment.

"Do not give yourself any trouble on my account, my dear Miss Mordaunt," said Clementine: "for I assure you that I can eat nothing. Alas! it was not a very pleasurable circumstance which brought me up into this neighbourhood to-day, I can assure you," she added, suddenly assuming a melancholy look and heaving a profound sigh.

"I hope that nothing has occurred to give you pain, Mademoiselle?" observed the seamstress, whose kind heart was already touched by the little piece of successful acting with which the wily Frenchwoman had commenced her part.

"You shall judge whether I have not enough to make me unhappy when I give way to thought," continued Clementine, still adopting the dismals. "I have a sister a year younger than myself, and who was once beautiful as an angel. She became acquainted with a gentleman—a mere youth—but handsome as Apollo and subtle as Satan. He made honourable proposals to her—the day was even fixed for their marriage—and all the preliminary arrangements were completed. In a moment of weakness and fondness he triumphed over her virtue: and then, a recreant to all his solemnly-recorded vows, the seducer abandoned his victim and married another. My poor sister became a mother a few months ago: and he has never even testified the least concern for his innocent child. Heart-broken—ruined in health and shattered in spirits—with all her beauty faded and even her mind unhinged, my unhappy sister is sinking rapidly into the tomb, uncared for and cruelly neglected by the villain who has thus made a wreck of all that once was so angel-like and so lovely!"

"Ah! this is indeed shocking!" exclaimed Virginia, the tears chasing each other down her cheeks.

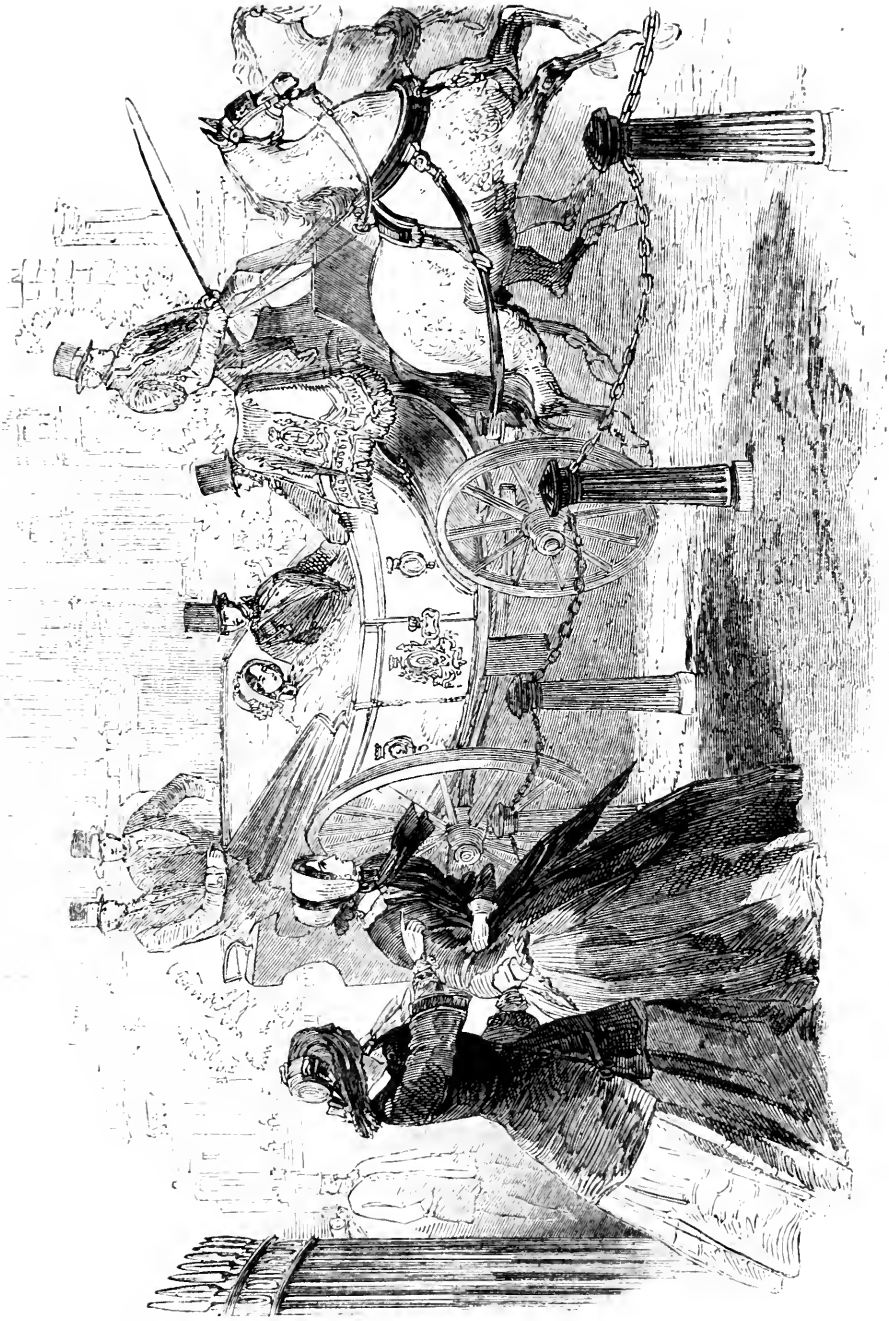
"If you can weep at the bare idea of sorrows which you have not seen, my dear Miss Mordaunt," continued the perfidious Clementine, with a voice and looks expressive of the profoundest woe,—"how deep must be the affliction of one who is daily condemned to witness those sorrows and gaze upon the wreck they have made. Yet such is my fate;—and now you can judge whether I have cause for unhappiness."

"You have—you have, indeed," cried Virginia, in a tone of the sweetest sympathy and with looks of the most angelic compassion.

"Months and months had elapsed," continued the *femme-de-chambre*, "since I last saw the seducer of my sister—until I beheld him proceeding along Portland Place this morning. He was walking rapidly towards the Regent's Park;—and I resolved to follow and upbraid him with all the miseries he had caused and the wrongs he had heaped upon his victim. But I could not succeed in overtaking him. Nevertheless I sped onward: he entered the park—and then I lost sight of him. I continued to ramble about, in the hope of still encountering him—for I know not where he dwells."

"Did you meet him after all?" inquired Virginia.

"No—and I had already given up the pursuit, after two or three weary hours' rambling about this neighbourhood, when I happened to encounter you,



No. 10.—The Seamstresses.

Miss Mordaunt. You may therefore suppose," added Clementine, "how cheerfully I accepted your kind proposal to enter your dwelling and rest myself awhile."

"Your narrative has touched me profoundly," said Virginia, upon whose long lashes the tears were still glistening. "How cruelly your sister must feel the perfidy of that man who has wronged her!"

"And, oh! if you could only see him, Miss Mordaunt," exclaimed Clementine, assuming an excited and impassioned tone, "you would not believe him capable of such an atrocity. He is still quite a youth—not two-and-twenty—and with one of those god-like countenances the masculine severity of which is subdued by a look of even feminine softness. Beautiful as an angel, he possesses the heart of a fiend;—and under a captivating suavity of manner, he is able to conceal the most perfidious intentions. His looks are full of love: but they carry venom into the heart which they penetrate!"

"How dreadful that one so faultless externally should be so wicked and deceitful!" exclaimed Virginia.

"Ah! my dear girl," said Clementine, "let me beseech you never to judge by appearances. You are young, and beautiful, and confiding; and it is impossible that you should altogether escape the notice of those villains who are ever on the alert to entrap the lovely and the artless. Excuse me, Virginia, for giving you this counsel: it emanates from a sincere wish to place you upon your guard against the thousand disguises which treachery knows so well how to assume. There is too often guile upon the most honied lip—too often perfidy concealed beneath an appearance of the most generous frankness. At all events, wherever mystery is observed, be cautious how you put your trust or place your confidence——"

"Oh! I thank you sincerely for this well-meant advice, Mademoiselle," said Virginia: "but to be candid with you, I am in no danger of becoming even the object of treacherous aims, much less their victim. I hope," she exclaimed proudly, "that my own good conduct would preserve me from the latter: and as for the former——I shall shortly become the wife of an excellent and amiable young gentleman," added the seamstress, a flush once more mantling upon her cheeks.

"What! is that your own bridal-dress you are making?" asked Clementine, as if the thought that such might be the case had only just this moment struck her. "Ah! I see that I guessed the truth!" she exclaimed, with an arch look: "that tell-tale glow upon your countenance, my dear friend, confirms my suspicion. But I congratulate you, Miss Mordaunt—sincerely congratulate you. You will render your husband happy—and it is to be hoped that he will appreciate the treasure which heaven will have consigned to his care."

In this manner did the two young women continue to discourse: and as Clementine made herself very agreeable, and insisted upon giving Virginia some advice relative to the fashion of the wedding-dress, our charming heroine experienced no small degree of pleasure in her new friend's company. At length Mademoiselle Clementine appeared suddenly to remember that it must be growing late and that the Duchess would be angry at her long absence;—and on consulting her elegant gold watch, which she wore concealed in her bosom, she affected to be quite dismayed at finding that it was past four o'clock.

"And I who am such a stranger in this neighbourhood that I scarcely know my way!" exclaimed the wily Frenchwoman as she started from her seat.

"I shall have much pleasure in acting as your guide until you reach that part of the town with which you are familiar," said the good-natured seamstress, hastening to put on her bonnet and shawl.

"I must call at a friend's in Portland Place before I return to Grosvenor Square," observed Clementine.

"Then our nearest way will be through Regent's Park," returned Miss Mordaunt.

This was precisely the answer which the treacherous Frenchwoman desired to elicit from her unsuspecting companion;—and they accordingly set off together. Clementine drew down her veil in order to avoid being recognized by the Marquis of Arden and Lady Clarissa, whom she expected to see in the park;—and the moment she entered the spacious enclosure, with Virginia by her side, she threw a searching look along the road-way to ascertain if the Duke's carriage were visible. Three or four private vehicles were approaching at different distances; and in a few minutes Clementine recognized the Belmont livery.

She now made some casual observations to her fair companion, watching all the time until the Duke's carriage was close at hand: and then, just as it was passing, she clutched Virginia violently by the arm, exclaiming in a hollow voice, "There! there!"

The maiden, startled and affrighted, threw her looks upon the open barouche which was dashing past. On one seat was an elderly gentleman—and facing him was her lover, Mr. Osmond, with an elegant and beauteous lady by his side. They were all three laughing gaily at the moment;—and Charles beheld not his Virginia as he was borne along by the spirited horses.

A terrible presentiment of evil now struck with the sudden virulence of a blight upon the heart of Virginia;—and turning abruptly towards Clementine, who seemed to have staggered against the railings of the enclosure for support, she said, "In heaven's name, what is the matter?"

"Oh! did you not see him—that young gentleman—in the carriage which has just gone by?" gasped the *femme-de-chambre*, apparently labouring under the most dreadful agitation.

"Yes—my God!—yes—what of him?" cried Virginia, already rent with a thousand agonies from head to foot.

"The villain—the seducer of my sister—in company with his bride!" exclaimed Clementine, speaking as if with the madness of passion.

"Just heaven!" moaned the wretched Virginia; and she sank senseless at the feet of the Frenchwoman.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE CLAIMING OF THE REWARD.

THREE months had elapsed from the date of the incidents just recorded;—and it was now the end of July.

In those three months what sadness seemed to have worked its insidious way into the hearts of some of the principal inmates of Belmont House! The young and beauteous Lady Mary Melcombe was pining beneath the influence of withered hope and cruel disappointment—for the Earl of Mostyndale was a visitor no longer at the ducal mansion. Secondly, the Marquis of Arden seemed to be devoured by a profound sorrow which was undermining his health, robbing his youthfulness of its vigour, and turning his very existence into a burthen and a curse. Thirdly, the Duke of Belmont was weighed down by the deepest affliction at the spectacle of those two beloved beings—his only son and his favourite daughter—thus bending beneath the weight of a woe the secret of which in either case was only too well known to *him*. And lastly, the Duchess herself had become so wedded to the solitude of her own chamber, that she seldom crossed the threshold of that suite of apartments which now constituted her own little world which she peopled with her mournful thoughts, and beyond which she cared not to stir.

Lady Clarissa was the only one of the Belmont family on whom the spell of affliction had not fallen;—and so thoroughly heartless was she—so perfect a type was she of the females of the patrician class, generally speaking—that the only reason why she deplored the altered mood of her relatives, was because there were now no more festivals, balls, and entertainments at Belmont House.

Mr. Collinson had continued to visit the mansion as usual during the interval of three months to which we have alluded;—and he troubled himself but little with the secret sorrows that appeared to have overtaken so many of its inmates. His attentions were pretty well divided between the sisters; and it would really have seemed to an observer of his conduct in this respect, that he was resolved to become a suitor to one of them, but could not yet make up his mind which to choose. Sometimes he chatted gaily with Lady Clarissa—sometimes he endeavoured to cheer the spirits of Lady Mary. The former had grown into the habit of welcoming his visits, because she frequently felt dull for want of company and was glad to have even the sententious lawyer to converse with: but the younger sister viewed him with a repugnance that increased as her own melancholy became the more desponding.

But to resume the thread of our narrative. It was, as we have already stated, the end of July; and on a certain evening we shall once more find the Duke of Belmont alone in his library. But this time he was not seated at the table with a volume before him: he was pacing to and fro in an agitated manner—and every now and then ejaculations of despair burst from his lips. The lamp-light gave a ghastly look to his countenance, which had become thinner and paler within the last three months;—and deep lines were traced by the unmistakable finger of care upon his brow.

Presently some one knocked at the door: but he heard not the sound. The knock was repeated a little louder; and this time he bade the person enter. The door opened slowly—and Clementine entered the library.

"What do you want with me?" demanded the Duke, in a tone the sternness of which showed how little pleased he was at being thus intruded upon.

"I wish to have some conversation with your Grace," was the calm reply.

"I am in no humour to talk to anybody," exclaimed the nobleman, violently. "My son is pining away—my younger daughter is perishing before my eyes—I myself am devoured with cares of all kinds—and my wife——"

But he stopped short, as if suddenly remembering that either prudence or propriety—or some other reason, perhaps more cogent still—should hold him upon his guard how he alluded to *her*.

"With the sorrows of Lady Mary and her Grace," said Clementine, "I have no concern, beyond commiserating them. With respect to the afflictions of the Marquis of Arden, I acknowledge that I stand on a different footing: but your Grace surely does not feel inclined to blame me for my conduct on that head?"

"I blame everybody and loathe and detest everything," cried the wretched Duke. "The whole world wears a jaundiced aspect to my contemplation—and I care not how soon I am out of it. Misfortunes and sorrows have entered my house like an army—and their ravages have been merciless."

"Your lordship would have been still more inclined to curse your fate, had the Marquis of Arden married the obscure seamstress," said Clementine.

"Well—perhaps you speak truly in that respect," exclaimed the nobleman. "At all events I did my duty by allowing you to adopt the necessary measures to prevent so ignominious an alliance. Do you know what has become of the girl?"

"No, my lord," was the response. "But I believe the Marquis of Arden is searching everywhere for her——"

"And we must hope that his endeavours will prove unsuccessful," added the Duke. "But wherefore have you sought me now? and what do you require at my hands?"

"Your Grace suspects, then," said Clementine, "that I am come to demand my reward for the service that I rendered in the affair of which we have just been speaking?"

"I presume that such is the case," replied the Duke. "You told me at the time that you would not receive any immediate recompense, inasmuch as you should perhaps have a boon to crave at some future period. I therefore judge that the moment is now arrived when you seek your reward. Name it, then, and be quick."

"Your Grace will be startled—nay, more—amazed, astounded, and indignant," said Clementine, "when I declare the boon which I crave at your lordship's hands."

"Do you intend to be so very unreasonable in your demands?" exclaimed the Duke, not liking the *femme-de-chambre's* preparatory warning. "But delay is useless—and I am anxious to be alone. What do you require?"

"To become the Marchioness of Arden!" was the response.

The proud Duke of Belmont started as if stung by a serpent—and then staggered back as if reeling beneath the effect of a violent blow: but almost immediately recovering himself, he said, "Young woman, I am in no humour to bandy jests with you—and this familiarity on your part is very inconsistent with your usual good taste."

"I can assure your lordship that I am in earnest," replied Clementine, with a resolute decision in her manner; "and unpalatable as my demand may be, nothing shall deter me from persisting in it."

"But you are mad, Clementine!" cried the Duke, angrily.

"Your Grace will be mad to refuse the boon I ask," was the tranquil rejoinder.

"Ah! if you be really serious, young woman," exclaimed Belmont, with an ironical laugh, "you must doubtless fancy that you have the power of coercing me by the threat of revealing the whole proceedings relative to Virginia Mordaunt. Well—go to my son—confess it all—tell him that his father employed you to stand between him and his foolish love for that young creature—and if he comes to demand explanations of me, I shall know how to answer him. Begone—or my lacqueys shall eject you ignominiously from the house!"

But Clementine moved not;—and, instead of quailing beneath the stern and indignant looks which the Duke of Belmont fixed upon her, she only smiled with a self-complacency that seemed to argue a consciousness of some secret power of a far more formidable character than that to which his Grace had just alluded. The nobleman marked that smile of supreme satisfaction which wavered upon her lips—and a feeling of uneasiness crept gradually over him: for his conscience was not so pure as to enable him to hurl a farther defiance at the woman who now assumed so determined an attitude in his presence.

"Once more I ask you," he said, in a tremulous tone, "whether you be really serious in the extraordinary demand that you have made?"

"And once more I assure your Grace," replied the *femme-de-chambre*, "that I am not only serious, but that I intend to gain my purpose."

"But you cannot for an instant suppose that my son will assent to so monstrous a proposition?" exclaimed the Duke. "It is too absurd!"

"I was prepared for all kinds of harsh terms and strong objections, my lord," said Clementine: "but I care nothing for the former, and feel confident of triumphing over the latter."

While she was yet speaking, a terrible thought flashed to the mind of the Duke; and his whole form was shaken as if with a strong spasm. He remembered the possibility—nay, even the probability of the Frenchwoman having become possessed of a certain secret the knowledge of which would indeed throw him entirely into her power. Circumstances had placed her at a particular time in a position to learn that secret;—and although he had hitherto felt assured that the fatal truth had *not* transpired at the period when accident might have revealed it to her, he now recoiled in horror and alarm from the dreadful thought that he had been buoying himself up with false hopes in that respect!

"I perceive what is passing in your Grace's mind," said the Frenchwoman, on whom this sudden change in the looks and manner of the Duke of Belmont was not lost: "and I need only observe that I know *all!*"

"All!" echoed the miserable nobleman, staggering towards an arm-chair and sinking into it. "All!" he repeated in a tone of concentrated anguish, while his eyes were fixed with an expression of vacant terror upon the calm, unruffled, but resolute countenance of the lady's-maid.

"Yes—all!" she said, in a low deep voice; and the look which she flung upon the unhappy Belmont appeared to traverse his brain like a fiery arrow and fall upon his heart with the effect of red-hot iron.

"My God! my God!" he moaned in the bitterness of his profound mental agony: "what new calamities has my wretched, wretched fate in store for me? But, no—it is impossible!" he suddenly exclaimed; and starting from the chair, he seized the hand of the Frenchwoman with such violence that for an instant she feared he was about to do her a mischief. "Speak! speak!" he cried with frenzied vehemence: "deal no more in dark menaces and mysterious threats which any one can blurt forth, even against the most immaculate. Tell me, young woman—what do you know that should place me in your power?" and he fixed his eyes upon her with a maniac wildness and a ferocious keenness that alarmed her.

But instantly recovering her self-possession, and not even attempting to withdraw the hand which he retained in his iron grasp, she looked significantly into the depths of his savage glaring eyes, and said in a low clear voice, "The secret which your wife unconsciously revealed in her slumbers!"

"Ah! then my worst fears are confirmed!" exclaimed the Duke, a horrible expression, ghastly as death, seizing upon his countenance; and, as if suddenly struck with the palsy, he fell back all quivering and shaking into the arm-chair whence he had sprung with so fearful an excitement.

At the same moment the features of Clementine grew radiant with triumph: for she saw that the victory was her own.

"My lord," she said, in that voice which, though measured and low, sounded rapid and loud as the peal of a deafening bell clanging through the brain of the miserable Duke,—"I have dared to love your son—yes—to love, to worship, and to adore him—and now I dare also to aspire to the honour and happiness of becoming his wife. Think you, my lord, it was through any feeling of sympathy or regard for the house of Belmont that I troubled myself with his affection for the young seamstress? No, my lord: the motives which influenced me in casting a blight upon *his* hopes and *her's*, were those of selfishness and egotism. I loved him—and I resolved that he should not espouse another. I have waited patiently until now, in the fond expectation that the impression which Virginia had made upon his mind would wear away. But I was mistaken in that hope. He still loves her as adoringly as ever—and day after day does he wander through the streets of London in search of his Virginia. This folly must be put an end to—and my love as well as my ambition must now be gratified. Your Grace has heard my demand—and its speedy fulfilment rests with you. 'Tis not for me

to suggest the course which your lordship will have to adopt in making known my wishes to the Marquis of Arden and in persuading him to yield to them. I know that the scene will be a painful one for your Grace: it is even probable—nay, almost certain—that your lordship will be forced to confess everything to your son and throw yourself upon his mercy. But such considerations as these, much as I may deplore them for your lordship's sake, cannot deter me from my purpose, which is fixed and settled. I therefore beg that your Grace will lose no time in breaking this matter to the Marquis of Arden."

While Clementine was delivering her long address, the Duke of Belmont sate motionless in the arm-chair, gazing up into her countenance with a look of vacant terror and wild astonishment. He appeared like one who, with his eyes open, labours under the influence of an appalling dream. The reality seemed too dreadful to be possible;—and yet the wretched man could not persuade himself that it was all a vision.

But when Clementine ceased from speaking, the Duke of Belmont's harrowed feelings found for themselves a vent in a moan of such unspeakable anguish that the mental tortures which gave it birth must have been an ample punishment for any guilt, even the blackest, that could possibly weigh upon his conscience.

And Clementine, unmoved by the spectacle of such excruciating woe, flung upon the wretched nobleman a last look of terrible significancy, and then quitted the apartment.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### THE RUINED GAMESTER.

For some minutes the wretched Duke of Belmont remained in the attitude of horror and consternation in which the Frenchwoman had left him. But suddenly starting from his chair, he dashed his hand twice against his forehead, murmuring in accents of utter desperation, "Holy God! what is to become of me?—what must I do?"

A feeling of profound oppression now came over him: there was a weight upon the brain and a sinking at the heart which made him fancy he was about to fall down in a swoon. The atmosphere seemed to grow intolerably hot and heavy—but it was only a sensation on his part. The effect was however the same: the air appeared of a stifling sultriness—he felt as if he were in his coffin.

Snatching up his hat he rushed from the house, and hastened into Hyde Park. The cool breeze of the evening fanned his fevered cheeks refreshingly; and approaching the water, he sate down upon one of the benches which dot the margin of the Serpentine and are shaded by little clumps of trees. There he gave way to his reflections; but the cruel difficulties which formed the topic of his thoughts, appeared like a tangled skein that it was impossible to unravel. To sacrifice his son to the ambitious Frenchwoman, was a deed which the Duke dared not resolve upon; and to treat her with defiance was an alternative that he found himself in no condition to adopt with safety.

The Duke was vainly racking his brains for a solution of the perplexity, when he heard footsteps approaching: and by the reflection of the starlight in the water, he beheld the figure of a man slowly advancing along the bank. In a few moments the individual stopped short and gave vent to an ejaculation of despair, as he stretched out his arms towards the Serpentine. The Duke was now seized with such a sudden horror, that the remembrance of his own sorrows was absorbed for the instant in the dread lest a fellow-creature was on the point of committing self-destruction. But at the moment when he was about to spring forward and clutch the stranger by the arm, this individual exclaimed passionately, "No—no, I cannot do it!" and advanced straight up to the bench where the Duke was seated.

"Unhappy man! who are you—and what rash deed were you about to commit?" cried his Grace, whose nervous state of feeling was painfully excited by an incident that for a moment had threatened so tragical a catastrophe.

"Ah! is any one here?" exclaimed the other, starting back as he heard a voice and beheld a form in the shade thrown by the trees: then, instantaneously recovering himself, he said in a somewhat dogged if not absolutely brutal tone, "Well, if you have any real sympathy for me—as I suppose you guessed what my intention was—you can show your good nature by relieving my necessities."

The Duke had risen from the bench at the moment the stranger advanced so hurriedly up to it; and while exchanging the observations just recorded, they took a rapid survey of each other. So far as the dimness of the place could possibly favour this mutual scrutiny, the Duke saw before him a tall, well-built young man, decently dressed, and with a countenance that was naturally good-looking, but which was pale with the traces of dissipation. On the other hand, the stranger's eyes, which had a certain flashing wildness in their expression, swept over the form of the nobleman and then settled upon the diamond pin that gleamed like a star on the bosom of his Grace's shirt.

"You ask me to relieve your necessities," said the Duke, in reply to the latter portion of the young man's observations: "but first tell me who and what you are?"

"My whole history may be summed up in five words," was the response. "I was brought up as a gentleman—which means, that my parents gave me no profession, which they ought to have done, and allowed me to live in idleness and pleasure, which they ought not to have done. But they were well off—and I was their only child: this, I suppose, was the reason of their conduct. They died when I was about twenty; and a year afterwards, on attaining my majority, I came into a fortune of thirty thousand pounds. I am now twenty-seven; and as every farthing has gone to the gaming-table, I of course am going to the dogs. Confession, they say, is good for the soul—and if this is true, I ought to be benefitted by making a clean breast of my follies."

"You are utterly ruined, then, young man?" said the Duke of Belmont, irresistibly prompted by some unknown impulse thus to penetrate into the stranger's history.

"So completely, kind sir—whoever you may be," was the blunt answer, "that I am both house-

less and supperless—and I came into the park with the desperate resolution of either robbing the first gentleman I should meet, or else making a hole in the water. I did not happen to encounter any one worth plundering—and so I was about to adopt the other course, when nature revolted against the idea of suicide just at the critical moment. I am glad of it, because I have fallen in with you."

"And would you rob me, then?" demanded the Duke, his voice trembling—but not altogether through fear: no—it was because a secret whispering in the profundities of his soul appeared to tell him that Satan had now thrown in his way precisely such an instrument as his circumstances required.

"Would I rob you!" ejaculated the young man, in a tone of irony mingled with a brutal recklessness. "And why not? You have a diamond brooch in your shirt frill—a ring gleaming upon your finger—and a gold chain to your watch. All these little matters argue a well-filled purse. In addition thereto, you are stricken in years and not over powerfully built—whereas I am young, and strong as Hercules. Lastly, you are evidently rich as Dives—while I am poor as Lazarus;—and therefore if you present me with your purse, you won't miss it—whereas it will be of wonderful service to the recipient. You seem to be a gentleman of sympathies as ample as your means; and consequently you will at once comply with my little request."

During this long harangue, the Duke had leisure to form a very tolerable estimate of his new acquaintance's character. The mingled flippancy, dogged resolution, and savage recklessness which marked his tone and manner, indicated the ruined gamester, reduced to the most desperate expedients. In fine, he was evidently one of those individuals whom the atmosphere of the gambling house and the society of blacklegs had polluted, body and soul; and who, smarting under a sense of villanous treatment on the part of the associates that had plundered him, was now ready to perpetrate any villany in his turn.

The deeper grew the insight which his Grace of Belmont was thus enabled to obtain into the young man's character, the stronger became the impulse urging him to make use of one whom Satan appeared to have thrown so opportunely in his way. Until the circumstance of this meeting, the Duke had not for an instant contemplated a crime: such an idea, while pondering upon the perplexities into which Clementine's outrageous demand was so well calculated to plunge him, had never entered his head. But the Evil One had doubtless found the occasion favourable for enmeshing the Duke still more completely than ever in his toils;—and thus was the temptation thrown in his way. The first spark fires in a moment a complete train of ideas in the mind that is diseased;—and no sooner does the thought of a crime take its inception in the soul of man, than its chances of success, contingent danger, and probable security are all calculated in an instant. The imagination travels through the vista of the whole prospect of turpitude and all its associated circumstances, as rapidly as the intelligence of a murder just committed runs along the wire of the electric telegraph.

"And thus is it," said the Duke, in a musing tone, as he fixed his eyes upon the stranger's countenance, "that you would rob me if I were to refuse your demand for assistance?"

"Swindlers and scoundrels have robbed me of thirty thousand pounds," was the answer: "and I am not therefore very likely to be particular how or whence I get back a portion of my money."

"Your case is, then, so very desperate?" said the Duke, trembling all over with the nervous excitement of the thoughts that were gaining the ascendancy in his mind.

"Desperate!" ejaculated the young man, with an ironical laugh. "When I tell you that I have not eaten a morsel since yesterday—that I have been turned out of my lodging—that I am friendless—and that I carry all my wardrobe upon my back, you can judge whether all this be not enough to make a man desperate. But I begin to see your object, sir," he exclaimed more hastily and menacingly: "you are endeavouring to gain time, in the hope that some one will pass this way and help you to resist me—perhaps to take me into custody. Now then, sir—as I would sooner drown myself than go to prison—and as my circumstances *are* so desperate, please to tell me your decision at once. Will you give me your purse?—or shall I take it?"

"I will give it to you—cheerfully," answered the Duke, without a moment's hesitation. "It is heavy—there may be a matter of fifty or sixty pounds there, in gold and notes."

"Upon my honour, the gift is well worth thanking you for, most charitable and munificent sir!" exclaimed the young man, as he clutched the purse greedily. "But surely you have not bestowed this upon me without a motive? Such a sum of money was worth a struggle on your part, to save it from the robber's grasp. You are either a man of the most incomprehensible benevolence—or else you have some ulterior object in view. Which opinion am I to adopt?"

"The latter, if you will," said the Duke. "In plain terms, I want the assistance of a man whose circumstances will prompt him to do anything for gold. Mark you, *anything*—no matter how desperate or how criminal."

"As a matter of course," interjected the ruined gamester, "the price will be in proportion to the nature of the service required?"

"Beyond all doubt," exclaimed the Duke. "Have I not just convinced you that I am inclined to be liberal?"

"The earnest is a fair one," said the young man; "and taking it as a sample, I like your mode of doing business."

"Then you are prepared to serve me—to any extent?" demanded the Duke.

"Yes—to any extent," returned the gambler. "Of course I can see by all this prefatory matter on your part, that it's no milk-and-water concern in which my assistance is needed. Perhaps if I may venture a guess, the affair is more the colour of blood than of sky-blue?"

"Blood!" ejaculated the Duke, with a start, as the ominous word fell upon his ears: then, instantly recovering himself, he said, "And if your surmise were correct, should you hesitate?"

"Not a whit!" cried the young man. "Let me digest my capabilities into a succinct tariff—a sort

of graduated scale of the prices for which I am prepared to sell myself, body and soul. Well, then, a highway robbery, one hundred pounds—a burglary, where the house is liable to be watched by the police, two hundred and fifty—an incendiary fire, four hundred; because the deed is a cowardly one, save and except for a political motive—a child murder, six hundred—the murder of an adult male, eight hundred—and of a female, a thousand. Those are my terms: cash payment beforehand—as I must respectfully decline to do business upon credit."

"But is this all in jest, or in earnest?" demanded the Duke, shuddering with a cold tremor at the horrible deliberation with which his new acquaintance unbosomed all those sanguinary details.

"Ought I not rather to ask whether *you* are in earnest?" exclaimed the thorough-paced villain.

"You have a guarantee and a proof that I am, in the contents of the purse which I have given you," was the Duke of Belmont's reply.

"I accept the boon as such," observed the young man. "And now, are we not growing towards a point?—or do you mean to continue beating about the bush for another half-hour?"

"We can come to no further understanding to-night," said the Duke. "This day week we will encounter each other again—at the same place and hour."

"When you will come with a dozen policemen at your back," remarked the gamester, bluntly. "I am not to be caught so easily."

"What good would your arrest do me, fool?" exclaimed the Duke, contemptuously.

"What good does the arrest of a man ever do his fellow-creature?" asked the young villain. "And yet arrests are constantly taking place."

"True," said the nobleman. "But while we have been exchanging these last few observations, you have not noticed that the sounds of horses' feet were approaching. Hark! these are doubtless a couple of mounted police advancing—and now if I raised an alarm, your capture would be inevitable. But I shall remain silent—and then you will believe that I harbour no sinister intentions toward you."

The eyes of the ruined gamester seemed to shine with a vivid lustre as he fixed them penetratingly and searchingly upon the countenance of the Duke, while the latter gave utterance to the concluding portion of his remarks. The nobleman saw that his new acquaintance was endeavouring to read the thoughts that were passing in the inmost recesses of his soul: and, stepping farther forth from the shade, he said, "I do not shun your scrutiny—because I meditate nothing which you might call treachery after the discourse that has taken place between us."

"I am satisfied—and shall trust you," returned the gamester: but it was not without a certain feeling of uneasiness that he remained in the Duke's company while the horsemen were passing.

As his Grace had surmised, they were two of the mounted police who were riding leisurely through the park towards Kensington Gardens; and not until they were at a considerable distance again, did the Duke of Belmont break the silence which he observed as they were going by.

"Now do you believe me?" he demanded.

"I cannot do otherwise," was the response. "You have given me the most satisfactory proof that can possibly be afforded under such circumstances. But at the same time, I think it right to inform you that when we meet on the next occasion I shall come provided with two pistols charged to the muzzle—and that if there be any symptom or sign of treachery on your part, I shall take the liberty of blowing out your brains. This will furnish occupation for one pistol—and the other shall perform a similarly agreeable office for my own self, should I incur a chance of being captured. The truth is, my circumstances will not allow me to be particular: hence this readiness on my part to sell myself body and soul unto you. At the same time I have an awful dread of the polluting touch of a policeman and of the insalubrious atmosphere of Newgate. But you will admit that these little weaknesses are pardonable enough."

"You can bring your pistols if you will," said the Duke, scarcely able to conceal his disgust at the rakish flippancy which characterised the young man's words, tone, and demeanour. "This day week, at ten o'clock in the evening, we shall meet here again."

"Agreed, most benevolent sir," was the response.

The Duke and the gamester then separated—the former returning to his palatial mansion in Grosvenor Square, and the latter hurrying off to one of the "hells" in which the fashionable quarter of St. James's abounds.

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE DUKE'S MACHINATIONS.

THE appointment between his Grace of Belmont and the ruined gambler was duly kept: but the former did not completely unbosom his intentions and aims. He merely sounded his new acquaintance more fully than he had been enabled to do on the first occasion of their meeting; and the result was as satisfactory as he could wish. Putting another purse, containing fifty guineas, into the young man's hand, the Duke made another appointment for a week later; and again did they separate.

This second appointment was kept as punctually as the former one; and the nobleman obtained a still farther insight into the gamester's character. Indeed, he felt convinced that either accident or Satan's agency had thrown in his way as thorough-paced and complete a villain as ever was prepared to commit a crime and only wanted the opportunity. Another gift of fifty guineas was the ruined rake's reward for keeping this second appointment; and a third was arranged to take place at the expiration of another fortnight.

On this last occasion the Duke of Belmont opened his mind without reserve to the young man; and, as he had expected, he found him ready and willing to undertake the business thus proposed. The amount of reward was agreed upon and a portion of it paid in advance: arrangements were made for the settlement of the remainder—and full instructions were given by the ducal employer to his agent in the contemplated iniquity. Having thus arrived at a complete understanding, they separated once more.

A month had now elapsed since Clementine first made known to the Duke of Belmont the presumptuous hopes which she entertained relative to the Marquis of Arden. During this interval his Grace had frequently tried all possible means to induce the aspiring Frenchwoman to abandon the project which she had formed of compelling the young lord to become her husband. But all was in vain. The Duke offered the largest sum of money of which he was enabled to dispose: the abigail was resolute in refusing the bribe and insisting upon the fulfilment of the other condition. At length his Grace saw that neither entreaties nor gold would work any change in her determination;—and he therefore made up his mind to adopt the extreme measure on which he had during the month relied as a last resource. Hence the settlement of the plans to which allusion has so recently been made in respect to his last meeting with the gamester.

On the very morning after that interview, the Duke of Belmont took an opportunity of beckoning Clementine to follow him to the library;—and when they were alone together, he said, "For the last time I have to beseech and implore that you will renounce the project which will stamp my son's unhappiness and send me broken-hearted to the grave."

"My lord, this is mere child's play on your part," returned the Frenchwoman, angrily. "I have assured your Grace over and over again, during the last month, that my mind is made up."

"But you perceive, Clementine," urged the Duke, "that my unfortunate son loves another. From morning to night is he in search of the young seamstress. *This* you know well."

"I cannot help it, my lord," said Clementine. "We dare not expect to obtain all we covet in this world: it is sufficient if a portion of our fondest hopes be realized. Fain would I see both my love and my ambition gratified at the same moment and by the same means: but if I cannot win your son's affection, I shall at least share his title and position."

"Your marriage will be a wretched one, Clementine," returned the Duke. "for the Marquis will loathe and detest you as the destroyer of his happiness—the merciless executioner who has dealt a death-blow to all his hopes."

"I am sorry for it," observed the Frenchwoman. "But it is better to be a Marchioness hated by her husband, than a mere lady's-maid who may be scolded and buffeted about by a capricious master and mistress."

"Such a master and mistress you have not got to tyrannize over you, Mademoiselle," urged the Duke.

"But I may have, if I continue in my present humble sphere," rejoined the young woman, with an imperturbable resoluteness of tone and manner.

"My son has never injured you, Clementine," continued his Grace, in a voice of melancholy reproach: "and you will seal his eternal misery."

"He will remain his own master as much as he chooses," was the cool response; "and if he can find out his Virginia, he may make her his mistress. That will solace him."

"But there is something dreadfully heartless in this mode of reasoning and calculating," said the Duke. "Besides you will find—perhaps to your cost—that real happiness does not consist in a title and fortune. *I* am not happy, Clementine—as you must well know," he added, with a mournful significancy, as he fixed his eyes upon the pretty but determined countenance of the Frenchwoman.

"All this regards me, my lord," she exclaimed, her tone and manner now ruffled with the petulance of impatience. "Let us argue the point no longer. We are only travelling over beaten ground. On former occasions your Grace has reasoned precisely in the same style—and I have given exactly the same answers. All the sophistry—all the entreaties—all the remonstrances in the world, will not shake my determination. I am resolute—and that must suffice. But I am not prepared to tolerate any farther delay. A month has now flown since I first explained my wishes to your lordship; and the Marquis of Arden is still entirely ignorant of everything. When does your Grace propose to communicate with him upon the subject."

"Listen to me, Clementine," said the Duke, profoundly agitated. "I am as wearied of this delay as you are—but for a very different reason. You are anxious to enter upon what you believe to be a course of happiness: whereas I am sick of procrastinating the evil hour which now looms like a dreadful phantom in the distance. If the worst must take place, then let me look all the extent of my misery in the face. In plain terms, I cannot endure this torturing suspense: and it was to hear your final resolve that I beckoned you to follow me hither ere now."

"And that final resolve is known to your Grace," said Clementine. "Indeed, it has been known all along—and the suspense spoken of, is of your lordship's own creating. As for the delay which is torturing you, let it cease as soon as possible—within four-and-twenty hours, if your lordship chooses."

"Be it so, Mademoiselle," returned the Duke. "You are merciless and cruel: I must be pliant and yielding. You are resolute in exacting this tremendous sacrifice which the house of Belmont is about to make to your ambition: I must be courageous in permitting the consummation of that sacrifice."

"I am glad to hear your Grace speak thus rationally," said the Frenchwoman, in a tone of ill-concealed triumph. "At length we seem to be approaching a proper understanding. When will your lordship break the intelligence to the Marquis of Arden?"

"This very morning," replied the Duke.

"And the marriage?" said Clementine, inquiringly.

"Shall take place within four-and-twenty hours," was the rejoinder. "Now leave me—and return hither again as soon as you learn that the interview between me and my son is over. Tell one of the domestics to inform the Marquis of Arden that I wish to speak to him immediately."

"I will do so, my lord," said the Frenchwoman: and she issued forth from the library radiant with smiles.

In a few minutes the Marquis of Arden made his appearance; and the Duke, bidding him be seated, addressed him in the following manner:—

"My dear son, it grieves me to the very soul to mark the change which has taken place in you during the last few months. Hitherto I have forborne from speaking to you on the subject: but now I can retain my sorrow no longer. Have you any

No. 11.—The Seamstress.

secret sources of affliction?—wherefore do you place so little confidence in your parent——"

"My dear father," exclaimed Charles, starting from his seat—seizing the Duke's hand—and conveying it to his lips. "I beseech you not to reproach me if I have kept one secret from you. But I know that the revelation thereof would only offend——"

"Then, if I may be permitted to hazard a conjecture, Charles," said the Duke, "you have formed some attachment—perhaps some connexion—of which you are ashamed?"

"An attachment—yes—but no connexion," cried the young nobleman: then, in a warmer and more enthusiastic tone, he added, "But I do not know wherefore I should be ashamed of loving an amiable, excellent, and virtuous young lady—simply because she is poor and moves not in the brilliant circles of fashion——"

"Who is she, my dear son?" asked the Duke, of course affecting the most complete ignorance of that love-affair the progress of which he himself, or rather his female agent, had so cruelly interrupted.

"It matters not, father, to give you any information concerning her whom I love?" returned Charles, in a tone of profound melancholy. "She is lost to me, I fear—vainly have I endeavoured to obtain a trace to her residence—and for months past have I been in complete ignorance whether she be even still a denizen of this world:"—and as the young man thus spoke, the tears trickled down his cheeks.

"You must endeavour to conquer this passion which you have conceived for one whom you admit to be possessed of neither birth nor wealth," said the haughty Duke of Belmont: and he proceeded to lecture his son upon the subject, in the approved fashion invariably adopted by fathers under such circumstances.

But Charles heard him not. The young nobleman was lost in painful thought;—and after an interview of about an hour, he was on the point of retiring from his father's presence, when the latter caught him by the hand, exclaiming, "My dear son, I cannot bear to witness this sombre melancholy into which you are plunged."

"Listen attentively for a few minutes," said the Duke, in a cold and mournful tone, as if he were speaking upon a topic which he endeavoured to treat with stern hauteur, but which nevertheless touched him deeply. "It must not be supposed that I, the head of the great house of Belmont, in any way winked at—much less assented to—this connexion. The blame must be wholly and solely attached to my son;—and therefore must it be what is called a runaway match. For some months I shall refuse to receive either you or him: but in the end I shall forgive you both."

"This is politic and prudent on your side, as the world goes," said Clementine, to whom the arrangement appeared perfectly natural on the score of expediency.

"The Marquis of Arden and myself are invited to dine this evening at Lord Merton's," continued the Duke. "My son would not have accepted the engagement—indeed, as you are aware, he has lately avoided all society——but he will go to Lord Merton's this evening, in order that he may have a better opportunity of carrying out what the world must be led to look upon as a preconcerted scheme between *himself* and *you*."

"I understand, my lord," said Clementine. "Proceed."

"At ten o'clock precisely my son will slip away from the company," continued the Duke. "You know, perhaps, that Lord Merton's mansion is in Park Lane, near Grosvenor Gate? At that spot must you be within a few minutes after the hour which I have mentioned: and as the night may be dark—for the moon does not rise now until late—he will mention the name of *Charles* to the female who accosts you. You will answer *Clementine;* and then he will hurry you away to where a post-chaise will be in readiness to whirl you both off to some cathedral town, at which a special license can be obtained to-morrow morning. Are you satisfied with these arrangements?"

"Perfectly, my lord," responded the Frenchwoman: then, after an instant's pause, during which her natural coquetry suggested an idea, she observed, "And yet I should have been better pleased to have avoided so much mystery: for with this arrangement I shall have no bridal-dress—no diamonds—whereas his Lordship the Marquis will be in the full costume which he must wear at Lord Merton's party."

"Can you not help yourself to a ball-dress belonging to one of my daughters?" asked the Duke: "and as for diamonds—if you really must have such ornaments for the occasion, can you not borrow those of her Grace? You have access to her wardrobe and casket, I should imagine——"

"Yes, my lord," said Clementine, hesitatingly: "but would not these proceedings on my part appear very like petty thefts?"

"We should not think of prosecuting her whom my son chooses to make his wife," returned the Duke: "neither should we publish to the world anything calculated to dishonour her, much as we may deplore the ill-assorted alliance. Besides, after all, Clementine—am I not still in your power?"

"Yes—and you must screen me in every way," rejoined the Frenchwoman. "Well, my lord—I will adopt all your suggestions; and I swear by heaven that, since your Grace is evidently disposed to act with sincerity towards me, *your* secret shall remain eternally locked up in my bosom."

"You could have no possible interest in ever disgracing the father of him who will shortly be your husband," observed the Duke. "And now we thoroughly understand each other—all our arrangements are settled—and you will be in the vicinage of Grosvenor Gate within a few minutes after ten o'clock to-night."

"I shall be there punctually, my lord," replied Clementine:—and the Frenchwoman once more quitted the Duke's presence with a radiant countenance and a triumphant beating of the heart.

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

### HYDE PARK.

THE evening was very dark; and although it was no later in the year than the beginning of September, yet the sky was as overcast with sombre

clouds and the wind blew as inclemently as if the fine autumn season had already yielded to the sterner sway of winter. The moon had not yet risen—and the stars were obscured by those dense masses that appeared like huge black crags forming the underneath crust of heaven's tremendous arch. The trees rustled—the lamps flickered as if they were every moment on the point of being extinguished—and altogether it was a boisterous and most ungenial night.

The clocks of the West End were striking ten as Mademoiselle Clementine, emerging from the nearest street, halted in the immediate vicinage of the Grosvenor Gate entrance to Hyde Park. She was apparelled in a manner that ill became the inclemency of the evening: but her vanity had triumphed over the fears of colds and rheumatisms, and her coquetry rose superior to the dread of rain and wet feet. In pursuance of the Duke of Belmont's advice, she had purloined one of Lady Mary Melcombe's evening-dresses; and she had likewise found an opportunity to self-appropriate the Duchess of Belmont's jewel casket. This she carried under her shawl; and having managed to issue unobserved from the mansion, she reached Grosvenor Gate precisely at the appointed hour.

Nor was she kept long in suspense: for five minutes had not elapsed when she beheld the figure of a man, muffled in a cloak, emerge from the surrounding obscurity. This individual appeared to hesitate the moment he caught sight of a female form slowly pacing to and fro on that spot: but the Frenchwoman instantaneously convinced by his stature and gait that he was none other than the Marquis of Arden, walked straight up to where he had halted.

"Charles!" said the one.

"Clementine!" replied the other.

And the next moment the muffled gallant, having drawn the Frenchwoman's arm beneath his own, was hurrying her across the road which constitutes "the drive" of the park, into the meadow of the enclosure.

On they sped for several minutes, during which not a word was spoken. Clementine fancied that the Marquis was too haughty and indignant in his displeasure to deign any remark that might savour of friendly or familiar discourse; and her own pride, on the other hand, prevented her from taking the initiative in this respect. But at length a silence so profound and protracted amidst the dense darkness of the night and in so deserted a place, grew something more than vexatious and annoying: it became positively alarming—and a presentiment of evil gradually crept into the young woman's soul, stealing with a chilliness more searching than the night-wind to the very marrow of her bones.

Where was the carriage!—and whither were they going? These were the questions which she now longed to ask: but this chill—this solemn—this profound silence on the part of her companion overawed her. It was now no longer her wounded pride that sealed her lips—but it was a positive consternation which was growing more and more intolerable every instant. At length she raised her eyes slowly—furtively—and stealthily towards his countenance, hoping that even through the obscurity of the night she should be able to read upon his features what was passing in the depths of his soul. But the collar of his cloak reached so high up and his hat was slouched so low down, that she could not even trace the outline of his countenance—much less decypher the expression of its lineaments at that moment. Only, from beneath the brims of the hat, his eyes appeared to shine with an ominous lustre upon her,—as if it were a reptile looking from the deep shade of a bush, or a tiger from the dark entrance of a cavern.

And now a terror less vague and more definite seized upon her;—and strong-minded, bold, adventurous, and resolute though she were, yet she could not help shuddering with a sense of the loneliness, the friendlessness, and the peril of her position. There she was—in the midst of the park and in the deep obscurity of night—along with a young man on whom (as she thought) she was endeavouring to force herself as a wife, and who had every possible motive to avenge himself upon her, and every conceivable reason to get rid of her. Robed in a purloined dress and with a casket of stolen jewels in her hand, her conscience was not likely to be at ease under the influence of such reflections; and, her terror amounting almost to a superstitious expansion of imaginative delusions, she thought that this ominous silence which her companion maintained could be indicative of nothing more nor less than the foulest, blackest, and most treacherous intention towards her. Still she had not the courage to turn back—nor the power to stop short—nor the faculty to give utterance to a syllable of question, remonstrance, or entreaty. She was walking like one in a dream!.

Ten minutes had thus elapsed from the moment that they met at Grosvenor Gate,—ten minutes, during which they had walked rapidly across the park, whilst those varied feelings and sensations had been gaining with proportionate speed upon the young Frenchwoman. Surely, she thought, a married life which commenced under such gloomy auspices, would continue disastrous and end terribly! But, ah! what if the marriage were never to take place at all?—what if he on whose arm she now leant, harboured the diabolical intention of murdering her there and then? Oh! how cold—how deadly cold was the tremor that passed through her entire being as this reflection forced itself for the tenth time in a minute upon her disordered fancy!

Again did she look furtively up towards the countenance of her companion: but still was it wrapped in the deepest gloom, the eyes shining forth like stars of evil augury from the midst of a sky laden with the thunder-clouds. A glance to the right showed her the far-off lights belonging to the mansions in the road skirting the northern side of the park: another look, thrown to the left, gave her the feeblest glimpses of the lamps of Knightsbridge;—and before her at a little distance, some tall trees were beginning to stand darkly and gloomily out of the obscurity, like spectral forms of colossal dimensions. Not a sound met her ears, save the moaning of the wind through those trees and the rustling of their leaves,—yes, and the tread of her companion's steps on the beaten pathway which they were pursuing. Her own feet moved noiselessly and with airy lightness over the ground.

Ten minutes, we say, had thus elapsed: and not a word was spoken the whole time,—not a

syllable since the exchange of those names—"Charles"—"Clementine." How much longer was this silence to endure? The Frenchwoman could bear it not another instant!

"My lord," she said, forcing herself to address the man who was treating her with such marked scorn and sovereign contempt, "whither are we going? and where is the carriage waiting for us? I am already wearied: and moreover, I do not perceive the necessity of traversing this lonely place. Surely your lordship might have commanded the chaise to be in attendance at some nearer point?"

But her companion made no reply, and continued to hurry her along.

"Ah! I presume your lordship is resolved to punish me to the utmost of your power for daring to love you—and, what is still more culpable no doubt, for daring to aspire to become your wife," continued Clementine, her indignation now getting the better of her fears. "But why should you commence thus early to goad my spirit to desperation? I love you now—adore you—worship you: and yet mine is a nature which can be taught to hate as fervently and as bitterly. Well aware am I that your love can never be bestowed upon me: but I do not choose to submit tamely to the wreakings of your vengeance. Observe a passive indifference towards me, if you will: but do not proclaim an overt warfare. If you do, I shall have recourse to similar means in order to practise a retributive revenge. Do you hear me?—will you not speak?—am I to remain in ignorance of the terms which we are to observe towards each other? What! silent still? My lord—my lord—speak—speak—I conjure you: or I shall be forced to believe that some phantom has deluded me with his companionship this night!"

And Clementine's voice, which was at first grave, solemn, and impressive, now grew hysterical and thrilling as this continued silence stirred up again in her bosom all the wild vague fears which indignation and a sense of wounded pride had for a moment subdued.

But still that silence was persevered in: still, also, did her muffled companion persist in leading her onward.

"Then, by heaven!" she suddenly exclaimed, stopping short, and snatching away her arm from beneath that of the cloaked individual,—"I will not advance another step in this cruel uncertainty. Whatever coercion I may have used—whatever means I may have adopted—to force you into an alliance with me, you shall not treat me with this crushing contempt—this flagrant indifference. No—no!" proceeded Clementine, her excitement growing to a pitch of frenzy. "You shall not break my spirit nor my heart in a few short hours. Besides, my lord—I implore you to remember that it is cowardly in the extreme thus to behave towards a woman, let her faults be what they may! Now, will you speak? My lord—Charles—Marquis—speak—speak——Good God! what means this dreadful silence?"

And the young woman, agitated and tortured by a thousand conflicting feelings, clasped her hands in bitter anguish as she thus gave vent to the mingled prayers and menaces that denoted the confused and chaotic condition of her wildering thoughts and her distracting sensations.

But still the cloaked figure responded not: and there he stood before her—in the very position in which he had suddenly halted when she stopped short and withdrew her arm so abruptly from his own. Drawn up, as it seemed, to his full height—motionless as a statue—that individual looked like a muffled corpse, which mischief, mirth, or philosophical ingenuity had made thus to stand upright, either as an object of terror or scientific experiment. And all in a moment to the mind—the already weakened, attenuated, and bewildered mind—of the young Frenchwoman, rushed a thousand terrific reminiscences of legends and romances which she had read, and wherein the grave had been represented as giving up its dead for the purpose of scaring unprotected maidens and defenceless women in peculiar circumstances. An insurmountable terror thus gained upon the wretched Clementine; and she felt as if her senses were abandoning her.

"Once more—once more—for the last time," she faltered forth in broken tones and with gasping breath,—"I conjure your lordship—I implore you—earnestly beseech you—to break this dreadful silence. Say but a word—a single word——O God! no one is nigh to help me!" she shrieked hysterically forth, as she cast her eyes wildly around in the vain hope of discovering some moving form amidst the obscurity of the evening.

But no human being met her view, save the one that stood statue-like before her: and now her terrors amounted to an anguish that racked her brain and made her imagination conceive in a moment all kinds of horrible ideas relative to that silent figure.

"Ah! you are endeavouring to drive me mad—you wish to steal my senses away!" she exclaimed, in a voice that was now broken and sepulchral. "What phantom art thou?—and why dost thou haunt me? My lord—Charles—Ah! speak——tell me who you are——relieve me from suspense! What hideous delusion is this? Methinks I am walking in a dream——Oh! spectre that thou art, I will see thy face—even though it should be the countenance of the dead!"

And goaded to the frenzy of desperation, Clementine sprang like a tiger-cat at the muffled figure—dashed off his hat with one hand and tore open his cloak with the other: then, as there was just sufficient light to enable her piercing eyes to mark the features of her companion, she saw that it was not Lord Arden—but a stranger!

The jewel-casket fell from her arm—a shriek burst from her lips—and she turned to fly: but the next moment she was felled to the ground by a bludgeon which the assassin had all the time grasped beneath his cloak—and a second blow silenced her for ever!

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It was shortly after daylight that two police-constables were wending their way across Hyde Park and discoursing in the following manner:—

"What time was it, then, that the information was given at the station-house?" inquired one.

"At about half-an-hour after midnight," responded the other. "It seems that the Duke of Belmont and his son——"

"That's the Marquis of Arden—eh?"

"Just so. Well, their lordships had been out to a party; and on returning home shortly after twelve o'clock, they were told that the French

lady's-maid had disappeared. The Duke very naturally ordered a search to be instituted to see whether anything was missing——"

"Was it suspected, then, that the young woman had bolted with property?"

"Not a bit of it. It appears that such a thought had never entered the head of any one in the house till the Duke and his son returned home from the party. The Duchess, the young ladies, and the servants generally, had no suspicion of Clementine's dishonesty: they were afraid she had gone out and met with some accident. But when the Duke and the Marquis came in and heard that the young woman was missing, they precious soon ordered a search to be made; and sure enough, a robbery had been committed."

"The Duchess's jewel-casket, eh?"

"Yes—and one of the young ladies' ball-dresses, I believe. But no doubt other things have been taken likewise:—only, in the first hurry and confusion caused by the event, it was impossible to ascertain what was lost and what was safe."

"I suppose you've got a description of the Frenchwoman's person?"

"Yes—here it is," replied the constable who was thus enacting the part of informant towards his comrade. "The Duke sent the Marquis of Arden and the butler down to the station to give notice of the flight and the robbery; and that description," added the officer, as he passed a paper to his brother-policeman, "is said to be accurate enough."

"She must be a pretty girl," remarked the other, as he scanned the document.

"So she is. The inspector who took Lavenham into charge—you remember that affair at the Duke's some months ago?"

"To be sure I do. But what about our inspector?"

"Why, he saw the Frenchwoman on that occasion; and he told me just now that she is a very tidy body and answers the description in that paper to a nicety. But, holloa! what have we here?"

"A drunken lady——"

"No—a murder, by heavens!"

And the two constables hastened up to the spot where lay the object which, suddenly meeting their eyes, had elicited those ejaculations.

On the ground was the corpse of a female, elegantly dressed. Her bonnet was all broken—and the marks upon her forehead indicated but too plainly the manner in which she had come by her death. At a short distance was a bludgeon, massive and heavy enough to inflict murderous blows; —and a little further off still, lay a casket with the lid open and emptied of its contents. The pocket of the unfortunate woman's dress had also been rifled—for it was turned inside out: and certain traces of violence about the ears showed unmistakably that the ear-rings had been torn away, and not deliberately taken off. The corpse was quite cold—and from its appearance, some hours must have elapsed since the perpetration of the terrible deed.

Provided as they were with the written description of Mademoiselle Clementine, the officers were not long in identifying the murdered female. The dress which she had on—the casket—her personal appearance,—everything corroborated the suspicion that this was none other than the fugitive *femme-de-chambre* of Grosvenor Square.

Assistance was speedily procured from the nearest park-keeper's lodge; and the corpse was borne to a public-house at Bayswater. Information of the occurrence was then conveyed to Belmont House; and the Duke appeared to be as much shocked as any of his family or servants at the dreadful event. Indeed, his Grace, on recovering from the mingled horror and consternation into which the tidings seemed to throw him, at once declared his intention of offering a reward of five hundred pounds for the apprehension of the murderer, and a similar sum for the recovery of the diamonds.

An inquest was held on the body in the course of the day: but nothing transpired to afford the faintest clue to the elucidation of the mystery. The only inference to be drawn from the circumstances, such as they were presented to the jury, was that the young woman had been murdered while decamping with her mistress's jewels: but whether she was the victim of a stranger whom she encountered accidentally, or whether some improper acquaintance had led to the robbery and the catastrophe, it was impossible for the inquest to determine. The usual open verdict of "Wilful Murder against some person or persons unknown," was accordingly returned.

On the following day the remains of the unfortunate Frenchwoman were consigned to the grave; and the tragic occurrence shed a deeper gloom upon the Belmont family.

Sixteen months now passed away, without being characterised by any incident of special importance:—but during that period what had become of Virginia Mordaunt?

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

### THE WHITE SLAVE OF ENGLAND.

We now come to a painful—a very painful episode in our tale; and even as we glance forward upon the woes, the sufferings, and the distresses which we are about to record, our soul sickens at the task that we have undertaken. At the same time, too, our blood boils with indignation when we view the details of that picture which is stretching before us,—a picture so made up with the vivid colourings of poor woman's wrongs, the sombre hues of man's cold-bloodedness and cruelty, and the dark outlines of a vitiated society and a heartless world, that we wonder God's vengeance sleeps when He looks down from heaven and beholds the enactment of such scenes on earth.

But to enter properly upon this harrowing portion of our narrative, we must bring back our reader's attention to that day on which Virginia was made the victim of the atrocious treachery planned and executed by Clementine the Frenchwoman.

It will be recollected that on beholding her lover ride past in the carriage, and on hearing him denounced as the hero of the tale of seduction and cruelty previously narrated, Virginia had fallen senseless at the feet of her false friend. Three or four persons speedily gathered to the spot: and while Clementine, with every appearance of woe

and dismay, lifted the young girl in her arms, an elderly lady produced a smelling-bottle, which speedily operated as a restorative. Clementine then conducted the wretched Virginia home to her lodging, where she consigned the poor maiden to the care of the landlady, while she herself hastened back to Grosvenor Square.

No words have the power to convey an idea of the sorrow to which the seamstress was now a prey. Her first—her earliest—her fondest affections were suddenly blighted at a moment when they were expanding joyously and confidently in the sunshine of hope: her heart received the blow at the instant it was cherishing all those fervid aspirations and warming with all those holy fires which belong to a virgin's first and purest love. She was struck with the consternation of an awful calamity: a blank despair for a short time sealed the fountains of her eyes and closed the portals of her lips;—and then, as she gradually emerged from this ominous stupor, the full tide of her poignant anguish swelled forth in torrents of tears and piteous lamentations.

All the castle-building in which her fancy had been indulging for weeks past, had suddenly fallen in and overwhelmed her with its ruins. She had accepted the guidance of a fairy hand, and was led for a short time through delicious meads, and pleasing gardens, and along the banks of silver streams,—but only to be plunged with a cruel abruptness into a black and hideous gulf that yawned beyond the elysian scene. And now, therefore, she blamed herself for having yielded to a delusion which left so appalling a reality behind. She bitterly, bitterly repented the blind confidence which she had reposed in her lover, whose treachery she could not doubt for a moment: she reproached herself for being the wilful authoress of evils which she never could have foreseen;—and in fine, her soul was tortured not only with the excruciating reality of grief, but likewise with the ordeal of self-vituperation through which she made it pass.

Vainly did the good people with whom she lodged endeavour to console her. They certainly succeeded so far as to induce her to moderate the outward violence of her grief: but her heart only swelled with an anguish that was all the more excruciating because thus restrained and pent up. Nevertheless, the circumstance of exercising that amount of volition which was necessary to subdue the outpourings of her sorrow, brought the poor girl's mind into a condition for looking her calamity with steadfast earnestness in the face: and gently dismissing the worthy couple who endeavoured to solace her, she sate down in her chamber to meditate alone upon the course which she would now pursue.

The reader who understands the lofty principles, exceeding delicacy, and genuine pride which formed the character and guarded the innocence of the young maiden, will be fully prepared to behold her enacting an independent part and adopting a consistent line of behaviour. So soon, therefore, as she had succeeded in reasoning herself into a state of comparative tranquillity, she rose from her seat and began to arrange all her little property in a peculiar manner. Carefully separating everything which she had at any time purchased with her own money, from those articles which she had procured with the money presented to her by her lover, she made a packet of the former to take away with her. And while thus employed, how frequently did she find the scalding tears raining down her cheeks and her bosom palpitating violently with the sobs that half suffocated her! But it was when she removed the wedding-dress from the bed and placed it in a trunk along with every other article of raiment, even to the veriest trifle, such as a collar, a riband, or a pair of gloves, that had been purchased by her lover's money,—it was then that her anguish burst forth again, with a renewed poignancy: for as she closed the lid of that trunk which contained the bridal vesture, it seemed to the poor girl as if she had just buried all her hopes of happiness in a marble sepulchre.

Sinking upon a seat, the poor orphan remained for some minutes a prey to the most excruciating affliction. And there was nothing selfish in her grief: it was as genuine, as sincere, and as pure as her love was chaste, artless, and etherial. Not for a moment did she deplore the loss of that social position, that independence, and that pecuniary comfort which the late prospect of marriage had seemed to assure her: no—one idea was dominant in her mind—one thought was the source of her grief,—and this was the treachery (or rather, the supposed treachery) of him whom she had loved so fervently and so well!

It was about nine o'clock in the evening of that memorable day, when Virginia Mordaunt completed all her preparation for departure. She had laid aside the very garb which she had worn in the morning,—laid it aside, because it was purchased with *his* money; and she had resumed a faded frock, a well-worn shawl, and a shabby straw-bonnet—all of which articles she had fancied, a few hours back, that she should never require again! And now, too, all her little necessaries were contained in a small bundle: and the comforts which she had latterly gathered around her —the neat furniture—the changes of raiment—the few books upon the shelf—the trifling ornaments on the mantel,—all, all of these did she purpose to leave behind her, because she felt that they were no longer her own!

She even sate down for a few moments to recall to mind, if possible, how much money she had of her own on that day when her lover presented her with the bank-note; and having succeeded in recollecting that her purse contained but two or three shillings at the time, she resolved to take no more away with her now. She accordingly deposited in the trunk some four or five sovereigns which remained in her possession: then, locking the box, and taking out the key, she prepared to depart from the lodging where her heart had known such joyous hope and such deep despair.

But she had somewhat over-rated her own moral powers when she fancied that she had composed herself sufficiently to enable her to take this step without any farther outburst of grief. The farewell glance which she threw around her as she hurried to the door of that chamber, was all in a moment darkened by a film that came over her eyes;—and with a sickening sensation at the heart, she tottered towards a chair on which she flung herself helplessly. Across her brow did she slowly draw her hand, to steady her brain which appeared to be reeling, and to arrest her senses which seemed to be abandoning her: then the film gradually dissolved—but her vision was

again obscured by a torrent of blinding tears. Oh! how bitterly—how bitterly she wept!—how profoundly her bosom was convulsed with sobs! Poor girl—poor girl!

No more should she rise in the morning, happy as the bird whose carols met her ear, and in anticipation of meeting her lover in that park whence the song of the feathered chorister came so melodiously!—no more must she hope to feel the warm pressure of the hand whose touch was wont to send an ecstatic thrill to her very heart—no more to experience the bliss attendant upon the soft transfusion of adoring looks—no more to hear her own name breathed with the accents of love and coupled with all endearing epithets! O God! had all this charming vision fled for ever?—was it to return no more? Alas! alas! blank and cheerless indeed had now become the maiden's destiny: darkly spread now the pathway of the world before her eyes. And she—so young, so innocent, so lovely—to suffer thus!—Oh! it was cruel—too cruel! Beauteous but unhappy girl—as ill-fated as thou wast virtuous, as unfortunate as thou wast pure and chaste——what benefit will our sympathy achieve for thee now? Behold her—that sweet, interesting being,—with her sylph-like form so full of modest elegance and winning grace—her lovely countenance so pale and so full of care—her fine blue eyes so dimmed with tears—her steps so light and yet so painfully slow,—behold her as she now exerts a powerful effort to abandon the only place that she can call a home!

With her bundle in her hand, Virginia Mordaunt prepares to take her departure. She flings one last look around: she staggers against the door-post for support—and she compresses her lips violently to keep down the feelings that threaten to unnerve her again. The thought that she is performing a duty which she owes to herself, suddenly inspires her with courage and strength;—and turning hastily away, she crosses the threshold and descends the stairs with a rapid step. The good people of the house meet her in the passage below; and they are overwhelmed with grief and surprise when they hear that she is about to leave them. They are already acquainted with the fact that her marriage cannot now take place: but they are at a loss to understand wherefore she should flee away thus precipitately on that account.

"My good friends," said Virginia, in a voice that was tremulous and low, and with looks so mournful—oh! so profoundly mournful, that they already seemed to be telling the tale of a breaking heart,—"my dear friends, I thank you—most cordially thank you for your kind sympathy: but I must not—dare not remain in this neighbourhood—nor in this house! In the first place, it is necessary to my mental tranquillity,—for I dare not speak of happiness any more in this world,—but it is essential to the recovery of my soul's composure, I say, that I should remove at once from a scene every feature of which would only keep alive the most painful reminiscences. Besides—I owe it to myself—I owe it to the shade of my dear departed mother," continued Virginia, her blue eyes filling with tears, and her voice becoming scarcely audible—"to fly from a neighbourhood where I may chance to meet with *him* again! It is true that he knows not precisely where I have been living: but he is well aware that my abode was at no great distance from the park—and if he should resolve upon pursuing me still, his perseverance will lead him to this house. Ah! I dare not—oh! no—I must not meet him again, my friends: and you yourselves cannot counsel me to do so! But I have left behind me all that I have derived from his bounty—everything that has been purchased with his money;—and should he come hither——a tall young gentleman——yes, and very handsome, too——giving the name of Osmond —— Charles Osmond —— you will tell him——"

But here Virginia's voice, which for some moments had been broken and convulsed, was now lost in sobs; and the worthy couple were deeply affected by the young girl's acute and rending anguish.

"You will tell him," she said, after a long pause, and still speaking with difficulty,—"you will tell him that I have left behind me everything which does not properly belong to me. You may tell him also that I wish him no harm——that I even forgive him——but that he must never hope to see me again!"

Then wringing her friends' hands with all the cordiality and fervour of that grateful feeling which she experienced towards them, Virginia Mordaunt hastened away from the house, the tears streaming down her cheeks and her heart beating as if it must burst.

Let us suppose three months to have elapsed since that fatal day; and we shall then find the young maiden seated in a wretched attic in the purlieus of the Minories. The house, which swarms with lodgers, is situate in a court where the atmosphere is tainted, the drainage is deficient, and the water is scanty in supply and unwholesome in quality. A miserable flock mattrass stretched upon the bare boards—an old trunk for a table—a stool to sit upon—and a few articles of crockeryware,—these constitute all the furniture of Virginia's attic. And the young maiden herself——holy God! how changed is she! Gone are the roses which the fresh air of the Regent's-park had brought back to her cheeks during the day-dream of her love;—and the lilies have taken their place. Pale—yes, pale as alabaster is she—as if all vital colouring had fled from the presence of a withering illness: and yet ill, in the strict sense of the term, she has not been. Only the illness of the mind—the cankering disease of the heart—has she experienced,—accompanied by that gradual waste of the frame which is produced by sorrow, by poverty, by famine, and by crushing toil!

Pale—oh! yes—pale as a statue is Virginia Mordaunt!—not with the dull, dead, insipid whiteness of the corpse—but with that pallor which derives a life-like appearance from the presence of vital heat and from the delicate tracery of blue veins beneath her transparent skin. Her naturally slender shape had become thin and wasted—without however losing the sylphid outline and graceful symmetry which not even the well-worn frock could mar, but which the very scantiness of the poor girl's clothing defined all the more perceptibly. And as she sate upon that stool which had no support for her aching back, and plied her needle with a celerity that must have resulted more from a sort of mechanical skill than from physical energy, her hand as she raised it was so thin that it seemed

transparent. Yet was it not shrunken in the ugly meaning of the term: it was delicate—very delicate—even as her form had become too slender and too delicate to bear any association with the idea of health. Sweetly—deeply—touchingly interesting the maiden still was,—invested with a spirit-like beauty that appeared unable to resist the cold atmosphere of this world,—a charming flower whose loveliness increased proportionately with the languor that made it droop in death's slow and gradual decline.

We have said that her apparel was scanty: but it was neat as the most scrupulous tidiness could make it. The poor girl's hair, too—that superb luxuriant covering which might have made the envy of a queen, and the glorious gloss upon which ten thousand times outvied the lustre of all the gems that ever sparkled in a royal crown,—her hair, we say, was arranged with evident attention: but this arose from no sentiment of coquetry—just heaven! she had neither inclination nor leisure for idle vanities!—but it was in accordance with the habit of personal neatness and propriety which no distress nor suffering could ever subdue on her part. And the expression of her countenance?—Oh! this is sad, with a settled melancholy—but not a cynic gloom: it is a profound mournfulness attempered by holy resignation—the martyrised look of a saint who amidst the tortures of earth obtains glimpses of heaven!

Her lips are thin and have lost their roseate freshness: but the teeth which they reveal, as they remain slightly parted in deep pensiveness, are still beauteous as strings of pearls—and the breath that passes between them is fragrant as when she was wont to inhale the breezes of the park in company with her lover. Oh! to recall the roses to those pale cheeks and bring back the elasticity of youthful vigour to that drooping form!—but no—it may not be—at least not yet—even if it shall ever be done again!

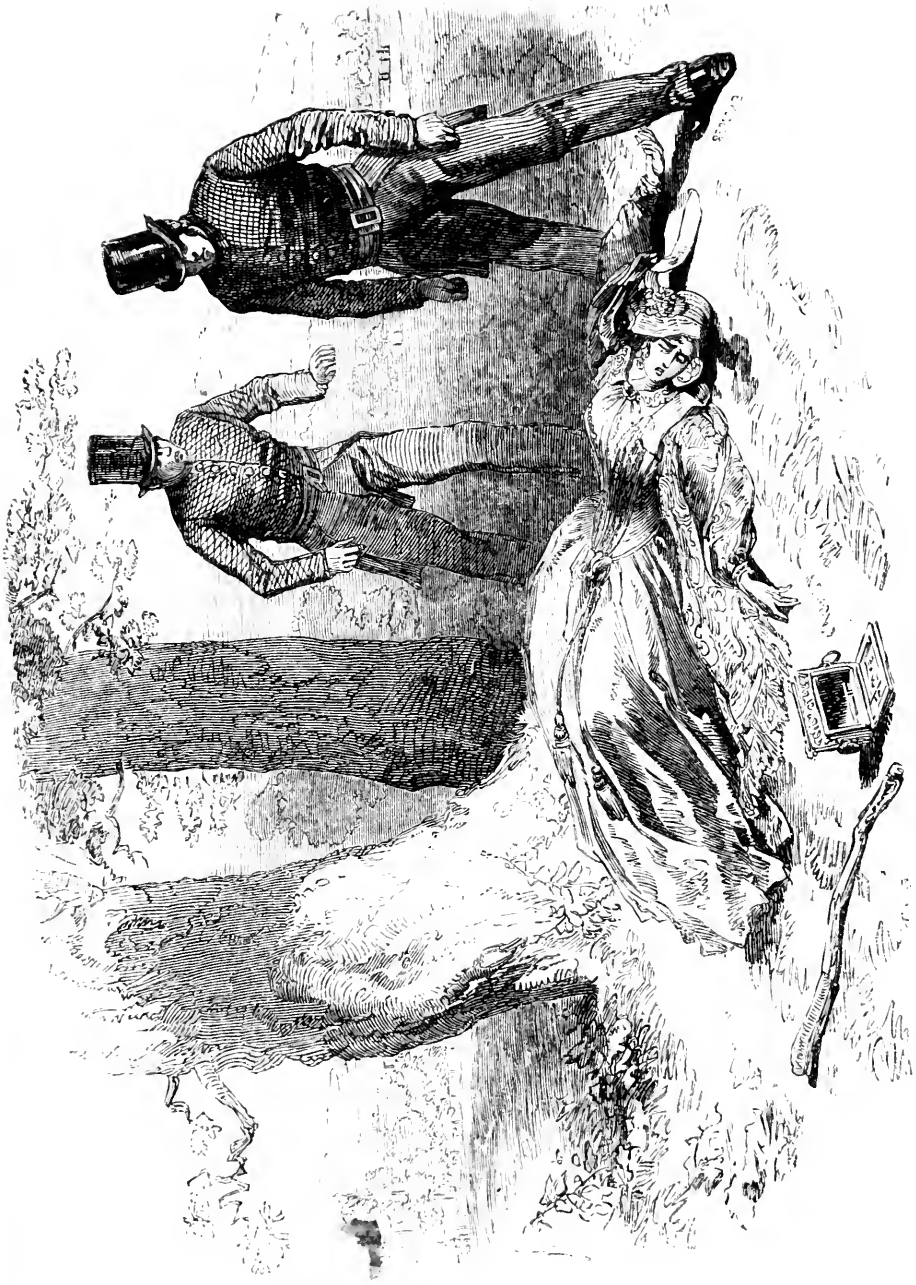
Poverty allows but little choice in respect to the lodging of one in Virginia's friendless, sorrowful condition. To dwell in a respectable neighbourhood a respectable rent must be paid; and that was a price which the poor seamstress could not afford. She was therefore compelled to occupy the attic wherein we find her now, and for which she paid eighteen-pence a week. But then she *enjoyed* the use of the furniture—that furniture which we have already described in a few words, and for the whole of which the most liberal-minded broker in London would not have given half-a-crown!

Yes—poverty had driven the unhappy maiden into a house situate in a low neighbourhood and in a pestilential atmosphere,—a house filled from cellar to roof with beings as poor and wretched as herself, but whose wretchedness often drove them into dissipation and debauchery—whereas, the wider became our heroine's experience of the world and its woes, the stronger were the defences that her innate rectitude was enabled to throw up around her virtue. Dwelling as it were in the midst of contamination, she remained pure and chaste: exposed to constant temptation, she never even lost the presence of mind that strengthened her in resisting it. When the din of drunken orgies reached the ears from below, she shuddered and prayed: and when the young women into whose companionship she was necessarily thrown at times, ventured to hint how easily she might procure a new gown or ensure a Sunday's dinner, she silenced them with one of those looks to which indignant virtue imparts such power. Or if she were jeered and taunted on account of her steadiness and chastity—as was sometimes the case—she would turn aside and heed not the scoffers.

Thus, although poverty was dragging the poor girl through a vista of dead and sickening experiences, and exposing her to many temptations, it succeeded not in plunging her into error. Amidst all her misery she could walk with head erect;—and although want and famine made her cheeks marble white, they were never tinged with the blush of shame. Such was Virginia Mordaunt!

But how did she earn her scanty subsistence? In that same district where she dwelt—the crowded quarter of Aldgate and the Minories—stands the splendid establishment of Messrs. Aaron and Sons. This palatial emporium is a colossal proof of the grinding tyranny which capital wields over labour, and the influence which it exercises over wages. Upon ancient Egypt did God in his wrath send the plagues of darkness, locusts, and murrain: but over modern Europe has Satan diffused the far more awful pestilence of competition. And it is this accursed system which makes the emporium of Messrs. Aaron and Sons flourish for the benefit of its proprietors; while the vapours of demoralization, despair, famine, sickness, and death, emanate from its portals and infect the atmosphere that is breathed by a large portion of the community. The towering edifice, so grand without and so superb within,—showing in the vastness of its extent and in the minutest details of its decorations, the lavish profusion that marked its erection,—with its magnificent windows, its plate glass, and its brilliant illuminations,—this costly structure, we say, is a mighty monument which capital has raised in honour of the Genius of Competition. But to view it morally, its aspect is hideous in the extreme. Its foundations are built with the bones of the white slaves of England, male and female: the skeletons of journeymen tailors and poor seamstresses, all starved to death, constitute the door-posts and the window-frames;—the walls are made of skulls—the architectural devices are cross-bones—and the whole is cemented firmly and solidly by the blood, pith, and marrow of the miserable wretches who are forced to sell themselves in the Slave-Market of British Labour.

And it was for this emporium that Virginia Mordaunt worked—that is to say, worked indirectly. For she was not employed directly by the house itself, but by the middle-women who farmed the work which the establishment required to be done. In fact, it was the old system of Mrs. Jackson, Mrs. Pembroke, and Madame Duplessy, all over again,—with the substitution of other names and lower wages. In fact, poor Virginia was now engaged in making slop-shirts at *two-pence farthing* a-piece! Yes, shirts at two-pence farthing each; and by dint of toiling from six in the morning until twelve at night, she was enabled to make three in a day. Ah! but *a day* of eighteen hours—leaving the poor girl only six hours which she could call *her night!* And during those eighteen hours she earned precisely *sixpence three-farthings*—out of which she had to purchase the thread! Every shirt had seven button-holes—three to the bosom, two to the collar, and one to each wristband; and the sewing must be neatly done, or



No. 12.—The Seamstress.

the poor seamstress would have to pay for the *spoilt work!*

Thus the fullest extent of wages which Virginia could earn by toiling eighteen hours a-day, the Sabbath excepted, was three shillings a-week for herself, the thread costing her at least the farthing over the two-pence on every shirt. Three shillings a-week to pay rent, coal, and candle—to procure the necessaries of life—and to purchase clothing! How could it be done? Only by subjecting the poor girl to the process of a lingering death by starvation. No wonder, then, that her cheeks were pale—that her form was attenuated—that her health was declining—and that her spirit was already broken!

Virginia's food consisted of coffee, tea, bread, and oatmeal. The Duke of Norfolk who so generously and humanely recommended the poor to use a pinch of currie powder in a gallon of hot water "*to make an excellent soup,*" would doubtless tell us that "coffee, tea, bread, and oatmeal," constitute a perfect summary of luxuries! Malediction upon all aristocratic heartlessness! For, oh! how small—how infinitely small—how tiny were the quantities of tea and coffee which the poor girl was enabled to purchase at a time—and how frequently was the tea warmed up and the coffee boiled over and over again! Sugar she had completely broken herself of. And then, as for bread—judge, ye tyrant aristocrats! how much of *this* could poor Virginia afford to buy out of her three shillings a-week, after paying eighteen-pence for rent and sixpence for coal and candles! She could not even enjoy a penny roll a-day. Her principal food was therefore oatmeal;—and the fair, innocent, interesting girl, endowed with every virtue and every personal grace, was not a hundredth part so well fed as the Queen of England's lap-dog or the Duke of Norfolk's pigs!

As sure as there is a God in heaven, must a curse fall upon the land where such a system exists. The Almighty cannot—oh! no—he cannot, he cannot suffer such horrors to endure much longer. Neither will he permit them to go unpunished. What right has any set of men to make this country an earthly hell for all the rest? Bishops who preach patience to starving millions, are the vilest hypocrites that desecrate the human species: statesmen who bestow the name of "sedition" upon discontent, will have much to answer for when they stand before the throne of a just God, however successfully they may have ground down the masses in this world. Yes—truly, there must be a hell hereafter: or else where is the justice of the Eternal?

We have seen that Virginia was compelled to live upon three shillings a week. But this was a sum which she was not always sure of obtaining. Sometimes work was slack; at others she felt too ill to toil for eighteen hours a-day. Then, indeed, did she endure misery the most pinching—penury the most poignant: then, indeed, did she feel, and know, and experience all the horrors which must attend upon the lingering death of starvation. Her weekly struggle was to pay her rent: every sacrifice must be made to accomplish this object; —or else would she be turned adrift into the open streets—homeless, as she was already friendless! Poor girl—poor girl! she was perishing by inches —dying by slow famine—as so many thousands of British females are ever pining and fading away into early graves, while titled demireps and noble courtezans at the West End are revelling in all the luxuries and elegancies of life. Oh! if the thirty thousand pale, spectral, wasted needle-women of London were all to assemble and go down in a body to Buckingham Palace, and demand—yes, demand an interview with the Queen,—what would be the effect? Doubtless Victoria would be appalled by the aspect of that multitude of shadowy forms and wan faces: but she would refer them to her Ministers—and her Ministers would tell them to go quietly home, for fear their shocking appearance should excite the indignation of the people and thereby *endanger the security of property!*

"Ah! by all means protect the property of such establishments as that of Messrs. Aaron and Sons—no matter how many journeymen tailors may fashion their own funeral palls and how many seamstresses may work their own winding-sheets in the service of the wealthy slop-sellers! Besides, only consider—the City every now and then requires a Sheriff from that class of capitalists, competitors, and monopolists. What are a few thousands of starving tailors or famishing needlewomen, so long as the Government receives the duty upon the twenty thousand pounds sterling annually spent by Aaron and Sons in newspaper-advertisements? Why, there are pensioners, placemen, and sinecurists to be paid: and therefore the Government must have money—somehow or another! Raise that money, then, by taxing the tea and the coffee which the poor seamstress drinks: for again we ask, of what matter is it to the Government, the Aristocracy, the Bishops, or the Legislature, how many inoffensive, hard-working, miserable women are *starved to death* in the course of a year?

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### CONTINUATION OF THE WOES OF THE WHITE SLAVE.

ANOTHER three months have elapsed—and bleak November has now set in, with its chill breath that pierces like an ice-shaft to the marrow of the bones and transfixes the very brain. Virginia is still in the same neighbourhood—yes, and in the very self-same room where we found her in the preceding chapter. She is employed on work that is more remunerative though much harder than that of shirt-making. For the middle-woman, or "sweater," by whom Virginia was engaged, found that the young creature would prove a more serviceable and valuable slave at trousers-making than at shirt-sewing. Our heroine accordingly became a worker on moleskin and corduroy trousers.

But why could not Virginia, who was so proficient with her needle, obtain the best and most delicate work from the mantua-makers and milliners, instead of the coarse slop-work of the delectable Messrs. Aaron and Sons?—or why, at all events, could she not procure the work direct from the establishment itself, instead of through the hands of a middle-woman? All these points have been discussed and explained in a previous chapter; and the same system which in the first instance rendered Virginia the slave of Mrs. Jackson, now

enchains her to the service of one of the numerous "sweaters" who farm the work of Messrs. Aaron and Sons. It is true that there are some slop-establishments which give out the work direct to the journeymen and the seamstresses, instead of through the agency of middle-men or sweaters: but in those cases security must be found by the persons to whom materials are entrusted for working up——and where was our poor friendless orphan to find such guarantee? She could not: and therefore she remained the prey of the middle-woman.

By working from six in the morning till eleven at night, Virginia could make two pairs of trousers a-day. For each pair she received seven-pence. When in full work—therefore—and not impeded by illness—she now earned fourteen-pence a day (the Sabbath excepted), or seven shillings a-week. Out of this sum, her thread, twist, candles, and coals cost her two shillings at the lowest: then her rent was eighteen-pence;—and thus she had three shillings and sixpence left to live upon and procure raiment. Such a position would have been one of prosperity compared with what it was when she toiled at shirt-making: but even this improved state of her affairs had its drawbacks. She was sometimes slack of work when in good health, and frequently overwhelmed with work when too weak and ill to perform it. Indeed, the poor girl could nôt conceal from herself the alarming fact that her health *was* declining—that she did not feel so strong as she even was three months back—and that she was at times troubled with a short dry cough. And then dreadful ideas would come into her mind and almost drive her mad,—ideas of a long lingering illness, without a friend to succour her—and perhaps the workhouse in the perspective!

Ah! that terrible word—the *Workhouse!* What miseries—what degradations—what sufferings are summed up in that appalling dissyllable! A severance from all the ties of human fellowship—a state of vile prisonage, characterised by the same gray garb that felons wear in gaols and hulks—an awful monotony in the routine of existence—the utter abasement of the mind beneath a sense of consummate humiliation,—all these ideas are condensed in the one word that expresses the lowest and most abject condition of human misery. And Virginia, during her residence in the purlieus of the Minories, had often heard of people going to the workhouse—aye, and had seen them go. In the place where she dwelt, the landlady exacted the weekly rent with the most scrupulous punctuality from every lodger: and those who could not pay were turned out mercilessly. Under such circumstances as these was it that Virginia had frequently—oh! too frequently beheld poor women forced to apply for admission to the workhouse: she had seen mothers press their famished children to their bosoms, and weep over them as bitterly—O God! as bitterly as any Duchess could weep over her own—at the thought of being separated from them! She had seen, too, strong men—hale, hearty, and willing to work, but having no work to do,—she had seen them tremble like aspens and shake like reeds—aye, and melt into tears, at the presence of that dread moment when necessity forced them to think of the workhouse! No wonder, then, that the young girl—patient, resigned, and enduring though she were—should feel her brain turning and her thoughts become maddening at the prospect of an immurement in that living tomb which the heartless rich have formed for their worn-out serfs and superannuated slaves!

We have already stated the amount which Virginia could earn at trousers-making, when in full work and good health; we have likewise observed that weakness and indisposition often marred her progress and thus abridged her wages. We may now add that the nature of the work itself was so fatiguing, in consequence of the stubbornness and hardness of the material, that it accelerated the decline of the poor maiden's health. With a daily increasing terror, therefore, did she contemplate the future,—that future whence she would so gladly avert her eyes if she could, but upon which they remained all the more steadfastly fixed in proportion to the agonizing anguish and despair of such contemplation. Besides, with all her patience and meekness—with all her truly Christian resignation and pious fortitude—she could not feel otherwise than wearied and disgusted with a state of dependence upon the caprice, petty tyranny, and insolence of a middle-woman.

Virginia Mordaunt accordingly resolved upon making a desperate effort to procure work direct from some establishment that gave it out. The only difficulty was to obtain the requisite security; and now she bethought herself of the worthy couple at whose house she had dwelt in Camden Town. Six months had elapsed since she bade them farewell,—six months since that memorable day on which she was so terribly deceived by the treachery of Clementine. During that interval she had often—Oh! yes, often—longed to pay those good people a visit;—and perhaps, with the natural feelings of her sex, she had experienced a secret inclination to learn whether Mr. Osmond (for she knew him by no other name) had found out that house, and if so, what he had said. But she had hitherto restrained herself from a feeling of maidenly pride and a sense of duty. She did not wish the old couple to imagine for a moment that she felt any curiosity, much less any latent tenderness, with regard to her lover: and her ideas of propriety had moreover all along suggested that she should abstain from visiting a neighbourhood where it was possible she might encounter him, should he be on the search after her.

But now she had a real, positive, and substantial motive for calling upon her old friends: and accordingly, one Sunday afternoon, Virginia set out to walk to Camden Town. She reached the house just as the worthy couple were sitting down to tea;—and we need hardly observe that the poor girl was welcomed with the sincerest cordiality. The old man placed a seat for her—the old woman kissed her and cried over her as if the maiden were her own child. Then they both looked at her long and attentively;—and when they saw how pale she was—how thin she had become—and how languid all her movements appeared to be, they inquired in a tone of compassionate interest whether she had not been very ill. Virginia's heart swelled at the kind sympathy thus manifested towards her,—a sympathy to which she had been such a perfect stranger during the last six months: and, with tears tracing their pearly path adown her cheeks, she told the worthy couple how hard she had toiled—how her health and strength had declined—and

how she stood in need of their friendly assistance, so far as a guarantee for her honesty was concerned. To this request the old man cheerfully acceded;—and then with a flush appearing for a few moments upon her cheek, and with downcast eyes, she inquired whether Mr. Osmond had ever been to take possession of the things which she had left behind her.

"Ah! my dear girl!" exclaimed the old woman, "we had a truly touching scene here one day, I can assure you; and if *his* grief was affected, then never did the world produce a greater hypocrite. You had not left us a week, when a tall, thin, handsome young gentleman—Ah! so handsome, I don't wonder you loved him—knocked at the door and inquired in a tone of agitation and excitement, if Miss Virginia Mordaunt lived here. He evidently was dying for the answer—I mean, he was almost mad with impatience: and when I told him that you *had* lived here, but that you had gone away about a week previous, he burst forth into the wildest exclamations. Then he put a thousand questions to me, all in a moment: whether I knew why you had gone—with whom you had departed—under what circumstances—and all manner of queries showing, or at least seeming to show, that he could not for the life of him understand your conduct towards him. I then told him as much as I know,—that you had come home one evening, a week back, in a dreadful state of mind, having had positive reason to believe that he was playing you false—that you had resolved to depart for the purpose of never seeing him again—and that you had left behind you, in case he should discover the house and call, everything which had been purchased by the money you had received from him. Ah! how the young gentleman wept——yes—wept bitter, burning, scalding tears, as he listened to all I told him. I never saw a woman weep in a profounder agony. He leant against the wall in the passage—he covered his face with his hands—he groaned in spirit. I pitied him—Oh! I pitied him: for I saw that he loved you well and truly, whether treacherous or not. At last, when I told him about the things you had left behind, he implored me to allow him to ascend to the chamber which you had occupied: and when I conducted him upstairs and gave him the key of the trunk, he opened it—he stooped down—kissed the wedding-dress which lay at the top—and then fell once more into a fit of such anguished weeping that the tears ran like rain down my own cheeks. His lamentations were most piteous—his ejaculations most impassioned. He declared that some treachery, or else some fatal misunderstanding had worked all this mischief: and he vowed never to rest until he had found you out again. Then, when his grief had somewhat subsided, he gently—and with an evident delicacy—removed the things from the trunk, one by one—no doubt in the hope of finding a letter from you. But there was none: and when he discovered the money which you had placed in the trunk, he exclaimed, 'My God! even to *this* has she left behind her everything for which she could in any way have considered herself indebted to me! Ah! what a fine spirit—what a noble nature! And shall I renounce such a being as this? shall I abandon all hope of meeting her again? No, no: if I were compelled to walk barefoot all over the world to find her out, I would not shrink from the task.'—Then he replaced all the things in the trunk; and demanding of me the rent of the room, he said, 'You will not remove that box: you will consider this apartment to be still Virginia's. I will pay you six months, or a year, or for any period you like in advance: for it would be desecration to remove anything that has belonged to her.'—Vainly did I remonstrate: Mr. Osmond worked himself into a pitch of passion that alarmed me; and I therefore took the five guineas which he tossed down upon the table. He then went away; and at the expiration of a week he returned to ascertain if I had received any tidings of you. I told him that I had not: and he charged me to write to him without an instant's delay, should I obtain the slightest clue to your abode. He desired that the letter should be addressed to him, under cover to some fashionable tailor at the West End, whose card he gave me, telling me at the same time that he should call there every day in the hope of finding a communication from me. Of course this hope has experienced incessant disappointment: but he called here frequently—at least every two or three weeks—to assure himself that I remembered my promise to write to him. Ah! Miss, he is greatly altered—sadly altered indeed,—almost as much as you are yourself!"

While the good old woman was narrating her tale,—not, however, in precisely the words which we have put into her mouth, but fully to the same effect,—Virginia struggled hard to keep down her emotions. But they rose—they rose, defying all resistance: higher and higher they surged, like gathering billows in the storm—until at length the tears flowed in torrents down her cheeks—her bosom was convulsed with sobs—and she was melted into a tenderness so complete that had her lover entered at the moment, she would have rushed into his arms.

And for some time after the dame had concluded her narrative, Virginia continued to weep and sob, while her hands were clasped firmly together, and her bosom palpitated violently. But relieved by this outburst of feeling, and recalled to a stern sense of duty and propriety—or rather, what she believed to be such, under the impression that still remained immoveably upon her mind,—she said in a low deep tone, full of touching pathos, "Be not surprised at this weakness, my friends: I cannot conquer the natural emotions of the heart! Would to God that I could believe Charles Osmond to be as honourable as he is affectionate. That he loves me, I have no doubt: but I have received such unmistakable proofs of his perfidy towards *another* and of his want of principle towards myself, that I dare not think of him—save as one whom I must never meet again. Besides, my dear friends—he is married—yes, married to another——and I saw him with his bride! The sister of a lovely and confiding girl whom he betrayed and abandoned, pointed him out to me on that never-to-be-forgotten day when I quitted your dwelling six months back. Let us, then, mention him no more. Yet another word," she added, after a pause, "ere I abandon the subject. Should he return, my friends, I charge you not to give him any tidings of me. The explanations which I have glanced at, will convince you that he is not in a position to bestow an honourable love upon me!"

The worthy couple had nothing to urge against the resolution of the young seamstress—a resolution, indeed, which they could not do otherwise than applaud. They promised to observe the most religious secrecy concerning her visit and everything that regarded her;—and the old man having made an appointment to attend in the City on the following morning and give the required security at the clothing-mart, Virginia took an affectionate leave of her kind friends.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### THE TEMPTATIONS OF THE SEAMSTRESS.

BEING now enabled to give security for the materials entrusted to her, our heroine obtained work from a large army-clothier's establishment, the foreman of which was a good-looking, dashing, conceited individual, who treated Virginia with a mingled urbanity and patronising familiarity, by no means calculated to win the confidence or ensure the esteem of the pure-minded girl. But she dared not testify any disgust at the fulsome manners of so important a personage; and she accordingly received both his attentions and instructions with a respectful reserve. He gave her some soldiers' trousers to make up, telling her that she would be paid sixpence halfpenny a pair, finding her own thread. Back to her humble lodging did Virginia hie, reckoning as she went along that she would be able to make two pairs a-day, thereby earning eleven-pence for herself when the cost of the thread was deducted. And for three or four weeks she toiled with comparative cheerfulness at a kind of work which was much easier than that whereon she had been previously engaged: but it nevertheless took her sixteen hours every day to complete the two pairs of trousers which she had calculated on finishing. Every morning when she rose from her humble pallet, she felt so wearied that it seemed impossible she could arouse within herself the energy sufficient to meet the coming toil of sixteen long, long hours: and every night when, exhausted and worn out, she threw aside her work and lay down to rest, she felt as if she never should rise up again. Thus six weeks or two months passed away; and the poor girl could not conceal from herself that she was becoming weaker and weaker—wearing out all her vital powers—over-taxing all the energies of her youthfulness—and day by day becoming more sensitive to the want of pure air and mental and physical relaxation.

Sad, too, were the experiences which her contact with the young women who worked for the same establishment brought to her knowledge: sad and mournful were the social phases which she was too often forced to contemplate! She saw that virtue amongst the females of her class was the rarest of gems,—that wives were compelled to go astray with the cognizance of husbands, and that daughters became criminal to the knowledge of their parents, in order to eke out a miserable subsistence by the addition of the wages of infamy. Yes—the earnings of honest labour were so poor, so wretchedly small, that the oppressed needlewomen were goaded by famine and desperation to have recourse to the earnings of shame. Many—oh! how many—of these unfortunate beings loathed and abhorred the base idea of walking in the paths of error: but their choice lay between starvation—suicide—and infamy! They dared not beg—the police-laws hung in terror over them: they shrank from the thought of self-destruction:—and yet they could not starve! What were they to do? Reader, spurn not away the unfortunate girl who accosts you in the streets: but pity her—and give her alms. Peradventure she belongs to the class of needlewomen, who would be virtuous if they could, but who are made the victims of all the tremendous tyranny of capital, monopoly, and competition. Yes—let there be pity and compassion for those who err, not from any impulsive love of profligacy and vice, but in obedience to that stern necessity which breaks down the strongest defences that woman may set up around her virtue!

And if our humble heroine remained pure and spotless in the midst of contamination—in the midst of temptation—in the midst of sorrow, suffering, and crushing toil,—she must be regarded only as an exception to the rule, and not as a type of her class in this respect. With pain and indignation do we record the fact that virtue in the poor seamstress is almost an impossibility: and yet we intend no reproach to herself or her order. God forbid! We are profoundly afflicted at the contemplation of her unmerited wrongs—wrongs so deep and cruel, so flagrant and terrible, that they call upon heaven for vengeance:—and our blood boils at the reflection that all those wrongs spring from a social vitiation which a humane government and an honest legislature could so speedily amend.

Of the thirty thousand females living in London ostensibly by the needle and slop-work, not less than twelve thousand are *under* twenty years of age;—and nine-tenths of those poor girls are plunged by stern necessity into the vortex of vice before they scarcely know what vice means! Eighty thousand daughters of crime walk the streets of London: and whence is this vast amazonian army of infamy chiefly recruited? The answer may be read in the details which we are now chronicling relative to the class of needlewomen. Oh! it is a mockery—a hideous, impious, frightful mockery to preach from the pulpit the beauty of female virtue, while thousands and thousands of poor girls are driven by a demoniac system into the ways of vice: and it is a diabolical, a scandalous, and an atrocious insult to denounce the immorality of the "lower orders," while they have neither the power nor the inducement to be virtuous. Instead of Magdalen Institutions—and Societies for the Protection of Young Females—and long sermons proclaiming eternal damnation to those who go astray,—let philanthropists and parsons, if they be honest and sincere, address themselves to the task of procuring an adequate remuneration for the daughters of toil. Let the eloquence of the pulpit be employed *less* in running down unwilling sinners, and *more* in showing up vile monopolists. Let not the *immorality*, but the *wages*, of needlewomen first absorb attention; and with the adjustment of the latter, the former will soon disappear. Let the mask be torn away from the countenances of those wretches and miscreants who

build and maintain palatial establishments with the bones, blood, and sinews of famished seamstresses and starving journeymen-tailors;—and let Christian charity throw its veil over the errors and frailties of the white slaves of England. The parsons need not always look beyond the boundaries of this world to discover demons and point out devils: there are both upon the face of this earth—both desecrating this land of vaunted civilization—both busily employed in making a terrestrial hell of this world of ours. Yes—body-crushing and soul-destroying devils and demons have dared to fix their habitation amongst us: vampyre-like, they are drinking the blood of men, women, and little children: hideous cannibals, they are preying upon human flesh;—and their accursed system is spreading an awful demoralization throughout the country—filling the streets with unfortunate women, peopling the gaols with victims, and crowding the workhouses with a mass of human wretchedness.

Such are the tremendous iniquities of those who grind down the needlewomen and slop-workers. But to return to Virginia—we said that about two months had passed away since she procured employment from the army-clothier's;—and during that period the foreman in the establishment gradually became more pointed in his attentions—more significant in his flatteries. The poor girl, though anticipating the result, received the former with coldness and turned a deaf ear to the latter. At length, as she had feared and expected, the fellow became more explicit in his observations, and from general hints proceeded to direct overtures. He was married and had several children: but the duties of a husband and a father did not restrain him from carrying on his intrigues wherever his fancy was suited and his favour valued. Indeed, of all the females who worked for the establishment over which he presided, there was scarcely one who, if at all good-looking, had not been compelled to endure his persecution and submit to his wishes. When, therefore, he was met with an indignant rebuff on the part of Virginia, he was so astonished at such unusual conduct, that he was some minutes before he could recover himself: then, bursting out into an insolent laugh, he taunted her with the affectation of a virtue which she was too poor to practise. This crowning insult brought all the blood into the hitherto pale cheeks of the pining, suffering girl;—and, throwing down the work which she had just received from the foreman, she repaired straight to the master of the warehouse. To him she briefly and modestly explained the treatment she had experienced; and, with the big tears running down her blushing cheeks, she besought his protection against insult for the future. But the clothier was incredulous as to the purity and sincerity of the young creature's motives: he did not believe that she was truly and veritably inspired by the resentment of outraged virtue;—but he fancied that some jealous pique was prompting her to seek the means of revenge against the foreman. In plain terms, he did not for a moment imagine that our heroine was actually virtuous: he did not believe that she *could* be! Well aware of the appalling fact that nine-tenths of the females who worked for him were morally ruined by the system that made *him* rich and prosperous and *them* wretched and miserable, he looked upon virtue in a seamstress as a phenomenon amounting almost to an impossibility. He accordingly surveyed Virginia with the air of one who feels very much inclined to unmask a hypocrite: but not considering it worth while to waste many words upon the matter—especially as he was busy at the time—he sharply bade her go about her business and settle her quarrels with the foreman elsewhere. Virginia's heart swelled almost to bursting: she endeavoured to speak—but her feelings choked her;—and her brutal employer pushed her out of his private office.

She hastened back to her humble lodging—flung herself on her knees—covered her countenance with her hands—and implored the sainted spirit of her mother to look down from heaven and have compassion upon her. Deep, deep was the poor girl's anguish as she thus wept and prayed in the bitterness of her spirit and with the keenest sense of her orphaned condition. What had she done to deserve so much persecution? Surely, surely she worked and toiled hard enough for her bread, without being subjected to the cruelty of insult? Was Man a base and remorseless tyrant, who not only made poor Woman his slave, but likewise the object of his persecution? Ah! it would almost seem as if she had no right to be virtuous:—and assuredly she received no credit for her virtue! On the contrary, the rectitude of her behaviour and the purity of her morals were likely to become barriers instead of auxiliaries in her painful path through this life!

Scarcely had she risen from her knees, wiped away the traces of her tears, and sate down to ponder upon the course which she ought to pursue, when a knock was heard at the door. She hastened to open it—and the foreman of the establishment entered the room. A flush of indignation appeared upon the maiden's countenance: but, on a second thought, she subdued her feelings as well as she was able, in the hope that he had come to apologise for his behaviour toward her. Apologise indeed! he was as unlikely to experience any remorse for persecuting "a mere seamstress" with his attentions as his master was incapable of sending him to pay a proper tribute to offended virtue. Besides, the man was too much inflated by the easy conquests he had invariably met with in all former instances not to make sure of obtaining a triumph in this. He accordingly shut the door—leant his back against it—and addressed our heroine in the following terms:—"It is all very pretty of you, Miss Mordaunt, to play the prude with me, in the hope of attracting the notice of my master and making a market of your charms with him. But he's too steady and at the same time too knowing an old file to be caught in that manner. The plant was good—only it wouldn't do. So you will have to fall back upon me, after all. And now hear what I have got to say, young Miss. If you continue to look as black as thunder upon me, you may just go and get work where you can: for I'll be hanged if you'll have any more from our shop. But, on the other hand, only be kind and good—and there's nothing I won't do for you. You shall have the best and easiest work—and if you *do* happen to make a mistake now and then and charge for two dozen pairs, instead of one dozen, I shan't be over nice in comparing the bill with the number of garments brought in. Do you understand me?"

Virginia did indeed understand him;—and, inspired with a spirit which had not animated her

for a long time past, she demanded how he dared insult her by suspecting her honesty as well as tempting her virtue? The man laughed at her indignation—swore that she looked quite beautiful when in a passion—and vowed that he would have one kiss of her charming lips. But Virginia's screams alarmed the house; and the other lodgers burst into the room. The foreman affected to treat the whole proceeding with the utmost levity; and the result was that Virginia only brought down jeers and ridicule upon herself. To rouse the neighbourhood on account of *such a trifle*, was something too preposterous in the estimation of those who could not understand the principles of delicacy, purity, and virtue which inspired our heroine. The lodgers therefore retired, recommending the poor defenceless girl "to make it all right with the foreman;"—and the orphan, thus abandoned to the mercy of the ruffian, seized a knife and threatened to stab him without remorse if he dared approach her. The man, astounded at her conduct, but unable to persuade himself that it was prompted by a real regard for her honour, endeavoured to overcome her scruples by coaxing and flattery: but, receiving naught save the most indignant remonstrances in return, he avenged himself by levelling cowardly and scandalous taunts at the heroic girl. Basely hinting that she no doubt had some lover whose jealousy she was afraid of exciting, and telling her that he should yet see her walking the streets as a common girl, the scoundrel took himself off—leaving the maiden without the slightest means of redress against his brutal conduct. Need we say how bitterly, how acutely her mind, so sensitive and so delicate in all its feelings and emotions, was wrung by the ordeal through which she had just passed? The compassionate reader can doubtless picture to himself the orphan girl, weighed down by the cruel outrage—smarting under the insult which even *her* forgiving and generous nature longed to avenge—and calling upon heaven to change the current of a destiny all the sorrows of which were so little deserved by her.

## CHAPTER XXX.

### SICKNESS.

THE poor seamstress lost her work at the army-clothier's, because she was virtuous — and not because she was criminal. She was persecuted because she would not deviate from the paths of rectitude and propriety. And this occurred in a christian country—a land of Bibles—a realm governed by a female sovereign!

At the particular moment when Virginia was thus thrown out of employment, she was penniless. It was on a Monday morning; and all that she received on the previous Saturday evening, had been paid away. She was now compelled to ask for credit at the chandler's shop where she was accustomed to deal; and the favour was not refused her. But it was necessary that she should apply to her good friends in Camden Town and solicit the old man to give his security for her to another clothing establishment. She was too weak and ill, after the painful excitement of the morning, to walk such a distance—and she had no money to pay for an omnibus. She accordingly wrote a letter and borrowed from a neighbour a penny to frank the postage. Then she lay down upon her humble pallet;—and for once in her life she was almost glad that she had no work for the moment, inasmuch as the absence thereof afforded her a legitimate excuse for taking that rest which she so much required. Sleep came upon her—and when she awoke again, it was pitch dark. She had slumbered there for many hours—and as she endeavoured to raise herself from the mattrass in order to procure a light, she felt that she was very ill. A sensation of coldness was upon her—she shivered all over—her limbs refused to perform their office——heavens! if she were about to die!

The idea appalled her for a moment—and she sank back on the pallet. But a second thought filled her with indescribable pleasure: for she reflected that it was better to die when young and virtuous, than linger on in wretchedness and exposed to temptation. Besides, she felt that death would be the passport to heaven, where she should join her sainted mother who had gone thither before her. The young girl accordingly experienced a glow of happiness at the prospect of death;—and clasping her hands together, she prayed long, silently but with fervour, in the profound darkness of that chamber. Then a sensation came over her—a sensation of numbness and faintness, as if all her energies were gradually extinguishing;—and murmuring to herself, "This is death!" she became insensible.

But it was merely a swoon into which the poor girl had fallen through weakness and exhaustion;—and when she slowly came to herself again, she sorrowed at the thought of waking once more to breathe the air of this world. Darkness still enveloped her—and the sounds of drunken revelry from below enabled her to judge that it was yet early in the night. Presently the din of debauchery ceased; and a dead silence prevailed throughout the dwelling. Sleep once more revisited the maiden's eyes; and when she awoke in the morning, with the first ideas that entered her mind came the conviction that she was very ill. Painfully did the poor girl drag herself from the miserable pallet to procure some water to slake the burning thirst that she experienced: and as she was creeping back to the mattrass, she caught sight of a letter which lay upon the table. Some one had placed it there, on the previous evening, while the maiden slept. It was an answer to the one which she had posted in the forenoon to Camden Town; and its contents were dispiriting indeed. The old man had died a few days previously—and his widow, who was in the utmost tribulation, had deputed a niece to pen a few hasty lines to Miss Mordaunt and acquaint her with the circumstance. The note concluded with a kind invitation to the young seamstress to visit the widow at an early day when the good woman promised to do all she could for her in the matter of the security that was required.

Virginia shed tears as she read of the demise of the worthy man who befriended her: and as for the invitation——alas! poor girl, she was compelled to return to her humble pallet, and lie down again—perhaps to die. Hours passed—no one came near her—and she was too weak to make her voice heard in the next room. She was ill—and she required attentions, necessaries, and comforts:

but there was no friendly hand to minister unto her—no voice to speak of solace and hope in her ears. Around were the four cold, cheerless walls of the chamber, seeming to frown upon the helpless invalid as darkly as her own fate. Poor suffering girl! how keenly then didst thou feel thy mother's loss—how bitter were the tears which moistened the rude bolster whereon thine aching head was laid—how suffocating were the sobs which convulsed that gentle breast of thine!

Heavens! was there none to aid the young seamstress, now that she was prostrated by sickness? Hours passed, we say—darkness once more enveloped her, concealing alike her sufferings and her tears:—and at length she heard a step approaching her room. The door opened—the light of a candle gleamed into the chamber—and Virginia, painfully raising her aching head, recognised a poor Irish needlewoman who dwelt on the storey below. The visitress, wondering at not having seen nor heard our youthful heroine all that day, had charitably come to ascertain whether aught unpleasant had occurred; and on observing the poor girl's condition, she at once bustled about to get her some warm tea. The beverage was most welcome to the invalid; and the Irishwoman insisted upon remaining with her a considerable portion of the night. Next day every lodger in the house, when informed of Virginia's illness, did somewhat towards her succour and assistance: one sent a little tea and sugar—another a loaf—a third some gruel—and the poor Irishwoman went out and secretly pledged her shawl to purchase a scrag of mutton to make the sick girl some broth. Thus it is that the poor assist each other in the hour of need;—and those very persons who had laughed and jeered at Virginia when she had alarmed them by her screams in the adventure of the foreman, were now eager and anxious to testify their good feeling towards her. For though poverty and the extremes to which it drove them, had destroyed their delicate notions of morality, yet their feelings were not blunted by the same influences: on the contrary, they who were so cruelly oppressed, scourged, persecuted, tortured, and trampled upon by their task-masters, were full of the milk of human kindness towards a suffering fellow-creature! Oh! how sublime is the disposition of the working-classes, not only in this country but in every other;—and it is because they are thus generous, thus noble-hearted, thus magnanimous, and thus humane, that the writer of this tale loves them so well—devotes himself so fervidly to their interests—and swears by all that is sacred never to desert their cause so long as he has the power to wield a pen or raise a voice to proclaim their wrongs and assert their rights!

For nearly a month was poor Virginia stretched upon her pallet;—and all this time did she subsist upon the benevolence of her neighbours. And how deep was the gratitude which the gentle sufferer experienced towards them: and how changed was the estimation in which she had been wont to hold them. She had now learnt that the men who often made night hideous with their drunken orgies, were in reality good-hearted creatures, who were amongst the very first to club together their pittances and procure for her use better food than they ever dreamt of purchasing for themselves; and she found likewise that the females who were so ready with their gibes and jests respecting her virtue and her prudence, were far from being the last to bring comforts to her sick bed. And then she thought within herself, "O God! if there were but a just government, an honest legislature, and a good social system in this country, what wonders might not be wrought with a people in whose minds are already existing the germs of every generous feeling and every moral excellence!—and Oh! that there shall yet come an HOUR and arise a MAN to give freedom to those enslaved masses and evoke all the grand and noble qualities which now lie concealed beneath the weight of tyranny and oppression!"

At the expiration of about four weeks Virginia was enabled to sit up for a few hours: but, great heaven! how altered was she! Pale, weak, and thin as she was before her illness—'twas a condition of buxom health in comparison with the poor girl's appearance now! There still was the melting beauty of the soft blue eyes—still the pure whiteness of the pearly teeth—and still the glory of the rich brown hair. But the forehead—how marble pale, with its tracery of blue veins so perceptible through the transparent skin!—and the cheeks—how colourless in the white garb of the lily, without the lily's life-like bloom! The sylphid form had become wasted into that shadowy lightness of figure which painters and poets give to the spirits of beauteous maidens prematurely dead;—and the air of languor which invested her every attitude, and look, and gesture, was full of the deepest, holiest, and most touching interest for the compassionate soul.

She still suffered deeply—but she did not tell those who aided her in her sickness how much she suffered! They told her not to think of touching the needle again until she was fully restored to health: but she was anxious to escape as soon as possible from a dependence on eleemosynary charity. This feeling arose not only from a proper spirit of pride and self-reliance on her part, but also and even more from the conviction that she was taking from those who could so ill afford to spare. She therefore pretended to feel better than she really did; and she sought to rally her spirits, while despair was still in her heart. For when her kind neighbours talked to her of restoration to health, the poor girl knew that they were prophesying something which could never be fulfilled. She felt that the springs of her life were poisoned—that the germ of a rapid decay was in her whole system. The short hollow cough which she endeavoured as much as possible to subdue,—the heart's quick and irregular beatings which were painfully audible in the silence of the night or during any still hours in the day,—the dewy drops which she often wiped away from her brow,—and the occasional appearance of a hectic tint upon her cheeks, remaining longer and growing more vivid each time it came,—all these were signs and warnings which the suffering girl was too sensitive to mistake and too intelligent to endeavour to conceal from herself!

One day—the fourth or fifth after she had risen from her sick bed—she was seated alone in her cheerless chamber, longing to be able to get abroad again into the open air, and panting for the fresh breeze of the country,—when the door opened and the widowed landlady of Camden Town entered the room. The worthy old creature was shocked at the change which had taken place in the young maiden;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and clasping her in her arms, she wept over her as if she were her own child. And Virginia was profoundly affected by the good woman's kindness; and altogether the meeting was pathetic and touching in the extreme.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the widow: "you have been ill—very, very ill—and you did not send for me. Ah! and you have wanted for everything — positively everything," she cried, sobbing deeply, as she glanced around the cheerless, naked chamber. "Oh! my dear girl, you are too young and too good to suffer in this manner: it almost makes one doubt the existence of Providence! You should have sent to me, Virginia—and although having troubles enough of my own, on account of my poor husband's death, I could have found sympathy to bestow upon you. And more than sympathy—for I could have given you a home, and attended to you in your illness—and my niece who has now come to live with me, would have been kind and good to you—for you are so kind and good yourself! Poor dear girl, how you must have suffered! But it is not too late to make you comfortable yet—and I will take you away with me now—to-day—at once—this minute:—and you shall go back to the room that you once lived in at my house. It has never been let since you quitted it: indeed, you remember I told you that Mr. Osmond had insisted upon paying me to keep it for you against your return—and all the things you left behind you are there still."

"But I must not—cannot—dare not return thither," said Virginia, in a low faint voice, while tears ran down her cheeks of waxen transparency and whiteness.

"Ah! do you mean to persist in that resolve?" exclaimed the old widow. "Well—I dare not counsel you against it, after all you told me about Mr. Osmond the last time I saw you. But he has continued to call regularly every two or three weeks, to inquire if I have obtained any tidings concerning you: and every time I say '*No*'—for you bade me give him that answer, you remember—he turns away, sighs profoundly, and departs without uttering another word. And he, too, becomes more and more changed every time I see him;—and I must confess that I have longed to ask him whether he is really married, and how he could have treated you with such perfidy. But I have kept a seal upon my lips——"

"And you must do so until the last, my good friend," interrupted Virginia, in that same low and plaintive voice which was harmonious and soft as an angel's whisper. "That he loves me, I have never doubted——and God knows how deeply, how devotedly I have loved and still love him." she added, the tears trickling faster and in larger drops down those cheeks to which the excitement of her feelings now brought the faint hectic tinge that imparted to her spirit-like beauty the holiest interest. "But never—oh! never more must we meet," she continued, in a voice of ineffable sadness: "for there is dishonour in his love——and I must remain pure and sinless, full soon to join my poor mother who has gone before me to heaven!"

"Oh! do not talk in this manner, Virginia," cried the good widow, weeping bitterly: "you will break my heart. Come—we will say nothing more of Mr. Osmond—we will not mention him again. We will think only of yourself. And if you will not return to my house, you must at all events go and lodge for a few weeks with a sister of mine—— the mother of the niece who is staying with me now. She has a nice little cottage higher up in Camden Town; and there you can remain quite private and be as comfortable as possible. Now, do not say another word upon the subject—'tis all settled and decided as completely as if we had discussed it for the last six hours. So I shall be off now to tell my sister you are coming;—and to-morrow morning I shall be here at about eleven to fetch you in a hackney-coach. Do you attend to what I am saying, Virginia?"

"Yes, my kind—my generous friend," murmured the young maiden, weeping with the profoundest gratitude. "But I cannot consent to become a burthen upon any one——"

"My dear child," said the good-hearted old widow, as she kissed the suffering girl affectionately, "you will receive the kindest welcome from my sister—and when you are well again, you will be a help and a comfort to her instead of a burthen. So let us argue the point no more—and to-morrow I shall come and fetch you as I have promised."

Thus speaking, the excellent old woman hurried from the room to escape any farther remonstrance on the part of Virginia; and if the maiden continued to weep after she was gone, it was not altogether in bitterness. The sympathy of which she had become the object, sank soothingly like an anodyne into the wounds which blighted love, crushing toil, the insolence of petty tyranny, sickness, and so many other adverse circumstances had within the last ten months inflicted upon her heart;—and she was already cheered somewhat by the prospect of escaping from a fœtid atmosphere and a vile neighbourhood into a purer air and a respectable dwelling.

On the following morning the good-hearted widow made her appearance at the hour specified;—and Virginia, having taken an affectionate leave of the kind friends whom she had found in her illness, was assisted down the stairs to the hackney-coach that was waiting to convey her to her new home.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### THE SIGN UPON THE CHEEKS.

Several months passed away; during which Virginia Mordaunt remained an inmate of the cottage where she had so fortunately found a home. Her mind was now comparatively tranquil and easy: but her health was gradually and almost perceptibly failing. She knew—she felt that the insidious destroyer was at work, sapping her constitutional vigour and undermining her physical energies: but she complained not when she suffered—nor did she repine in secret at the inevitable certainty of soon meeting Death face to face. On the contrary, she regarded the approach of dissolution not only with the resigned meekness of a saint, but also with a species of bland and subdued exultation at the hope of joining the hierarchy of angels.

Seldom is it that those who are a prey to con-

sumption, receive any intuitive warning of the fact: but if the suspicion be forced upon their minds that the remorseless and invisible worm is infecting with its venom the blossom of their youth, they seek to close their eyes against the sad and solemn truth. But it was not so with Virginia. She had received the warning—and acknowledged it. Instead of attempting to laugh away her fears, or to reason herself out of them, she bowed her head resignedly, saying, "God's will be done!" She was not afraid of death: because she had never injured a worm—much less a human being. Pure and sinless had been her life: nor in word, nor in thought, nor in deed had she ever broken a single law of either God or Man. She had suffered much—suffered profoundly: but never—never were her steps tempted aside from the paths of chastity and honour. Nor were her's mere negative virtues, such as those which are ascribed to a female sovereign and yet are so fulsomely lauded: but they were positive and real, inasmuch as they had been sorely tried and severely tested, and had passed triumphantly through the ordeal.

There is no merit in virtue when it has never been tempted. All persons commence life in that negative condition which may be termed virtuous: and if their circumstances be so happy that they are never subjected to temptations of any kind, they deserve no praise for remaining guiltless. It would be preposterous to applaud a man with ten thousand a-year, for never having committed robbery or forgery: and it is an insult to cry up the virtue of a woman who is married at an early age to the object of her love, and whom no libertine or seducer would dare to approach with his insidious addresses. The starving working-man who abstains from robbery, and the famishing daughter of toil who keeps her purity intact,—*these* are the characters that really and truly deserve praise.

High, then, above the merits of all Queens, Duchesses, Marchionesses, and ladies of rank and wealth must be exalted the praise of Virginia Mordaunt. Were these Queens, Duchesses, Marchionesses, and titled ladies, subjected to the same miseries and the same temptations through which our heroine had passed unscathed, *they* perhaps would have succumbed. Indeed, it is almost certain that they would—because so very, very few of them continue to remain virtuous even in the midst of their prosperity, their wealth, and their luxury. If, then, they err so readily through sheer depravity, how easily would they succumb in the presence of stern necessity? Possessed of everything that makes life pleasant, the wealthy classes ought to be the most perfect patterns of virtue: they have no excuse for immorality of any kind. And yet the British Aristocracy, male and female, is the most loathsomely corrupt, demoralized, and profligate class of persons that ever scandalized a country. The men belonging to that class are all intent on seduction, debauchery, and dissipation: the females abandon themselves to licentiousness and intrigue. Thousands of titled persons are notoriously the vilest cheats at cards and the most systematic sharpers in existence: numbers of them live handsomely without the slightest ostensible resources;—and few of them care how deeply they get into debt, or how many tradesmen they ruin by their wanton extravagance. Seduction is with them a boast: and all the most sacred obligations of friendship and hospitality are scattered to the winds in the pursuance of an object or the gratification of a desire. Then again, with regard to the females of the British Aristocracy, how constantly is the public shocked and scandalized by the exposures of titled ladies' profligacy,—exposures which show how the heartless demireps can desert their innocent babes without a pang, and fly from their husbands without a remorse, to fling themselves into the arms of their paramours. In fact, morality is at the lowest possible ebb with the highest classes in the land;—and yet these are the shameless hypocrites and vile slanderers that are constantly affecting to deplore "the vices of the lower orders."

We say again, then, that our humble heroine, Virginia Mordaunt, displayed in the individual instance of her own rectitude of conduct, an amount of moral worth ten thousand times greater than all the aggregate virtue that could possibly be found amidst the aristocratic classes of society. Alas! poor girl—would to God that her life had been as happy as it was sinless! But her's was a stern destiny and a sombre fate; and yet she bore all with such meekness—such resignation—such uncomplaining fortitude!

The good woman at whose cottage Virginia had found a home, was not very well off. True benevolence and riches are seldom associated in this world: and the former was not accompanied by the latter in the present instance. Our heroine soon saw that she was likely to become a burthen to her benefactress; and against such a position her rightly constituted mind naturally revolted. She determined to earn her own bread so long as she was able; and to the worthy woman did she impart this resolution. The result was that Virginia obtained recommendations as a proficient seamstress to several respectable families residing in the neighbourhood; and she was engaged occasionally to go to their houses and do a day's work. When her services were thus hired, she was expected to go at eight o'clock in the morning, and work until nine at night, the necessary intervals for meals being excepted. She received eighteen-pence a day and her food; and thus, if she only went out two days every week, she could earn enough to keep herself better than when she was making shirts at two-pence farthing each. But she speedily found that the new phase in her career as a seamstress had its drawbacks as well as all the former vicissitudes which she had experienced. Sometimes she was engaged to do a day's work at a house where she was made the victim of ill-temper, whim, or caprice; or where she was compelled to endure the rudeness of uncouth or spoilt children. At another time she would be watched throughout the day as rigorously and as suspiciously as if she were a known bad character whose presence in the house compelled the mistress to keep a sharp eye upon the silver plate. Sometimes her purity was shocked by the overtures which the master of the house would appear to deem himself quite justified in making to the poor seamstress, when his wife's back was turned for a moment: or else, perhaps, a grown-up son would fancy himself privileged to tap her familiarly on the shoulder or endeavour to snatch a kiss. Seldom—very seldom, was she treated with due consideration, kindness, and

respect. The full amount of work was on all occasions scrupulously exacted: and if weakness or downright illness sometimes compelled her to pause in the midst of her occupation for a few moments, the mistress of the house would be sure to exclaim petulantly, "Now, young woman, no laziness, if you please;"—or something to the same effect. It never appeared to strike any of those ladies and gentlemen at whose houses Virginia was thus engaged, that she had *her* feelings as well as they themselves: on the contrary, the poor seamstress was looked upon as a being whom the ladies might make the butt of their ill-humour, petty spite, whims, and caprices—and whom the gentlemen were at perfect liberty to regard as a fitting object for their insolent overtures and disgusting impertinences.

But, still, with all these drawbacks to her happiness, Virginia did not complain. On the contrary, she yielded herself up resignedly to her destiny, such as it was: and on the whole, therefore, we were justified in stating at the outset of this chapter, that her mind had become comparatively tranquil. She endured meekly the caprices of the ladies at whose houses she worked: and her indignant glance taught the libertine that he had no hope of making a conquest in respect to her.

Thus several months passed away: but though she bore up as well as she was able against the inroads of the disease which was secretly and insidiously undermining her constitution,—and though she concealed as much as possible the failing condition of her health and the progressive decay of her vital energies,—yet the day was fast approaching when she must renounce all farther toil and abandon her needle entirely. Then what was to become of her?—where should she linger out the brief remnant of her existence? Was she to remain beneath that hospitable roof, in utter dependence upon the worthy woman who had not too much for her own requirements?—or should she drag herself to that last refuge of the poor and friendless——the workhouse? Poor Virginia! no longer was thy soul tranquil when the fatal day came on which thou wast compelled to put these alternatives unto thyself!

One morning, Virginia said to the good woman at whose house she had found a home, "I am afraid, my kind friend, that I must leave you soon, very soon."

"Leave me, my dear child!" exclaimed the other: "and why should you think of leaving me?"

"Because," answered the maiden, in a tremulous voice, while her eyes filled with tears, "I can no longer hope to earn any money towards meeting the expenses which my presence entails upon you: and I would sooner beg my bread in the street than become a burthen to you. In plain terms, I have borne up against the advance of illness as long as I was able—much longer, no doubt, than I ought: but I am now sinking at length—I am declining fast—I am dying!"

"Good heavens! talk not thus despairingly, Virginia!" exclaimed the kind-hearted woman, weeping. "I will send for my sister and my daughter to pass the day with us; their presence will enliven you, and you will get rid of these gloomy ideas. That you are very thin, my child, and very pale—except just upon your cheeks, where there is a gentle bloom—I do not deny: but you have over-fatigued yourself by going out to do needle-work, contrary to my wishes. Rest and repose will soon restore you to health; and when the Spring comes again——"

"Alas!" interrupted Virginia, softly, "I feel a presentiment which tells me that the flowers of Spring will grow upon my grave!"

"My dear child, this is wrong on your part," said her friend, in a tone of gentle remonstrance. I know that you are very far from well; I have been telling you so for months past, and imploring you not to think of fatiguing yourself by going out to people's houses. You were not strong enough to undertake a whole day's work at a time. But you were obstinate—no, not exactly obstinate—you were too good, too kind, and too considerate—you could not bear the thought of lying under obligations to your friends. And now, my dear child, you are suffering in consequence of that over-delicacy on your part: you are fatigued, worn, weak, and ill. But all you require is rest and repose; and that shall you have. You have had your own way too long already, my love; and now I shall have mine. I therefore declare that you shall not even look at a needle until you are entirely and altogether restored to health."

"This is very kind of you, my dear friend," said Virginia, taking the good woman's hand and pressing it to her lips—aye, and moistening it with her tears; "but it is my duty to tell you the worst at once. If you persist in keeping me beneath your roof," continued the poor maiden, in a tone that was touchingly plaintive, and with a look of the martyrized sweetness and resignation of a saint, "you will entail upon yourself troubles and inconveniences which you are not prepared to encounter. You will be forced to attend upon an invalid fading, wasting, and dying before your eyes; you will have anxious days and sleepless nights: then you will have the awful gloom and solemn silence of death in your house;—and, lastly, the visit of the undertakers and the funeral! Now, my dear friend, you know the worst; and you will not oppose my wishes when I declare that I must leave you while yet I have the strength and resolution to go elsewhere."

"And whither would'st thou go, poor girl?" demanded the good woman, overpowered with grief.

"Whither would I go?" echoed Virginia. "Alas! to that supreme refuge of the worn-out sons and daughters of toil——to that asylum which is dreaded more than a prison——"

"The workhouse!" ejaculated the good woman, with a sudden start and a cold shudder. "No—no—a hundred thousand times no! What—*you*, poor girl—*you*, so beautiful, so innocent, and so good—*you*, so delicately nurtured and so tenderly brought up, to go to the workhouse! My God! what an idea! May maledictions alight upon the heads of those who established such hideous places! No, Virginia dear—you shall remain with me—to live long and happily, if heaven will permit—or to breathe your last in my arms, if God will not allow you to linger upon the earth. Ah! my sweet girl, I love you as much as if you were my own daughter—and the Almighty would shower down curses upon me, if I were to abandon

you in your illness. But tell me, my dear Virginia—tell me what you feel."

"I feel, my excellent friend," was the response, half choked with the sobs and sighs that indicated emotions profoundly stirred,—"I feel that the whole frame-work of my being is giving way—that all my efforts to exert myself are baffled by a weakness and a sense of exhaustion against which it is impossible to combat—and that an invisible hand lies heavily upon me, the weight of its pressure becoming greater and greater every day. And, then, my good friend, look at me attentively! The colour which you ere now observed upon my cheeks, is not the glow of health. Alas! no—it is the sure, certain, and unmistakable sign——"

"Ah! I comprehend you, poor girl!" murmured her friend, now evidently struck by the real truth relative to Virginia. "Oh! but we will save you yet—you are young, and your constitution is good! We will have the best medical advice for you—and my sister and I will scrape together all the money we can, to get you down to the sea-side when the Spring comes. This is the last day of December — in three or four months more the weather will be getting warmer —and then——"

"And then I shall go down into the quiet grave," said the young maiden, in a tone so full of pathos that the good woman felt as if it were an angel's voice which stole murmuringly upon her ears—and sinking on her knees by Virginia's side, she sobbed aloud.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

### SCENE AT THE THEATRE.

Our history opened in the middle of January, 1844: the events we have since chronicled have ranged over a space of two years;—and it is now therefore the middle of January, 1846.

We have seen that in the interval the Marquis of Arden has been unremitting and unwearied in his exertions to find out the beauteous seamstress —the only joy of his heart and idol of his soul, the charming and well-beloved Virginia. We have likewise seen that through disappointment, sickness at heart, and declining hope, he has become grievously altered in personal appearance: and we can add that his character and disposition have undergone a change not less remarkable. When we first introduced him to our readers, he was on the high road to become a rake, a debauchee, and a gamester: he was already plunging into the vortex of dissipation—he kept a mistress—and he was launching out into all those fashionable extravagances which doubtless pass as the refined foibles and delightful peccadilloes of the upper classes. But a pure and virtuous love soon wrought a change in the mind and behaviour of that young man who naturally possessed so good a disposition and so generous a heart. His amour with Miss Barnet was broken off the moment he discovered that she either could not or would not afford him any clue to Virginia's residence; and, abandoning all his dissipated associates, he had devoted himself to the search after his lost loved one. Shunning all society as much as possible, he wandered about from morning to night in the hope of encountering the object of an affection which grew all the stronger and all the more devoted in proportion as it seemed to become more and more hopeless every day.

And how the young man tortured his soul with conjectures and speculations as to what had become of the seamstress! Sometimes he fancied that she was dead; and, in the bitter, harrowing, excruciating agony of his mind, he would exclaim, "Oh! if I could even obtain a clue to the spot where she is buried, I would hasten thither—I would throw myself upon her grave—I would moisten the cold sod with my tears—I would invoke her spirit to mark the sincerity of my grief and judge thereby how deeply, deeply I have loved her—and I would strew flowers upon the turf that covers her remains!" At another time he would picture to himself the poor maiden struggling against all the horrors of penury,—enduring all the maddening afflictions of friendlessness and orphanage—exposed to temptations, insults, tyrannies, and treacheries of every kind—and perhaps calling upon God in her despair to take her away from a scene of so much sorrow! And then, as his fevered imagination was wont, despite of itself, to work up this picture to the most frightful vividness of detail, the young nobleman would shrink aghast from the creation of his fancy; and, tearing his hair in the bitterness of his anguished spirit, he would exclaim, "O God! save her—save her from the realities of such miseries as these!—protect and shield the poor orphan girl from those maddening afflictions—those goading, excruciating, racking agonies of mind and body! O God! save her—save her—defend her, my God! I beseech thee to spare that helpless, innocent, unoffending girl those galling trials and that career of horrors!" And thus did the young man, who for a long time past had prayed not for himself—thus did he implore and supplicate heaven, with all the fervour of his impassioned spirit, to have mercy upon poor Virginia Mordaunt.

But the Marquis of Arden was not the only inmate of Belmont House who was supremely unhappy. The beautiful Lady Mary Melcombe, his younger sister, was pining away with disappointed hopes and blighted affection. For the Earl of Mostyndale had never once re-visited the mansion since that day on which he had left it in indignation at the terms proposed by the Duke in answer to his demand for the hand of the young patrician lady. But, faithful to his promise, he still remained unmarried; and, like the Marquis of Arden, he shunned society, and had become thin, pale, and care-worn. The Duchess of Belmont kept entirely to her own suite of apartments, withdrawing herself altogether from the world, and courting solitude as the state of existence that was most congenial to her wounded soul. Lady Clarissa had not precisely caught the infection of the melancholy, sorrow, and gloom which reigned around her: but finding this sombre mode of life, with its mournful associations, almost intolerable, she became more irritable, haughty, and overbearing than ever; so that she lost all the few friends who had continued to visit at the mansion, while she likewise found herself omitted from the list of invitations to the *re-unions* of wealth, rank, and fashion, in which she had been wont to shine as a star. Devoured with *ennui*—finding the days so

long that she often wished the hours were only minutes, complaining that her sister was no companion for her, and yet exhibiting no sympathy towards her whom she thus upbraided—Lady Clarissa was only pleased and contented when Mr. Collinson, the lawyer, called: and she at last became so accustomed to look forward with satisfaction to his visits, that she positively moped and pined when he remained away.

Mr. Collinson was, however, pretty regular in his attentions at Belmont House,—pursuing the same line of conduct which we have already described: that is to say, sometimes pestering Lady Mary with all his assiduities—at another time devoting himself wholly and solely to her elder sister. But as time wore on, and as the period of two years was drawing towards a close, Mr. Collinson evidently displayed a preference for Lady Mary: and either not observing how unwelcome his attentions were to the afflicted maiden—or else not choosing to notice a fact so little gratifying to his own personal pride—he persevered in paying her a homage which she received at first with a marked coldness, and latterly with a positive disgust and indignation. But there were times when she was alarmed by the smile of self-satisfaction and placid complacency which would waver for a moment on Collinson's lips;—and then, as she reflected that the lawyer evidently wielded some potent though secret influence over her father,—an influence which a thousand little circumstances had proved to exist,—she often found herself giving way to suspicions and fears which were all the more painful on account of their vague and indefinite character.

As for the Duke of Belmont—*he* had become as altered in appearance as any other member of his family. Although at the period to which we have now brought the incidents of our tale, his Grace was only sixty-two years of age, he seemed to be eighty. A couple of years had worked a marvellous change in his aspect: but this alteration had been chiefly effected during the last sixteen months — or to be more particular still, from the date of the murder of Clementine the Frenchwoman. His cheeks had fallen in — his eyes were sunken and hollow—his look was a mingling of blank despair, profound grief, and a stern endeavour to struggle against the saddest thoughts. He passed nearly all his time in his library when at home; but he had recently made frequent visits to his estates, to watch the progress of the various improvements he had devised with regard to their management, culture, and tillage;—and as these plans proved far less satisfactory than he had hoped, the gloom upon his brow became all the more sombre, and his looks all the more care-worn.

Such was the condition of the various members of the Belmont family in the middle of January, 1846. But we must now direct the attention of the reader into another channel, and beg him to accompany us for a short space to the interior of one of the most fashionable theatres of the metropolis. There—on a certain evening—amidst the brilliant audience assembled, we shall behold a very handsome woman and a young man of striking appearance seated together in a private box. The lady is dressed in a superb style—but with more splendour than taste; and it is by no means difficult for a close and experienced observer to perceive that she is not altogether accustomed to that magnificence of apparel. It sits uneasily upon her—and there is a certain visible constraint in all her movements, her looks, and her manners. She feels as if she were not altogether comfortable,—as if she would rather have that fine black hair hanging in its own natural and unadorned beauty over her shoulders, than decorated with gems and evincing the fashionable coiffeur's art,—as if, also, she would have been more at her ease in a simple merino dress than in the gorgeous satin robe, the very rustling of which was painful to her nerves. But handsome she was—grandly handsome,—not with the beauty that steals, soft as the dawn of a May morning, upon the sense — but with the charms that burst like a sudden blaze of light upon the beholder, to dazzle, bewilder, and confound. Her eyes were large and dark, and lustrous with the reflection of an impassioned soul: her features were masculine, but faultless in their bold profile;—her lips were full without being coarse, and moistly red as a luscious fruit of the tropics;—her teeth, too large to be likened unto pearls, resembled pieces of the whitest ivory arranged with the most accurate evenness;—and her complexion might have been envied by the most delicately nurtured lady in the land. Then her bust was superbly developed—her figure well proportioned, though upon a large scale;—and indeed, she was one of those splendid women whose charms intoxicate the sense, but touch not the heart.

Her companion was a tall, good-looking man, but with a dissipated, rakish appearance. He wore moustaches and had somewhat of a foreign aspect, although in reality an Englishman. His age might have been at least nine-and-twenty or thirty: but the use of cosmetics, the hair-dresser's skill, and the art of an elaborate toilette assisted by an experienced *valet-de-chambre*, made him seem five or six years younger.

The lady and gentleman whom we have described, were "the observed of all observers," at the theatre where we now find them occupying a private box. On the male portion of the audience the entertainments of the evening were well nigh lost altogether, notwithstanding the assemblage of talent that appeared upon the stage: but all eyes and eye-glasses were turned upon the box in which the magnificent creature sate with her moustached companion. "Who is she?" was the oft-repeated question that was whispered on all sides: but no one seemed able to answer it. "Who is *he*, then?" was the next query which began to suggest itself amongst various groups and knots of individuals: and now in three or four instances the answer was, "His face is familiar to me, but I can't think where I have seen him before."

"What! don't you know who that is?" at length said some gentleman who had overheard the query, and who appeared to be better informed than the rest: then, addressing himself in a confidential tone to the particular inquirer in this case, he proceeded to observe, "You surely must have heard of Tom Lovel—one of the gayest fellows about town a few years ago?"

"To be sure! But I thought that Lovel was totally ruined and had emigrated—or something of that kind?"

"Well, ruined he certainly was—and for a long time he frequented the lowest gambling-houses in the neighbourhood of Leicester-square: then he disappeared altogether—*that* was about sixteen or

eighteen months ago, as near as I can recollect;—and now, within the last few weeks, he has turned up again, better off than ever he was—at least, to all appearances."

"And is that splendid creature his wife?"

"I don't know: but I should think not. See—the attentions which he pays her are not those of a husband: nor does she receive them with the manner of a wife. She is evidently his mistress?"

"But if you know Mr. Lovel, why do you not hasten to his box, renew your acquaintance with him, and procure an introduction to the lady, whoever she may be?"

"Because Captain Lovel and myself had a serious quarrel about a couple of years ago—and since that period we have never spoken."

"Captain Lovel! I thought he was simple Mr. Lovel—and still better known as plain Tom Lovel?"

"Ah! but I understand that since he has turned up again within the last few weeks, he has adopted the distinction of *Captain*—doubtless on the strength of that fine pair of moustaches. He keeps a carriage and pair—a tiger and a valet—and has taken a beautiful little villa at Brompton, where he lives with that lady."'

"You appear to know all about him."

"I accidentally learnt these particulars yesterday: but my informant could not tell me whether Captain Lovel was married to that lady or not. She however passes as his wife——But the curtain is falling on the first piece, and I shall step into the saloon to procure some refreshment."

From the preceding dialogue our readers will have obtained some little insight into the character of the moustached gentleman, whose name appeared to be Lovel, and who had recently prefixed thereto the distinction of *Captain*. But if we now introduce our readers into the private box where the Captain is seated with his lady, we shall perhaps glean from their discourse a little farther knowledge concerning them both.

"You are looking splendid to-night, my dear Julia," said Lovel, in a flattering tone, as he bent towards her. "There is not a lady in this tier of boxes who is not dying of envy and jealousy at the sensation your appearance has made. All the gentlemen are gazing upon you—and they doubtless think me a lucky dog."

"But do you consider yourself at all enviable, my dear Tom?" inquired the lady, with a smile which had as much sensuousness as archness in its expression.

"To be sure I do, my love," answered the Captain, in a whisper, as he fastened his eyes gloatingly upon the superb countenance of his companion. "I often think what a lucky fellow I was to fall in with you at the hotel at Boulogne——"

"And I am sure I shall never forget how generously you came forward to relieve me from the cruel embarrassment in which I was placed," added Julia.

"No generosity at all, my darling," replied the Captain. "The whole proceeding was quite natural and proper. I happened to learn, from the discourse of the waiters, that there was an English lady in the house who could neither pay her bill nor talk French; and as I could do both, I sent up my card. You granted me an interview—we were pleased with each other—an understanding was soon arrived at—and here we are, living together as man and wife, and as happy as the day is long. Is it not so?"

"To be sure," responded the lady; "and it is no compliment to tell you, Tom, that I love you better than anybody I ever knew before."

"Ah! my dear," said the Captain, with a slight accent of pique in his voice, "you have already confessed to me, when under the influence of champagne—of which, by the bye, you are particularly fond—that you have had a tolerable long list of lovers in your life; and therefore I must be a very captivating fellow to eclipse them all."

"But so you do, my dear Tom," returned Julia. "Besides, you are so good and kind to me, and have made me such splendid presents. You must be very rich, Tom?"

"Rich!" he ejaculated, with an uneasy start: "to be sure I am—as rich as Crœsus," he immediately added, with a laugh that sounded very much as if it were strained and forced. "But at all events, I behave more liberally to you than your last lover, who took you over to France with him and then left you at Boulogne to pay the hotel bill and shift for yourself."

"Ah! that was scandalous indeed," said the lady—"and if it had not been for you, I am sure I do not know what I should have done. However I shall love you as long as——"

"As what?" inquired Captain Lovel: "as long as I live—or as long as I can keep you in luxury, splendour, and ease?"

"Oh! don't talk in that silly manner, Tom," said Julia, affecting to frown upon him: then, laughing gaily the next moment, she exclaimed, "You are always making those kinds of remarks, just to see what I shall say and put my love to the test. But I *do* love you, Tom—and that is true as gospel."

"Well, I think you do, Julia——"

"You only think! Oh! you must be sure that I do. And to convince you that I am not altogether a frivolous creature intent only on pleasure, I must tell you frankly that I am often vexed and grieved to observe how mournful you become at times——"

"I—mournful!" ejaculated Lovel, surveying his handsome mistress with a strange and almost frightened expression of countenance.

"Yes—sometimes you turn suddenly pensive," answered Julia: "and at others you are so nervous that every knock at the front door startles you. Then, in your sleep, you often moan and toss about——"

"Oh! it is nothing—nothing at all," said Lovel, with an ill-concealed petulance. "Come, my dear," he immediately added, in a kinder tone, "let us be off—the entertainment is just over."

"I shall not be sorry to get away, Tom," answered Julia; "for this place is dreadfully hot:"—then, rising from her seat, she drew around her the folds of the superb shawl which her companion threw over her shoulders—and, taking his arm, she issued from the box.

As the handsome couple proceeded along the corridor and descended the stairs, they were the objects of exclusive attention with those whom they either passed by or encountered on their egress from the theatre; and Julia was evidently far from displeased at the admiration which her charms excited.

The moment they gained the portals, the cry of "Captain Lovel's carriage!" was shouted up the street; and in a few moments the elegant barouche and pair dashed up to the entrance of the theatre. Down leapt the tiger—the door was opened—the steps were lowered with the usual *fracas*—and Captain Lovel was about to assist his beauteous companion into the vehicle, when a rough hand was laid violently upon his shoulder.

An ejaculation of surprise and curiosity burst from the lips of those who were assembled on the spot: and Julia, turning her head at the sound, was horror-stricken on beholding her lover the Captain in the grasp of a couple of police-officers.

"There is some mistake in this," she cried, instantaneously recovering her prescnee of mind and flinging lightning-looks of indignation upon the constables. "Why don't you tell them who you are, Tom? Unhand him, fellows—it is Captain Lovel——"

"We know it, ma'am," interrupted one of the officers: "just the very gentleman we want! Sorry for your sake, ma'am — but the game's all up, you see — the forgeries have come out at last——"

But poor Julia heard no more: a terrible conviction of the real truth had suddenly flashed in unto her mind—and she fell senseless upon the pavement.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### MYSTERY AND CURIOSITY.

It was on the day following the arrest of Captain Lovel, and about three o'clock in the afternoon, that as the Marquis of Arden was returning home from one of his long rambles on foot, he saw a hackney-cab drive up to Belmont House, and Miss Barnet alight. He stopped short at a distance of twenty or thirty yards, under the impression that he must be mistaken: but the more attentive survey which he now took of the handsome profile and the fine figure as the young woman ascended the steps of the ducal mansion, convinced him that it was indeed his late mistress. She was superbly dressed in a winter costume: but it struck Charles that her countenance wore an expression of grief which she vainly endeavoured to subdue—that her pace was agitated and uneven—and, in fine, that there was a general air of nervous excitement about her, as she rushed rather than walked from the cab up to the front door of Belmont House. She did not look either to the right or to the left as she thus hurriedly ascended the steps—and therefore she did not observe that the Marquis was standing at a little distance.

Upwards of eighteen or nineteen months had elapsed since Charles had broken off his connexion with Miss Barnet;—and from that time until the present moment he had neither seen nor heard of her. In fact he knew not what had become of her: and his mind had been too deeply absorbed in his hapless, unfortunate love for Virginia, to allow him to bestow frequent thoughts upon his late mistress. Her sudden appearance, therefore,—especially in the character of a visitress at Belmont House,—both startled and annoyed the young nobleman; for it naturally struck him that she had discovered the identity of "Mr. Osmond" with the Marquis of Arden, and that she had either called to demand money or in the hope of renewing her former intimacy with him.

Now, as Charles knew that Miss Barnet was quite capable of "getting up a scene" with him, if she took it into her head, he congratulated himself upon the circumstance of not being at home when she called;—and retreating to a greater distance along that side of Grosvenor Square, he watched for the young lady to issue forth again. But as five minutes elapsed without her re-appearance, he was forced to come to the conclusion that she had resolved to await his return home: and being no stranger to the fact that the disposition of the fair one was sufficiently pertinacious to induce her to remain until ten at night, he began to think that it would be better to face the danger at once, whatever it might be. The Marquis accordingly hastened on to Belmont House; and the moment the porter opened the front door, he proceeded to the waiting-room in the full expectation of finding Miss Barnet there. But instead of beholding any female in that apartment, he only saw two men whose countenances were not altogether unfamiliar to him, but of which he had not more than a vague and indefinite recollection. They rose on his entrance, and bowed in a manner which showed that they knew him better than he remembered them: but anxious only to get rid of Miss Barnet as soon as possible, and already trembling lest she should have forced her way into the presence of his father and his sisters, he rushed from the waiting-room back again into the hall.

"Where is the young person who came just now in a hackney-vehicle?" he demanded of the hall-porter.

"With his Grace, my lord," was the reply.

"With my father!" ejaculated Charles, in a tone of deep annoyance. "Fool that I was to loiter at the end of the Square and thus afford her time—— But did she not ask for me in the first instance?" he demanded abruptly.

"No, my lord," returned the porter. "She inquired for the Duke of Belmont; and when her name was taken in, his Grace immediately ordered her to be admitted to his presence."

"Indeed! Then what name did she give?" asked Charles.

"Mrs. Lovel," was the reply.

"Lovel—Lovel," said the Marquis, in a musing tone. "Surely I have heard that name before——"

"A certain Captain Lovel was arrested last night, my lord, on a charge of forgery," remarked the hall-porter.

"To be sure! I read the account this morning at breakfast time," exclaimed the young nobleman. "I thought the name was not altogether unfamiliar to me. And now that I recollect, the newspaper-paragraph said that Captain Lovel, when arrested, was coming out of a theatre with an elegant lady of extraordinary beauty hanging upon his arm."

"Still I should scarcely think, my lord," observed the porter, deferentially, "that the Mrs. Lovel of whom your lordship is speaking can be the same who is now with his Grace. A forger's wife or mistress could scarcely obtain such ready access to the Duke of Belmont."

"It is strange—very strange," said Charles, in a low musing tone. "That Miss Barnet should

No. 14.—The Seamstress.

have become Lovel's mistress, is probable enough ——But what on earth *can* she want with my father?" demanded the young nobleman of himself, his perplexity becoming all the deeper the more he thought upon the occurrence. "Where is the interview taking place?" he suddenly demanded aloud.

"Your lordship's father happened to be in the saloon opening on the conservatory, at the moment when Mrs. Lovel called," said the porter; "and leave being given for her admission, the lady has accordingly been shown into that apartment, my lord."

The Marquis of Arden reflected for a few moments what course he should pursue. It was natural that his curiosity should be piqued in no ordinary manner by the present proceeding on the part of Miss Barnet—or rather Mrs. Lovel, as she now styled herself. What could she possibly want with his father?—wherefore had the mention of her name ensured her immediate access to his presence?—and was she really connected with the forger who had been taken into custody on the previous evening?

Charles remembered that her face wore an expression of grief and her manner was troubled as she flitted from the cab into the house;—and this circumstance tended to ratify the suspicion that she was indeed "the elegant lady of extraordinary beauty," mentioned in the newspaper-account of Lovel's arrest. In fact, there could no longer be any doubt upon the subject in the mind of the young nobleman; and the conclusion to which he thus came, only rendered him the more anxious to learn the purport of her visit to his father.

At first he thought of repairing straight to the saloon where the interview was taking place. Then he recollected that Mrs. Lovel had not sought the father because the son was absent—but that she had not inquired for the son at all. The interview was consequently a private one between that young woman and the Duke of Belmont: and it was even probable—at least appearances warranted the surmise—that she was not previously unknown to his Grace, inasmuch as the moment the name of "Mrs. Lovel" was communicated to him, it proved a ready passport to his presence. From all these reflections, which Charles made much more rapidly than we can describe them in words, he drew the inference that the meeting between his sire and the young female was a private one, and that it would be indiscreet to obtrude himself upon their presence: and yet, on the other hand, the very conclusions to which he thus came relative to the privacy of that interview, only rendered him the more anxious to penetrate the mystery. It was not a mere idle curiosity which animated him: it was a dread—almost amounting to a presentiment—that some calamity or disgrace threatened the family;—and this feeling rose paramount above all compunction or delicacy as to the means which he should adopt to put an end to so painful a state of suspense.

Hastening into the little garden at the back of the house, Charles passed into the conservatory by the ascent of steps and the glass-door already made memorable in the earlier portion of our narrative. The door between the conservatory and the saloon stood open; and by concealing himself behind the orange-trees and the rows of hot-house plants placed on an amphitheatrical stand, the Marquis could command a view of the interior of the room.

Crouching down, therefore, as noiselessly as he had stolen into the conservatory, Charles beheld his father pacing backward and forward in a state of evident agitation,—while Julia was seated near the open door of the hot-house, but with her back towards it. The Marquis was consequently unable to obtain a view of her countenance: but that of the Duke was distorted and convulsed with feelings of the most painful character. Horror, alarm, perplexity, and despair had literally chiselled their traces and dug their lines upon the pale and ghastly features of the old nobleman;—and Charles was stricken with a perfect consternation and an awful dismay as he thus read upon a human countenance feelings so harrowed and thoughts so excruciating—and that countenance his own father's!

"Upon what do you decide, my lord?" asked Julia, in a low hollow voice, which was however perfectly audible to the eaves-dropping Marquis—not only because she was seated near the spot where he was hidden, but also because every faculty which he possessed was sharpened by curiosity to a keenness never experienced before.

"You came to dictate terms, young woman," said the Duke, in a voice so altered—so sepulchral—so cavern-like in its intonation that if Charles had heard it in a crowd he would not have recognized it as that of his father;—"and yet you ask me upon what I have decided? Rather demand *when* and *how* I am to obey the orders which Lovel has sent me through you," he added, the deep tomb-like hollowness of his voice becoming momentarily marked with an inflection of poignant bitterness.

"My lord, do not speak thus—do not attempt either to reproach or banter me," exclaimed Mrs. Lovel, starting from her seat: and now, as she turned towards the Duke, who had halted in his troubled walk near the door-way of the conservatory, Charles could observe that there was a hectic flush of immense excitement upon her cheeks and a wildly fitful fire in her large dark eyes.

"Ah! would you do me a violence? would you murder me?" exclaimed the Duke, stepping back in evident alarm.

"Murder you!" echoed Julia, in a tone so strange—so full of meaning—so awfully significant, that the words sank down with a chilling weight into the soul of the listening Charles,—while the blanched features of the Duke became distorted with mingled anguish and horror. "Who dares talk of murder? Thank God, my hands are not stained with gore——"

"Nor mine—nor mine!" shrieked forth the Duke hysterically: and he literally wrung his hands as he spoke—as if he knew that he was uttering a falsehood, but did so in a paroxysm of despair.

"This is folly—insanity—madness!" exclaimed Julia. "I came not hither to quarrel with your lordship—but to demand your succour in extricating from his difficulties a man whom I love devotedly and sincerely. I know all—everything——"

"Yes, yes—you have already told me so," said the Duke, his voice having again relapsed into that sepulchral hollowness of tone which was so dreadful to hear, and the very sound of which would

have kept Charles motionless and petrified as a statue, even if the appallingly mysterious nature of the discourse had not produced that paralyzing effect upon him: for all the words that had hitherto been uttered in his hearing and all the vague but dreadful thoughts to which they gave rise, were terrible to contemplate as the fabled Medusa's head covered with hissing snakes, and the view of which turned the beholder into stone.

"Well—I have told you so already," said Mrs. Lovel,—"I have told you that I know everything! And dreadful as the crime was, yet I still love the criminal—or else I should not have called here to enjoin you to save him. Besides, my lord—in that *one* dark deed, you were the employer—you were the instigator——"

"Madam, justice is not taking cognizance of *that* matter," cried the Duke, with the impatience of feelings horribly goaded and poignantly excruciating. "Let us talk of the things already known to the authorities——"

"The forgeries?" said Julia. "Well—there are but three which have transpired as yet and the prosecutor can be bought off. He only requires his money: indeed, he would much rather have it than encounter the unsatisfactory trouble and expense of sending Lovel to New South Wales for the rest of his life. He is not as yet bound over to prosecute—Lovel was this morning remanded by the magistrate for a week, and was not finally committed for trial: there is consequently time to settle everything——"

"And you say that six or seven thousand pounds will do it all?" exclaimed his Grace of Belmont.

"Yes—the three bills which are already due, and those which have yet some time to run," answered Julia.

"But who holds the forged bills which are not yet due?" demanded the nobleman.

"Mr. Collinson—a lawyer——"

"Collinson!" echoed his Grace.

"Yes, my lord," replied Julia. "Mr. Collinson, of Bedford Square——"

"I know him well—*too* well!" murmured the Duke: and he resumed his hasty, uneven, troubled walk to and fro in the saloon.

"If your Grace knows Mr. Collinson," observed Julia, "it will doubtless facilitate the settlement of the affair."

"Know him!" cried his lordship, bitterly: "I tell you that I know him too well—far too well. At eight o'clock this evening—here—in this very room—will that same man Collinson prove a second Shylock, exacting his pound of flesh!"—and the Duke's voice quivered with deeply concentrated rage and hatred. "But all this does not concern you, young woman," he exclaimed almost immediately, and with a sort of start as if his ideas had suddenly struck into another channel: "nor was I prudent thus to allow my feelings to hurry me away."

"Ah! I wish your Grace would talk the matter over as coolly as you did at first," said Julia: "you only excite yourself—excite me also—and both so uselessly. If your lordship means to regard the affair in a friendly light, be it so: but if your Grace means to treat it otherwise, then Lovel declares that he will confess everything in order to avenge himself on you, no matter what may be the consequences to him."

"Spare your threats, young woman," said the Duke, the hollowness of tone again absorbing his voice in its sepulchral gloom: "I have not yet refused to treat the affair in the friendly light of which you speak. But let us see how stands the business? Mr. Lovel has forged the names of a certain mercantile firm to several bills which he has issued, and which amount to some six or seven thousand pounds. Three of these bills, held by a professional discounter, have fallen due and are repudiated by the bankers of the alleged acceptors. Therefore Mr. Lovel is arrested. The other bills, which are not yet due, are in the hands of Mr. Collinson, the attorney. Is it not so?"

Julia replied in the affirmative.

"But suppose that the discounter is settled with and that Collinson is satisfied," observed the Duke, "how do you know that the mercantile firm whose names Mr. Lovel has borrowed, will not take criminal proceedings against him?"

"Simply because the firm does not exist at all," responded Julia. "I thought that your Grace understood as much. The bills, so far as I can see into the matter, are rather frauds than forgeries; and therefore a few thousand pounds will save poor Lovel from transportation—and also prevent your Grace from becoming the victim of any revengeful proceeding to which desperation may goad him."

"I comprehend you," interrupted the Duke, curtly. "If I do not save Mr. Lovel, he will dare even hanging in order to ruin me?" added the nobleman with a concentrated bitterness of voice and a frightful working of the features.

"O God!" moaned Charles in his place of concealment: and he was about to spring forward and demand an explanation of the mysterious perils which seemed so horribly to menace his father, when he was restrained and still held motionless and silent by the words which instantaneously fell from Julia's lips.

"Your Grace has put the matter in its proper light," she said: "and a fearful explosion can alone be averted by prompt action on your lordship's part!"

"Come to me again to-morrow, Mrs. Lovel—early in the morning—say at ten o'clock," exclaimed the Duke, in a piteous condition of nervous excitement; "and I will see what is to be done. But I am bewildered—misfortunes of every kind are menacing me——"

"And this is doubtless the worst of all," interrupted Julia,—"and therefore the one that must be settled first."

"Settled first?" exclaimed the unhappy nobleman with increasing agitation: "who told you that I would not settle my debts? Did I breathe a hint of such a thing? Speak, woman—speak! Has any inadvertent word dropped from my lips——"

"Wherefore excite yourself in this manner?" said Julia, now surveying the Duke with intense curiosity. "Your lordship appears to be surrounded with phantoms, some real—some conjured up by your own imagination—and all threatening you strangely."

"Good heavens! how closely you have hit the truth!" exclaimed the miserable old man, elevating his arms with despairing gesture.

"But ah! what do I see—what do I behold?" cried Julia, with startling abruptness. "My God! that face—those features——"

"What?—where?" ejaculated the Duke, turning round and gazing with horrified suspense in the same direction on which the young woman's eyes were fixed.

"That portrait, my lord—that portrait?" exclaimed Julia, pointing towards a picture which hung at the further end of the spacious saloon and which she had not observed until the instant when she gave vent to that sudden ejaculation which so startled his Grace of Belmont.

"That is the portrait of my son the Marquis of Arden," he said. "Poor Charles! he little knows——But wherefore this excitement?"

"The Marquis of Arden—Mr. Osmond," said Julia, her voice and manner suddenly settling into that species of subdued astonishment which follows the discovery of a secret. "Ah! I always thought he was more than he chose to avow——"

"Then you know my son?" interrupted the Duke, trembling from head to foot with a new cause of terror: for he was now assailed with a mortal fear lest the next calamity which was in embryo for him should be the exposure of his most secret tribulations to the knowledge of the Marquis of Arden. "You know him, Mrs. Lovel? How—when—where?"

"I have been his mistress, my lord," she answered, still with the tone and manner of one who has not yet had time to recover from the stupor of surprise.

"But you do not see him now?—you are no longer accustomed to meet him?" exclaimed the Duke, with all the eagerness of anxious inquiry.

"No, my lord: months and months have elapsed since last we met," said Julia. "Had it not been for a certain young needlewoman, I might have continued his mistress until the present time—and perhaps I should be happier now," she added, a big tear trickling down her cheek. "I loved him—and I would have remained true to him——"

"But this needlewoman of whom you have spoken?" cried the Duke. "Was her name Virginia Mordaunt?"

"It was, my lord," responded Mrs. Lovel.

"Oh! would that I had never heard of her—would that my son had never known her!" exclaimed the unhappy nobleman, in a paroxysm of despair. "I should then be comparatively happy—at all events I should not be in the power of Lovel and yourself at this moment!"—and he pressed both his hands violently to his throbbing brows.

Julia stood gazing upon the Duke with frightened and astonished looks: she evidently fancied that despair had turned his brain and that he was raving.

"Ah! you cannot understand what connexion the name of Virginia Mordaunt has with the terrible deed that places me in your power!" he suddenly exclaimed, as he withdrew his hands from his countenance and beheld the wild and singular manner in which Julia was regarding him: then, in a paroxysm of anguished emotions so ungovernable that he took no heed of what he was saying or to whom he was speaking, the wretched nobleman cried, "Better—Oh! ten thousand times better that my son had married the obscure seamstress, than that his father should have become a——"

The word—the awful word—smote like the voice of doom upon the ears of the young Marquis of Arden in the conservatory: and the cry of horror that rose to his lips was suddenly stifled, ere it found vent, by the crash of an appalling consternation which fell upon him at the same instant,—so that, without giving utterance to even the faintest murmur, he sank down deprived of all consciousness.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### MR. COLLINSON'S CHOICE.

When the young Marquis awoke from his swoon, he found himself lying on the floor of the conservatory, which was now involved in the obscurity that marks the close of an afternoon in the middle of winter. Rising to his feet, he pressed his hand to his throbbing brows in order to steady his ideas, which were all whirling and agitating in confusion, as if the influence of some dreadful dream were still hanging about him even though the trammels of sleep were cast off. But as his thoughts and recollections settled by degrees and took a consistent form and a disciplined continuity, he recoiled in horror from the appalling spectacle which the whole picture, when thus filled up, presented to his contemplation.

And in that picture there were so many points of vivid colouring—so many features of frightful interest, that the bewildered and agonized young man knew not upon which particular one to fix his attention, nor how to deduce from them any suggestion or hint as to what course he himself should pursue. The saloon in which the interview between his father and Mrs. Lovel had taken place, was now dark and silent; and he therefore concluded that no one was there. It was equally clear that his own presence in the conservatory had not been discovered: otherwise he would not have been left unaided in the swoon whence he had just awakened. But how long had he remained in that lethargy? He knew not—and it was too dusky for him to consult his watch.

Trembling all over with a nervous excitement which seemed the forerunner of some approaching evil of a vague but tremendous nature, the Marquis of Arden hurried away from the conservatory and sped to his own chamber. But as he ascended the stairs, which were lighted by lamps, he looked at his watch and found that it was nearly five o'clock. It was about half-past three when he had first entered the conservatory—the interview between his father and Julia had lasted about an hour up to the fatal point when Charles's knowledge of what was passing suddenly ceased—and he therefore concluded that he had remained at least twenty minutes in a state of unconsciousness.

On entering his chamber he threw himself distractedly upon the bed—covered his face with his hands—and gave way to a violent outburst of anguish. He sobbed—Oh! that young man sobbed aloud—sobbed like a child in the bitterness of his grief, but with a far more poignant acuteness of feeling than a child could ever know! Those tears—that ebullition of mental agony—this outpouring of goaded and harrowed emotions relieved him: and rising from his couch he wiped away the traces of weeping—slaked his feverish

thirst with a draught of cold water—and sate down to review his thoughts and his recollections with as much calmness as he could possibly summon to his aid.

And what were the salient points of his meditations? That his father was a criminal of the blackest character,—a criminal whose very life was in the power of a forger in Newgate and that forger's mistress: that Collinson was to come in the evening for some purpose which the Duke anticipated with horror and anguish:—and that the awful deed which weighed so heavily upon the conscience of his Grace and left him so completely at the mercy of Lovel and Julia, had been perpetrated in order to prevent the marriage of his son with Virginia Mordaunt.

All these things were terrible enough—heaven knows that they were terrible enough! But if it were possible that their horror could be augmented and their excruciating effect be enhanced in the mind of the young Marquis, it was because all that related to his Virginia was involved in such a hideous uncertainty. That a deed of the blackest dye had been perpetrated, was apparent, —and that its object was to sever the seamstress from her youthful adorer, was likewise certain: but then came the appalling question—Was Virginia herself the *victim?*

Wild with suspense—enduring the tortures of crucifixion, as that query remained unanswered in his imagination—the young nobleman sprang from his seat and was about to rush from the room, seek his father's presence, and demand a full explanation of everything that was as yet dark and mysterious—when another idea flashed to his mind. There it flamed up with the effect of a lamp suddenly lighted in a cavern and illuminating all the objects that were dim and indistinct before. The murder of Clementine was the incident now brought out in bold relief to the mental vision of the young nobleman;—and falling back into the seat whence he had started a few moments before, he said in a low and subdued tone of consternation, "Yes—the plot thickens—and yet it becomes every instant more and more intelligible!"

Then he fell into a profound reverie, which lasted for some time: and then he sprang up and paced wildly to and fro in his chamber, like a restless and maddened animal in its cage;—and then he sank down upon a seat again, with the air of one who abandons himself to utter despair. At one moment he resolved to hasten into his father's presence and implore his fullest confidence in all things: then he thought of sallying forth and seeking an interview with Julia, so as to learn every detail from her lips;—and then he decided upon waiting until eight o'clock in the evening for the purpose of ascertaining the nature of the dreaded business which the Duke had to transact with Mr. Collinson. Thus time wore on — and the bewildered, tortured, distracted Charles could fix his mind upon no particular point nor resolve upon any special course. That a fearful storm was brewing—or indeed was ready to burst over the ducal house of Belmont, he saw too plainly: but how could he avert it?—what power or influence was he enabled to wield in opposition to its menacing approach?—where were he means by which the awful explosion was to be prevented and the imminent desolation stayed?

Suddenly the Marquis of Arden recollected the two men whom he had ere now seen in the waiting-room, and whose countenances had struck him as not being altogether unfamiliar. Until this moment he had quite forgotten all about their presence there; and the reader may judge whether he had found any leisure to bestow a minute's thought upon them. But now their forms suddenly seemed to rise up before him and introduce themselves as it were into the sombre picture which he was contemplating. Then, all in a moment, it struck him that they properly belonged to that gloomy scene and had fitly taken their places there; for he now recollected the features of Mr. Solomon's two followers!

Ah! then ruin was menacing the ducal house, —ruin of every kind and every description,—ruin of fortune and ruin of good name—ruin of purse and ruin of honour! And the young Marquis could not prevent his imagination from obeying the impulse of all these dread forebodings and launching out into the wild realms of conjecture with regard to the terrible future. He accordingly saw the crash of destruction overwhelming the family—his father dragged ignominiously to a felon's gaol—his mother-in-law and his sisters driven by bailiffs from their palatial home—and himself reduced to beggary, to desperation, and to suicide!

He was writhing in the midst of such thoughts as these,—thoughts which stung, goaded, rent, and lacerated him with the virulence and rage of maddened serpents,—when he was startled by a knock at his chamber-door. It was a domestic who had come to announce that dinner was served up. Charles, instantaneously adopting the first excuse which presented itself to his mind, said that he was engaged elsewhere; and the servant withdrew.

It was now seven o'clock; and the young nobleman decided upon awaiting the visit of Collinson. He hoped that he should then be enabled to ascertain the precise position of the family affairs;—at all events he should most likely discover the secret link which appeared to place his father at the mercy of the attorney;—and that point being cleared up, he fancied that he would be in a better condition to decide upon the adoption of some prompt and resolute course of action.

Nearly another hour was now passed in the companionship of his thoughts,—those thoughts every one of which was a viper stinging him to the quick, or a vulture tearing at his very brain. At one moment he wept bitterly, calling upon his Virginia: at another he gave vent to passionate upbraidings against his father;—and then he implored heaven's mercy to save the family from ruin, dishonour, and destruction. Thus did three quarters of an hour pass away;—and at the expiration of this period—it being now close upon eight o'clock—the Marquis stole down from his chamber and once more concealed himself in the conservatory.

Lights were in the saloon adjoining: but a heavy velvet curtain now filled the door-way between the hot-house and that apartment. Fortunately for Charles's purpose the door itself stood open—and thus he was in a position to overhear everything that might take place in the saloon, although he could see nothing.

No voices were as yet speaking in the apart-

ment: but the agitated tread of some one pacing to and fro met the young nobleman's ears. Yes —and now he caught the sound of a stifled sob: then he heard a noise as of a hand dashed against a forehead with that violence which is prompted by despair; and then he heard a low voice murmur in a tone of indescribable anguish, "My God! my God! have pity upon me!"

The utter misery which marked those words—the deep, deep despair which characterized the manner of their utterance—the excruciating agony that was evinced by the accents themselves, smote with a kind of blasting effect upon the listener's heart. It was his father—his own father who was thus enduring the tortures of the damned: and they were separated only by that purple velvet curtain which hung between the conservatory and the saloon! Oh! it was more than the generous-hearted young man could brook;—and he was about to rush from his hiding-place—dash aside the drapery—and catch his unhappy parent in his arms, when the opening of a door and the loud announcement which a servant made of the name of Collinson, nailed the Marquis to the spot where he was concealed.

"Ah! he has come!" said Charles to himself: "and now for the unravelling of all the mysteries which exist between my father and that man!"

With this musing observation to himself, the Marquis of Arden prepared to listen to a discourse which he felt convinced would be characterized by no ordinary degree of interest.

"Good evening, my lord," said the well-known voice of Collinson, after the door by which he had entered was closed behind him. "This is the 16th of January, 1846—the clock has just struck eight—and I am therefore punctual to a minute."

"Before we enter upon the business of the evening, Mr. Collinson," said the Duke, in a low deep voice which indicated alike a broken spirit and a breaking heart,—"will you permit me to ask wherefore you have sent the sheriff's officers into my house to make a seizure for the sum of *one hundred and twenty thousand pounds?*"

"All in the way of business, my lord," replied Collinson, with his characteristic coldness of tone and manner. "The deed your Grace signed two years ago, and which was duly witnessed by my clerk, gave me certain powers of which I have availed myself. But your lordship will understand that it is a mere precaution on my part—and that if the conditions be fulfilled the bailiffs will of course be withdrawn."

"Then the bailiffs are in the house, Mr. Collinson," said the Duke, his voice displaying increased emotion, "in order to act as an engine of terror and coercion with regard to myself. Surely —surely, you might have saved me this indignity —an indignity which has once again exposed me in the face of all my domestics?"

"I know nothing but law in the case, my lord," returned Collinson, his tone evincing an implacable determination,—"nothing but law and my rights."

"Do you suppose that I would take any advantage of you?" demanded the Duke, petulantly.

"I was bound to protect myself against the possibility thereof, my lord," was the chilling, pitiless response. "But shall we go to business?"

"Yes—at once," replied the Duke, with the desperate impatience of a man who is surrounded by frightful calamities and who longs to know the worst.

"It is necessary, my lord," continued the attorney, "that I should recapitulate all the incidents of the past, in order that the whole affair may be properly understood by your Grace. I have brought with me the various documents and papers connected therewith; and if your lordship will only grant me your patient attention we shall soon reach the end of a proceeding which is not perhaps altogether agreeable to your Grace."

"Agreeable!" ejaculated the Duke, bitterly. "But pray go on, Mr. Collinson," he immediately added, in a calmer tone.

"Two years and a half ago," resumed the lawyer, in the cold and measured tone of the perfect man of business, "your Grace, being already deeply indebted to me in various sums, consulted me on the position of your affairs and requested a large loan to pay off your pressing liabilities. On that occasion I proposed to make your lordship a present of one hundred thousand pounds on condition that I should become your Grace's son-in-law. In plain terms, I offered your lordship that sum as a premium for the hand of your Grace's elder daughter, the charming Lady Clarissa: and your Grace, flying into a passion, denounced my immense presumption and my startling impertinence. Finally, your Grace refused the proposal; and with regard to my pecuniary claims, I was assured that they should be settled the moment your son came of age. Vainly did I represent to your Grace that if the Marquis of Arden, on attaining his majority, were to join your lordship in cutting off the entail, the inevitable result must be to bring all the ducal domains and property, of whatsoever kind, to the auctioneer's hammer—and that sufficient would not be realized to satisfy all your lordship's creditors. Vainly, I say, did I make these representations: your lordship persisted in holding a different opinion—and we accordingly separated without coming to any amicable understanding upon the subject. Some months afterwards—in fact, to be particular with regard to dates, on the 16th of January, 1844—I caused a distress to be levied in this mansion for the amount of nearly fourteen thousand pounds. On that evening the sheriff's officers entered your Grace's mansion, while the saloons were thronged with a brilliant company. Your Grace could afford to give an entertainment which cost some hundreds of pounds, at a time when the very interest upon your lordship's debts remained unpaid."

"You know, Mr. Collinson," said the Duke, in a low and tremulous voice, "that the entertainment was a sort of desperate means of retrieving my embarrassments."

"By hooking Lord Mostyndale for one of your Grace's daughters," returned the lawyer, in a tone of cold sarcasm,—"and by affording the other daughter an opportunity of captivating the heart of some other wealthy suitor. Well, my lord—I did not complain of this manœuvre on your part: indeed, I had no right to complain. It was nothing to me—and your lordship has the undoubted

right of doing what you think fit in reference to your Grace's family. The entertainment, then, was given; and it was interrupted by a lamentable incident—the mysterious and unaccountable ferocity of Mr. Lavenham towards her Grace of Belmont."

"Proceed, sir—proceed," exclaimed the Duke, with passionate impetuosity. "That occurrence has nothing to do with our present business."

"Nothing, my lord," observed Collinson, in a tone of assent. "To continue my narrative, therefore, with due regard to the succession of events as they really took place, I must proceed to state that on the evening alluded to—namely, the evening of the grand entertainment—Mr. Solomon and his men levied a distress at my suit in Belmont House. Your lordship despatched the Marquis of Arden for me—and I came hither accordingly. Your Grace and I had a long conversation upon the position of your affairs; and allusion was made by your lordship to the proposition tendered by me some months previously. Your Grace suggested a modification of that proposal—to the effect that I should advance a hundred thousand pounds upon your own security for two years, and that if at the expiration of the term your lordship should fail to return the amount with a certain interest, I should be entitled to the hand of your Grace's elder daughter the Lady Clarissa. Perceiving that your Grace was merely using me as a tool, and that you hoped to be enabled to make a market, as it were, of your daughters by procuring for them wealthy husbands whose purses would assist in paying me off and dismissing me with the contempt, scorn, and indignation which, in your aristocratic arrogance and pride, you believed me to have richly merited by daring to aspire to the *honour* of becoming your Grace's son-in-law——"

"Wherefore these harsh terms, Mr. Collinson? wherefore these sarcasms? wherefore this vindictive tone?" demanded the Duke, in a voice that trembled and faltered with mingled dismay and anger.

"Because your lordship, I repeat, hoped to be able to use me as a tool and instrument," replied Collinson, with a stronger accentuation than he was wont to adopt; "and because your plan was to make the usurer serve your temporary purpose, and then dismiss him with ignominy. Does your Grace fancy that I did not see through all this?—or does your lordship suppose that I cared not for being covered with ridicule so long as I got a large interest for my money!"

"But I frankly explained myself on that head," said the Duke, "in reply to a question which you put to me. I told you, if I remember aright, that I calculated upon the marriage of my daughter to repay you——"

"Yes—but you did *not* tell me," interrupted Collinson, emphatically, "that you looked forward with eager hope to the time when you should be enabled, as you thought, to say, '*There! take your money, fellow, and be off!*'—But I read all that was passing in your mind; and I was resolved not to become the mere tool of your lordship's temporary purposes. I therefore resolved to meet your Grace's artifice by counter-artifice, and to put *my* hopes and aspirations in opposition to *yours*. In plain terms, I was resolved not only to become your Grace's son-in-law in the long run, but also to convince your lordship that the wealthy commoner Collinson was more powerful than the pauper Duke of Belmont. I accordingly insisted upon modifying the conditions as already proposed; and I drew up the copy of that deed which I now hold in my hand. And this deed, my lord, stipulates," continued the attorney, now assuming the cold, imperturbable, and measured tone which was characteristic not only of the man of business but likewise of an implacable nature,—"this document stipulates, I say, that I should advance your Grace the sum of one hundred thousand pounds for a period of two years; that if the said sum were repaid to me within the term, the amount of twenty thousand pounds should be added by way of bonus for the accommodation; that so long as the said sums of a hundred thousand pounds and of twenty thousand pounds in addition, should remain unpaid, your lordship should not allow *either of your daughters* to contract marriage, under penalty of rendering yourself instantaneously liable for the two amounts just specified; and that if the said sums were not repaid *within* or *at* the expiration of the two years, then I should have the privilege of making my election between your Grace's daughters and choosing either the Lady Clarissa or Lady Mary as my wife. Those, my lord, were the stipulations which I committed to paper on the evening of 16th of January, 1844, and to which your Grace's signature was affixed on the following morning."

"'Tis true, Mr. Collinson—too true!" said the wretched nobleman, in a dying voice.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

### THE CHOICE.—THE POCKET-BOOK.

THERE was now a long pause in the saloon—during which the young Marquis of Arden in the conservatory obtained leisure for breathing and thinking: for it may be almost literally affirmed that throughout the preceding colloquy between his father and the lawyer, his powers of respiration had remained suspended and all his faculties of thought were absorbed in the fearful interest of the revelations which he had thus overheard.

Fearful interest, forsooth! Oh! the reader can perhaps imagine all the amazement—all the dismay—all the consternation which piled their crushing weight upon the young man's soul as those stupendous disclosures met his ears. For it was dreadful—Oh! it was dreadful for a son thus to listen to the damning facts which proved his own father a villain,—a villain who was not only blackened with the hideous crimes which had already come to the knowledge of that son, but who was now convicted of having entered into the most degrading, derogatory, scandalous negotiations and conditions relative to his own daughters!

And it was this appalling consternation—this crushing wonderment—this blank dismay which had bound Charles to the spot where he had concealed himself in the hot-house: it was this stunning feeling which had sealed his lips and made his limbs rigid as those of a statue—thus preventing him from breaking forth from his hiding-place and bursting into the saloon to cover his father with reproaches and inflict condign chas-

tisement upon the scoundrel attorney. And even now, when he had somewhat recovered from the stupefaction of the senses and suspension of the physical energies,—now that he was enabled to breathe and think,—he did not choose to quit his lurking-place. No—he had heard enough to determine him to listen unto the end, so that he might obtain a knowledge of the full measure of his sire's criminal folly and the whole sum of Collinson's refined rascality.

"Well, my lord," said the attorney, at length breaking that long silence which had followed the last despairing ejaculation of the Duke of Belmont, —"the moment has now come when it is necessary that I should be informed what I am to expect. The two years have expired—and during this period the sum of one hundred and twenty thousand pounds has not been repaid. On the other hand I am bound to state that your lordship has faithfully adhered to the condition which restrained you from assenting to the marriage of either of your charming daughters. The matter, therefore, now lies in a nut-shell; and the alternatives are these:—*First*, is your Grace prepared to pay me the sum of one hundred and twenty thousand pounds?—or *secondly*, am I to make my selection of one of your Grace's charming daughters?"

"Mr. Collinson," said the Duke, in a voice which can only be likened unto that tone in which the doomed felon expresses his last wishes to the chaplain ere the fatal drop falls,—"Mr. Collinson, I am utterly unable to return you the amount which is due to you. All my hopes have been blasted, in every respect. To be candid and frank with you—since there is no use in practising concealment or reserve —I am as much embarrassed as I was two years ago when you advanced me the hundred thousand pounds. The improvements effected in my estates have not had time to develop themselves and produce a commensurate return: and as for my hope that the Earl of Mostyndale would espouse my younger daughter—*that* has hitherto remained unfulfilled——"

"Then what course does your lordship propose to adopt," demanded Collinson, with an accent of triumph penetrating through his words.

"I am at your mercy, sir," was the faint and despairing response.

"In this case I am at once to inform your lordship on which of your two daughters I have fixed my choice," said Collinson: "and I must admit that your Grace has allowed me full opportunity of rendering myself well and intimately acquainted with the merits of both those charming damsels. In Lady Clarissa I have discovered many excellent points. Her ladyship possesses a few feminine failings, it is true: such as an inordinate vanity—a consummate jealousy—a peerless hauteur—an infinite conceit—and all those usual aristocratic traits of disposition, conduct, and manner which serve to convince her friends and acquaintances that she is a being so remarkably superior to them, they must consider themselves highly honoured by being allowed to breathe the same atmosphere with herself."

"Mr. Collinson, this bantering is most misplaced—this sarcasm is most cruel," said the unhappy Duke, who did not at first perceive the slight vein of irony which ran through the lawyer's observations.

"Well, if your Grace thinks that I exaggerate the agreeable qualifications of the Lady Clarissa," replied the merciless Collinson—"we will dismiss her for the moment from the *tapis*, and turn our attention to her sister. Therefore, with regard to the Lady Mary, I must declare that she is full of amiability—possessed of an excellent heart—devoid of all impertinent pride and aristocratic arrogance—and capable of becoming the joy and ornament of an affectionate husband's household. The only misfortune is that she detests me as inveterately as a lord abominates a working-man, or as an overseer hates a pauper——"

"And therefore," interrupted the Duke, catching greedily at the last straw of hope which was left to him in the world,—"and therefore you will choose my elder daughter, Lady Clarissa?"

"So that Lady Mary may bestow her hand upon Lord Mostyndale, who has not even taken the trouble to conceal his hatred and contempt for me?" said Collinson, a smile of mingled scorn and triumph playing for a moment upon his lips. "My lord," he continued, his voice suddenly becoming solemn to a degree, "I am now entering upon the enjoyment of a position to which I have looked forward with a burning eagerness—yes, an ardent longing, the depth and the intensity of which I have concealed, as I am capable of concealing all my thoughts and all my sensations, beneath a studied coldness of look and language. In a word, I have brought matters to that crisis which empowers me to tell the Duke of Belmont that having hitherto *tolerated* me as a visitor, he must now *accept* me as a son-in-law; —to tell the Earl of Mostyndale likewise that having repudiated me as a *friend*, he shall now have me as a *rival*;—to tell Lady Clarissa Melcombe that having condescended to receive my visits as an *inferior* on whom it suited her to smile, she shall now be compelled to treat me as her *equal*;—and to tell the beautiful Lady Mary that as she would not encourage me even as an *acquaintance*, she must now make up her mind to receive me as a *husband!*"

"No—no—you will not do it, Collinson!" exclaimed the Duke, now goaded to madness: "you will not consummate the unhappiness of that poor girl who never injured you! Avenge yourself upon me—Oh! avenge any slight which may have been put upon you beneath this roof—but let all the fury of your indignation fall upon my devoted head! Mary loves you not——"

"And it is precisely because I wish to punish her for her aversion, that I intend to make her my wife," exclaimed Collinson, with an abruptness that savoured even of brutality. "We have now nothing more to say, my lord: but at noon to-morrow I propose to call, when I shall expect to be received by Lady Mary as her future husband."

"And the bailiffs?" gasped the Duke, in a dying voice.

"Must remain in possession until after the marriage," replied Collinson: then, without another word, he quitted the room.

"Oh! my God—my God!" exclaimed the Duke aloud in a tone of rending, thrilling, excruciating anguish: and he rushed from the room, doubtless (as Charles thought) to seek the solitude of his own chamber, where he might give free vent to his maddening grief without fear of intrusion.

A few minutes after the door had closed behind

No. 15.—The Seamstress.

the Duke of Belmont, the Marquis of Arden passed from the conservatory into the saloon, with the intention of repairing likewise to his own apartment and communing upon all he had just heard. But as he was traversing the saloon with uneven steps and reeling brain, he beheld a decanter of water and a tumbler upon the table: and the sight of these objects reminded him of a burning thirst under which he was labouring and which was produced by the fevered—almost frenzied condition of his feelings. He paused to imbibe a long draught of the refreshing element; and as he replaced the glass upon the table, his foot trod upon something on the carpet. He stooped down—picked it up—and found that it was a pocket-book secured with an elastic clasp. This clasp was of silver; and on it was engraved the name of Mr. Collinson.

The blood thrilled through every artery of the young nobleman as a presentiment flashed to his brain with the vividness of an inspiration and the mystic force of a supernatural warning. He already seemed to feel as if he were touching upon the threshold of some startling discovery which would more or less influence the present position of affairs;—and unhesitatingly he sate down at the table to examine the contents of the pocket-book.

Several papers did he turn over and examine without observing aught that specially claimed his attention: but presently he opened one which was a letter written in a female hand and much soiled by having been kept a long time. He read a few lines—a convulsive start suddenly shook his frame and a hectic flush appeared upon his pale countenance. He turned over the letter, which was a long one, and glanced at the name of the writer: heavens! what amazement now mingled with the excitement which he had first experienced! But calming his thoughts as well as he was able, he continued the perusal of the letter;—and in a few moments his eye-lashes grew moist—and then two large tears rolled down his cheeks. His lips quivered with emotion—and a subdued sob agitated his breast as with a strong spasm. At length he finished the perusal of the letter; and instead of restoring it to the pocket-book, he secured it about his own person. He then fastened the pocket-book and threw it down on the floor in the spot where he had picked it up.

The Marquis of Arden now quitted the saloon and was proceeding to his own chamber, when he was accosted by a servant who said, "Her Grace desires to see your lordship for half-an-hour some time this evening."

"I will repair forthwith to her ladyship's apartments," replied Charles, who was so struck by the circumstance of receiving such an unusual invitation from his mother-in-law that, in the disordered state of his mind, he could not help associating it with the multiform and terrible affairs that now absorbed all his thoughts.

Ascending the stairs, therefore, at a rapid pace, the Marquis of Arden hurried into the presence of the Duchess of Belmont.

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### THE MOTHER-IN-LAW AND THE MARQUIS.

THE Duchess of Belmont was greatly changed since the period when we first introduced her to our readers. During the two years which had thus elapsed, the corroding influences of care had manifested themselves on her fine countenance and her splendid figure: the former had grown pale and sunken—the latter had become wasted and had lost all the healthy plumpness of its *embonpoint*. She was now thirty-nine years of age; and although no streak of silver mingled with the dark glory of her hair, and although the perfection of the pearly teeth still remained, yet did she seem older than she really was. And on her features there was an expression of soft and settled melancholy, proclaiming with all the unstudied eloquence of mirrored feeling that Augusta had bade farewell to this world's dream of bliss, and that hers was the secret woe of blighted affections and ruined hopes.

In describing the Duchess of Belmont's own suite of apartments in one of the earliest chapters of our tale, we spoke of a small but elegantly-furnished saloon, abounding in all the proofs of a fashionable woman's taste: and it is in this room that we now find her, half reposing upon a sofa drawn near the fire. Although it was evening, she still wore the negligent apparel of the morning's toilette: an elegant wrapper enveloped her form—and her hair fell in partial disorder over her shoulders.

When the Marquis of Arden entered the room, the Duchess extended her hand towards him, saying, "I thank you, Charles, for this prompt attention to my wishes. Sit down—and let us have a few minutes' conversation together—for I am certain that it is necessary we should unbosom ourselves frankly to each other. But, just heavens!" exclaimed the noble lady, as she surveyed her son-in-law with a more earnest attention than at first; "how strangely wild your looks appear! Has anything happened——"

"I cannot answer you in a breath," interrupted the young nobleman: "nor will a few words suffice to explain all I know and all I feel."

"Then sit down, Charles," said the Duchess, her curiosity and her alarm being both excited. "I have been thinking for some months past that I would invite you to a conference with me upon certain matters: but I have hesitated at interfering therein—fearful that my motives should be misinterpreted. Now, however, I can no longer restrain the desire which thus prompts me to consult you, Charles, upon subjects wherein you are most especially interested, and which seems also to affect the happiness of your amiable sister Mary."

"My dear mother-in-law," observed the Marquis of Arden, "you have always treated my sisters and myself with so much kindness, that nothing which you may say or do in respect to our welfare, can possibly be misinterpreted. I cannot speak so emphatically of Clarissa's feelings, because she has ever been more reserved towards me than my younger sister; but for Mary and myself I can safely say that we have observed with sorrow, and still behold with painful curiosity and

sincere grief, all those evidences of a profoundly seated affliction which during the last two years your own retired and peculiar mode of life has so unmistakably furnished. We should have proffered our consolations long ere this: but your sorrow seemed too sacred for such intrusion."

"I thank you, Charles—sincerely thank you, for these expressions of sympathy," said the Duchess, in a tone of plaintive sorrow and melting softness. "But have *you* not also your cares?—and has not poor Mary her woes likewise? Alas! alas! a spell appears to have fallen upon this house—an evil genius seems to have obtained the power of blighting every bud of happiness that ventures to expand beneath this roof!"

"First, then, my dear mother-in-law," said the Marquis of Arden, "let me learn the secret of your unhappiness."

"No, Charles—we will speak of your younger sister and yourself in the first instance," replied the Duchess. "And to begin with Mary—she is perishing visibly before our eyes, and no one appears to have the courage, the inclination, or the power to extend a hand to save her! What is the meaning of all this? She loves the Earl of Mostyndale—and she is beloved in return. What barrier exists to their union? wherefore does Mostyndale absent himself, when it is notorious that he is enamoured of Mary beyond all possibility of change? But while he is either excluded from the house, or else constrained by some unseen influence to keep away, a purse-proud man is suffered to have the run of the mansion precisely as if it were his own. You cannot fail to comprehend, Charles, that I allude to Mr. Collinson——"

"The villain!" muttered the young Marquis between his quivering lips, as the scene in the saloon flamed up with fearful vividness in his memory.

"Ah! you call him a harsh name," said the Duchess, whose ear had caught the expression; "and you are therefore acquainted with his evil designs? For that he *does* meditate evil towards your father, or some one beneath this roof, I feel confident. Without being superstitious, I do not altogether mistrust presentiments——"

"And if you have experienced a presentiment of evil with regard to Collinson," exclaimed Charles, bitterly, "you have assuredly not erred in yielding to it. Know, then, that the bailiffs are once more in possession of Belmont House——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Duchess, with a start: "then I was not misinformed! One of my maids casually mentioned to me just now that she had seen in the waiting-room a couple of ill-looking individuals who were here—on the night of the ball—just two years ago," continued Augusta, gasping with the emotions that were suddenly aroused in her bosom: "and on hearing that intelligence, all the presentiments which have haunted me for weeks and months past, seemed to concentrate their forebodings and fill my heart almost to bursting with the auguries of evil thus conjured up. Then was it that I resolved to postpone no more my long wished for and too long deferred conference with you. Tell me, Charles—tell me—what do you know of your father's affairs?—are they irretrievable?—is Collinson at the bottom of this second invasion on the part of the officers of the law?—and if so, how is it all to end?"

"Ah! that is the question which I keep asking myself a hundred times in a minute," exclaimed Charles, with the sudden excitement of an almost frenzied wildness; —"and no possible conjecture or foresight can furnish a solution to the query!"

"Tell me all you know, Charles—tell me everything, I entreat you!" said the Duchess, in a tone of the most earnest and solemn appeal. "Amidst my own deep sorrows I have not been unmindful of the change which has come over yourself within the last eighteen months or two years: but I have not ventured until this evening to question you upon the subject. I thought that if it were consistent with your feelings to seek solace at my hands and make me your confidant, you would do so unasked and uninvited by me: and as you are no longer a child, I did not consider myself justified in intruding upon the privacy of your soul's sentiments. The cause of your poor sister's sorrow, I have of course heard, seen, and understood: that, alas! is no secret in the household—no secret amongst all her friends and acquaintances. But you, Charles, are cherishing some deeply-seated woe, the nature of which my conjectures cannot fathom: and if you deem me worthy of your confidence, I am at length disposed to be daring enough to invite it. Remember, my dear boy, I am not seeking to exercise over you the authority of a mother-in-law: I am addressing you as a friend—treating you as such——"

"And as such will I regard you—as such will I treat you in return!" exclaimed Charles. "Moreover, I feel that I need your advice—your counsel in many, many things, and that it will be a relief to my soul to pour forth all its pent-up anguish and shape it in words that your ears may drink it in and your heart appreciate its magnitude. But first of all, my dear mother-in-law," said Charles, drawing his chair closer towards her and fixing his looks with an earnest commiseration upon her countenance, as if he already pitied in advance the tremendous agonies which his revealings were about to excite in her breast,—"first of all," he said, in a low deep tone, "I must warn you that you are on the threshold of astounding discoveries—that you are on the point of hearing terrible and startling things!"

"Tell me everything, Charles—suppress nothing," said the noble lady, with a feverish impatience. "I am nerved—I am prepared——"

"No, no—you cannot be!" ejaculated the Marquis. "Widely as your conjectures may range, they cannot possibly embrace the horrors which are in store for you!"

"Horrors!—in store for *me!*" echoed the Duchess, aghast at the fearful nature of the warning just given.

"Yes—horrors of the blackest, blackest dye!" responded Charles, his eyes dilating with ominous fire and his lips turning white as those of a corpse.

"Just heavens! what mean you?" demanded the Duchess, her blanched visage convulsed with all the agonies of a torturing suspense, while her bosom palpitated violently. "You speak of horrors—you must doubtless mean crimes."

"I do—I do," murmured Charles between his set teeth. "Crimes most damnable——"

"O God! who has perpetrated them?" asked

the Duchess, in a dying tone—for in her heart the query was already answered.

"Who has perpetrated them?" echoed the young nobleman, suddenly starting with fierce excitement: "my father—your husband!"

"God protect me!" murmured the Duchess, falling back upon the sofa—not in a state of insensibility—but in a condition of mingled despair and stupor, as if her spirit were utterly appalled and broken.

Then there was a long pause in that room, during which the Marquis of Arden sate gazing in mournful earnestness upon his unhappy mother-in-law;—and the dreadful nature of the thoughts that were preying like vultures upon his brain, was evinced in the nervous quivering of his white lips, the contracting lines of his forehead, and the sinister light that burned in his eyes.

"Charles," said the Duchess, at length raising herself slowly to a sitting posture upon the sofa, and speaking in a voice that was profoundly marked with an illimitable woe,—"Charles, tell me everything! The first paroxysm of agony is passed—the first access of excruciation has gone by. I am now prepared to listen, Charles: but I beseech you to reveal all you know—without reserve——"

"I will do so," said the young Marquis, in a tone strongly accentuated. "Yes—it is meet and proper that you should know everything: and therefore I will commence my narrative with certain particulars which will explain the cause of that change which has come over me during the last two years. Mother-in-law, be pleased to carry your recollections back to the 16th of January, 1841——"

"Heavens! the incidents of that day are seared upon my brain," ejaculated the Duchess, in the rending voice of an agony produced by the most poignant reminiscences suddenly awakened. "Is it possible that *your* afflictions date likewise from that terrible evening?"

"No—not from the evening of the entertainment," answered the young nobleman: "but from the morning of that day. Nor can I precisely aver that my sorrows began on the occasion referred to—because with the early portion of the narrative which I am about to reveal to your ears, there were many pleasing hopes, many delicious feelings, and many elysian dreams interminglcd."

"Ah! then, *you* also have loved—and have loved unfortunately?" said the Duchess, in that low, measured, and profoundly mournful tone which showed that she was involuntarily expressing the secret of her own life in the query which she thus put to her son-in-law."

"Yes—I loved—and heaven alone can tell how fervently I have loved!" continued the Marquis. "But in desiring you, my dear mother-in-law, to carry back your recollections to the morning of that memorable day which well nigh terminated so fatally for you,—and in fixing your attention upon that particular date, I wish to ascertain if you recollect an incident which was trivial enough with regard to you, but which was important enough in respect to me to give stamp and impress to the current of my destiny."

"To what incident do you allude?" asked the Duchess, completely at a loss to penetrate the meaning of her son-in-law.

"Tax your memory," said Charles, "and see if you can recollect the fact of a young milliner calling upon the particular day of which I am speaking——"

"Heavens! what mean you?" cried the Duchess, now once again becoming dreadfully excited, as a suspicion of the truth flashed to her imagination. "Yes—I remember the incident to which you allude——"

"And you therefore remember the young seamstress herself?" exclaimed Charles, eagerly. "Well——"

"Yes—yes—I remember her," gasped the Duchess: "what then?"

"She was a beautiful girl—genteel and well bred as any lady in the land," said Charles: "did you notice all this?"

"I did—I did," murmured Augusta. "And you saw her, then?"

"I saw her," replied the young Marquis, solemnly: "and she became the object of my love."

"Her name—her name?" faltered the Duchess, who was nearly overpowered with excitement.

"Virginia Mordaunt," was the answer.

The noble lady threw herself back upon the sofa—pressed both her hands to her forehead as if to stay the violent throbbings of her brows—and then remained silent and immoveable for upwards of a minute.

"Charles," she at length said, slowly withdrawing her hands from her head, and gazing with a solemn earnestness into the young nobleman's face as she bent forward and inclined her head towards him,—"Charles, answer me as you would reply to your God! Has Virginia's honour been made a sacrifice to your passion? or has she passed pure and spotless through the ordeal? Tell me, Charles—tell me truly—as you may value my blessing or dread my curse!"

"Virginia is an angel of chastity and innocence!" cried the young Marquis, gazing upon his mother-in-law in astonishment, at her manner, her words, and her looks.

"You swear that you are speaking the truth, Charles?" she exclaimed, grasping his wrist with convulsive violence and fixing her eyes upon him with a scrutiny that seemed intended to pierce him through and through.

"I swear," he repeated, with a thrilling emphasis, his amazement increasing to a positive wildness.

"Then may God in heaven bless you, Charles!" cried his mother-in-law, in a tone of fervid enthusiasm, while the tears ran down her cheeks: and falling upon her knees at the young man's feet, she took his hand and pressed it to her lips, exclaiming, "Oh! yes—I thank you, Charles—God knows how sincerely, how unfeignedly I thank you for sparing the honour of that poor girl whose virtue doubtless is her only dowry."

And having covered the hand of the Marquis with her kisses and her tears, the Duchess rose from her suppliant posture—resumed her seat upon the sofa—and, burying her countenance in one of the pillows, gave vent to a tide of emotions the spring of which was beyond all possibility of conjecture on the part of her son-in-law.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### RETROSPECT OVER THE SCENE IN THE CONSERVATORY.

THAT outpouring of the varied and conflicting feelings which had concentrated themselves in the bosom of the Duchess of Belmont, proved a signal relief;—and rising her head, she wiped the traces of tears from her cheeks, composed her looks, and bent her eyes upon the Marquis with an expression which seemed to inquire how far she should be justified in trusting him. He understood the meaning of the gaze;—and in a low soft tone he said, "I perceive that you have a secret which you are more than half inclined to reveal to me? Rest assured, my dear mother-in-law, that I am fully deserving of your confidence—especially as I intend, ere we separate this night, to unbosom myself fully and unreservedly to you."

"Listen to me, Charles—and give me your attention," said the Duchess of Belmont, after a few moments' deep meditation. "I am about to tell you a tale which may not at first appear to have any connexion with the topic of our discourse, but which nevertheless will prove in the end to be intimately associated with it."

"Proceed, my dear mother-in-law," said the Marquis: "I am prepared to listen with attention and with interest."

"Some years ago, Charles," resumed the Duchess of Belmont, "there was a young lady belonging to one of the noblest families in the realm, and who was worshipped as the star of the fashionable world. She was said to be beautiful and accomplished; and if the homage of a host of admirers and the address of a train of suitors were to be regarded as a criterion, then assuredly did the tongue of fame exaggerate nothing in respect to the young lady's personal charms and mental attractions. But she was neither vain nor ambitious: though courted by Dukes, Marquises, Earls, and Viscounts,—though gallant officers knelt at her feet and great statesmen wooed her smiles,—she cared for none of these, but bestowed her love upon a poor, obscure, and almost friendless young gentleman who acted as her father's private secretary. They loved—that high-born lady and that obscure young man,—they loved with a sincerity, a fondness, and an ardour such as only romancists are supposed to depict or poets to feel. And in the impassioned mingling of the spirit that warmed them both and flashed from their eyes in delicious transfusion,—in those melting looks of sunny tenderness which they were wont to fix upon each other,—in those sighs of love and passion which they heaved, and those caresses which they exchanged with so fond an ardour,—in all this concentration of fervid feelings and elysian emotions was their sense of prudence lost! They loved in secret—the world suspected not the tender mystery;—and they knew that it was useless—vain—insensate to dream or hope that the young lady's parents would ever assent to her union with one who possessed neither fortune nor high-birth. Therefore the word '*marriage*' was never breathed between that tender pair: and reckless of the consequences—or rather, absorbed wholly and entirely in the delicious day-dream of their love—they abandoned themselves to the raptures, the joys, and the delights of their passion. Nor did they awake from this intoxication of the feelings and the senses until a frightful peril stared them in the face: for the young lady was in a way to become a mother! In her despair she threw herself at the feet of her parents and confessed everything. You may conjecture their dismay—their rage—their consternation: but nothing could exceed the wildness of their daughter's grief when she found that so far from gaining the hoped-for end by her avowal, she had produced a result utterly fatal to her happiness. The expectation was that her parents, in order to rescue her from disgrace and shame, would at once assent to her union with her lover: but, instead of adopting this course, they immediately took counsel together how they could best hush up the matter. Swayed by mingled entreaties, threats, and misrepresentations,—these last being to the effect that the young lady herself had fallen into her parents' views,—the disconsolate lover was persuaded to quit London and proceed to Ireland, where a government situation was procured for him. Arrangements were made with the utmost caution and secrecy for the young lady's confinement. The widow of the land-steward upon her father's estate was taken into confidence; and this female, who was of the highest respectability, was placed in possession of a neat little house in the suburbs of London. There the young lady became the mother of a female infant, which was adopted by the widow-woman as her own. The young lady's parents made some arrangement with a lawyer, whose name I never learnt, to pay the woman a certain quarterly stipend: but the man of business was not of course acquainted with the mystery attending the affair. Four years after the birth of her child, the young lady was forced into a marriage with one of the proudest Dukes in England's catalogue of nobles——"

"Mother-in-law," said Charles, seizing the hand of the Duchess as he thus interrupted her, and gazing steadfastly upon her countenance,—"pardon me if I wound the feelings of your soul or bring a blush to your cheek—but I am at no loss to penetrate the meaning of your narrative!"

"Nor did I intend that you should be, Charles," murmured the Duchess, with downcast looks: "but I thought that I would break to you the history of my shame gradually, rather than avow it all in a moment—and likewise——"

"And likewise unfold to me by degrees the fact which nevertheless is so startling—so amazing—so bewildering," exclaimed Charles,—"that Virginia Mordaunt——"

"Is my own child!" added the Duchess, clasping her hands together and bowing her head forward: then, as she remained for more than a minute in that attitude, motionless and silent, she resembled a sculptured effigy of woful shame.

"Your own child!" murmured Charles, likewise clasping his hands—but in mingled anguish and despair. "O! where art thou, Virginia?" he cried aloud: "where art thou, my angel and my beauty?"

"You know not, then, where she is, Charles?" said the Duchess, raising her head at length and gazing earnestly upon her son-in-law.

"Would to God that I could discover her abode!" ejaculated the young man. "But I am ignorant of everything that concerns her now—I know not

whether she be even in the land of the living or in the realm of departed saints——"

And overpowered by his feelings, he melted into tears: for illimitable as heaven itself, and profound as the unfathomed depths of the ocean, was his love for thee, Virginia Mordaunt!

"We will find her out, Charles," exclaimed the Duchess, suddenly speaking forth in a tone of fervid feeling: "we will discover her abode, if the poor girl be still a denizen of this world. Oh! my God! who can describe the emotions which filled my heart when two years ago a young maiden, beautiful as an angel, stood in my presence—there, in the adjoining room—and on being asked her name, she replied '*Virginia Mordaunt!*'—That was the first time I had ever seen or heard of my daughter since I beheld her an infant in the arms of Mrs. Mordaunt, the widow of the land-steward, on the day when I bade her farewell at her own humble dwelling. But, Oh! that 16th of January, 1844, was indeed a memorable day! In the morning I encountered my own child whom I had not seen for eighteen years and of whose existence I was not even certain: and in the evening, I was destined to behold the object of my affections—the father of that unacknowledged girl—branded as an assassin——"

"Mr. Lavenham!" exclaimed Charles. "Good heavens! is it possible? Mr. Lavenham Virginia's father!"

"It is so," responded the Duchess. "On being induced to leave England, he repaired to Ireland where some petty government situation was procured for him. But embarking in business as a merchant, he speedily accumulated a princely fortune—so large a portion of which has been devoted by him at various times to prop up the falling grandeur of the house of Belmont!"

"Poor Mr. Lavenham!" said Charles, in a tone of the sincerest sympathy. "How deeply I compassionate his lot!"

"Rather raise your voice, my dear son-in-law, to glorify and extol to the seventh heaven," exclaimed the Duchess, "the admirable man, who, with generosity unparalleled in this world, has sacrificed himself to save *me* from shame! Yes—Julius Lavenham," continued Augusta, her cheeks flushing with the enthusiasm inspired by the subject, "is one of those chivalrous and exalted characters that only appear upon earth at long intervals, and whose devotion to the object of their love is proved by a cheerful self-martyrdom!"

"Do you mean me to understand that he is innocent?" demanded Charles, anxiously.

"As innocent of the attack upon me as you yourself are!" returned the Duchess solemnly.

"Strange! most strange!" said the young Marquis in a musing tone as a particular incident flashed to his memory. "Virginia is slightly acquainted with Mr. Lavenham—she visited him in Newgate—and she expressed to him her conviction of his innocence!"

"And it was of her own father that she was thus speaking!" murmured the Duchess, the tears streaming down her cheeks: then, after a long pause, she observed, "But you are doubtless anxious to learn the true version relative to the tragic occurrence in the conservatory—and if you grant me your patience I will soon satisfy you on that head. You must know then, my dear Charles, that on the memorable evening of the grand entertainment, Julius Lavenham was conversing with me, when the discourse took a somewhat serious turn, upon the Duke's embarrassments and Lord Mostyndale's attentions to your sister Mary. The business-like nature of the topic induced us to leave the saloons and enter the conservatory, where we might continue our remarks without retraint. But the discourse soon took a turn of deeper and more tender interest,—assuming a complexion such as Lavenham and myself had not permitted it to take for years before. For I solemnly declare, Charles, that never—oh! never did I prove unfaithful to the marriage vows which I pledged your father at the altar——"

"Do not insult yourself, my dear mother-in-law," exclaimed Charles, "by volunteering an assurance so unnecessary—so uncalled for. You were telling me that the conversation between yourself and Mr. Lavenham in the hot-house turned upon a tender topic which you had both previously avoided for some time past?"

"Yes—and I know not how the discourse came thus to touch upon the forbidden ground," said the Duchess: "but so it was. Julius Lavenham addressed me in that tone of fervid eloquence to which no woman who fondly loves can listen with impunity. And I *did* love Lavenham *then*—I love him *now*—I shall never cease to love him while the breath remains in my body! Well, Charles, you who have loved so tenderly and who still love so devotedly,—you, I say, can pity and pardon me—or at all events you can understand me when I tell you that overpowered by the various feelings which thronged in upon my soul, I threw myself into his arms—I proclaimed my unalterable love—I vowed never to separate from him again—and I implored him to take me thence and let me be all and everything to him in future. But Julius Lavenham would not thus devote my name to infamy and sacrifice my reputation to scorn and scandal: his was no selfish passion—it was the holiest, purest love—and he idolized me with an affection too profound and a worship too ethereal, to permit him to become the means or the cause of dragging me through the mire of public reprobation. In his generous enthusiasm on my behalf, he caught up one of the fruit knives in the conservatory and threatened to plunge it into my bosom rather than become the destroyer of my peace and let me live! I recollect that I threw out taunts and reproaches against him—that I upbraided him with a want of affection—and that I almost goaded him to madness by my insane words and excited actions. But I was not the mistress of myself—I was a perfect maniac at the moment. Wildly I bade him plunge the knife into my breast: he flung it from him—he caught me in his arms—he implored me to tranquillize myself—he covered me with his caresses! At this juncture the glass door communicating with the garden was opened suddenly—and the Duke of Belmont, trembling with rage, stood in our presence. Passion sealed his lips—but lent furious energy to his hand,—and snatching up the fruit-knife which Lavenham had flung upon the table a moment before, your father plunged it into my bosom!"

"My father—always my father!" exclaimed Charles. "Just heaven! how misfortunes and crimes have multiplied upon his head within the last two years! But pray proceed, my dear

mother-in-law: your narrative possesses a wild and terrible interest!"

"If I proceed with the details of my history in consecutive order," said the Duchess, "I must now narrate them as they were subsequently explained to me: because, as you are well aware, I shrieked and fainted on receiving the dreadful wound."

"Give me all the details, no matter how you learnt them," said Charles, eagerly.

"It appears then," resumed the Duchess, "that while I was engaged with Mr. Lavenham in the conservatory, your father had been summoned to the library to find the bailiffs in possession. Fearful that the rumour might reach my ears indirectly and in an exaggerated form, he resolved to break the afflicting intelligence to me at once. Having left me a short time previously in the saloon opening on the conservatory, he supposed that he should still find me there in company with Mr. Lavenham, to whom he also intended to communicate the disagreeable occurrence. To avoid traversing the other saloons—especially as the dancing was in full progress—your father passed round by the garden, proposing to enter by way of the conservatory. But the instant that he reached the top of the stone steps leading from the garden, through the glass door did he behold Mr. Lavenham supporting me in his arms and covering me with his caresses! In a paroxysm of rage, he rushed in—seized the knife—and plunged it into my bosom! Then, all in a moment recovering his presence of mind, Lavenham clutched the Duke by the arm, saying in a low, hasty, but impressive voice, '*Your wife is innocent, I pledge my soul to God! Depart—and save her even from suspicion! I will take the deed upon myself!*'—and he pushed the Duke out of the conservatory with one hand as he drew the knife from my breast with the other. All this was the work of a moment: the words were uttered quickly as thought itself can fly—and as the Duke precipitated himself down the stone steps into the garden, the guests burst from the saloon into the conservatory."

"Oh! now I understand all that was great, and noble, and generous in Mr. Lavenham's conduct," exclaimed Charles. "Had the truth been suffered to appear, my father must have declared in justification of the murderous deed, that he had beheld his wife in the arms of Julius Lavenham—and your good name would have been sullied beyond redemption. But by adopting the course which he took, Mr. Lavenham effectually screened you altogether."

"Every detail connected with that memorable occurrence is known to me," continued the Duchess; "because the fullest explanations were subsequently given to me by the Duke—and I will now make you acquainted with them all. It seems that he had fully comprehended and appreciated the meaning of the hurried but impressive words which Mr. Lavenham had breathed in his ear when urging him from the hot-house; and on hurrying back to the library, he had just leisure to collect himself somewhat ere the guests burst into his presence to proclaim the occurrence with which he was already too well acquainted. Then he saw by the accounts which were given him that Mr. Lavenham had not repudiated the charge of attempted assassination;—and many reasons combined to prompt your father to lend himself to the cheat which the generous Julius was thus willing to practise in order to colour the event and save my honour. For your father loved me devotedly and well—he was proud of me—and he likewise shrank from the thought of being talked of as an old man who was jealous of his young wife. Therefore, believing the assurance so solemnly given by Lavenham *that I was innocent*, he was well pleased to accept the self-martyrdom of that individual as the means of preventing an exposure of the real details as they actually occurred. So soon as all the guests had departed, your father despatched you to fetch Mr. Collinson: but no sooner had you quitted the house, when the Duke muffled himself up in his cloak and sallied forth likewise. To the station-house he repaired: and the mention of his name procured him a prompt and private interview with Mr. Lavenham, of whom he demanded an explanation of the scene which he had witnessed in the conservatory. Julius at once took all the blame upon himself,—declaring that he had ventured to persecute me with his addresses—that I had repulsed him indignantly—that he had seized me in his arms—and that it was at the moment when I was overpowered by the stupor of amazement resulting from the suddenness of his daring conduct that the Duke had burst into the conservatory."

"And my father was ignorant of the fact that Mr. Lavenham was once the object of your youthful affections?" said Charles, inquiringly.

"Your father remains ignorant of that fact until now—and must continue so till the end," responded the Duchess. "Between you and me, Charles, there shall exist no secrets: for circumstances have suddenly appeared to inspire us with mutual confidence——"

"And even to render that confidence necessary," added the young Marquis, "in the present deplorable state of the affairs of the house of Belmont. But pray proceed. I presume that my father was satisfied with the representations made by Mr. Lavenham at the police-station?"

"Not altogether," answered the Duchess. "Your father had seen me in the arms of Julius Lavenham—had seen me surrendering myself to the fervid caresses which he was lavishing upon me:—and he therefore could not close his eyes to the fact that I must have behaved with imprudence, even if I were not culpable. Despite of the colouring which Lavenham's chivalrous self-devotion gave to the incident,—a colouring which was intended to clear my reputation not only in the opinion of the world but likewise in that of my husband—despite, I say, of that generosity which prompted Julius to proclaim himself a cowardly aggressor against a lady who had given him no encouragement,—despite of all this, your father could not surmount the suspicion that I must at least have acted with a temporary weakness and a passing imprudence in the matter. He however believed that I was not guilty—but simply because he supposed Lavenham's avowal of love to have been made then and there for the first time."

"And how terminated their interview at the police-station?" inquired Charles.

"Your father said to Mr. Lavenham, '*You*

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

father,—a conversation the details of which had convinced him that his own parent was the author of a fearful crime the object of which had been to prevent his marriage with Virginia;—and he failed not to mention the suspicions which had arisen in his soul relative to the possibility—or, indeed, the probability—that the mysterious murder of Clementine and the black deed alluded to were identical. Nor did the Marquis omit to relate all the particulars of the discourse between his sire and his late mistress Julia,—those particulars which established the fact of some secret and dreadful understanding or complicity between the Duke and Lovel the forger. Lastly, the young nobleman detailed to his mother-in-law the features of the interview between her husband and Mr. Collinson,—so that the unhappy lady was now enabled to contemplate with a horrible clearness the whole range of menacing circumstances which surrounded the family into which she had married. Awful indeed was that contemplation!—terrific were the dangers that environed the dueal house of Belmont! Beneath it were mines which the most trivial accident would cause to explode: above it hung the portentous thunder-cloud ready to burst and vomit forth its shattering bolts and its searing lightnings. Around—on every side—were dangers the aspect of which made the flesh creep upon the bones, and evils whose threatening presence was enough to daunt the boldest heart and strike terror into the strongest breast!

"Mother-in-law," said the Marquis of Arden, breaking a long pause which ensued after he had brought his narrative to an end,—"I am ashamed to look you in the face—ashamed to think that you should have married into such a family as this!"

"My dear boy, do not talk to me thus!" exclaimed the noble lady, addressing him with as much reassuring tenderness and familiar confidence as she would have displayed had he been her own son: for an identity of grief and a sympathy in affliction are the best promoters of a genuine intimacy. "No—do not talk to me in such a manner," repeated the Duchess:—"but rather let us consult upon the proper course which we should now pursue—for I see, Charles, that the time has come when you and I must act in concert, and act with vigour."

"Nor must we separate this night, my dear mother-in-law," said Charles, with the accentuated firmness of desperation, "until we have settled all our plans. In the first place money must be found to settle the forgeries which Lovel has committed: for I am confident that my father cannot command the necessary sum to meet that emergency."

"Six or seven thousand pounds you said, I believe, Charles?" observed the Duchess.

"Such was the amount named by Julia," replied the Marquis of Arden.

"Here are ten thousand pounds, then," said the Duchess, opening a writing-desk and placing a small pocket-book in her son-in-law's hand: "you can settle the perilous liabilities of Captain Lovel, and present the remainder to him as an inducement to leave the country. Ah! I see that you are wondering whence I obtained this money: but you forget that previous to the trial of Julius Lavenham, he assigned his property in such a manner that the revenues arising therefrom are paid to me, the reversion of the property itself being settled prospectively on you. You can now guess whence came the money which I have just placed at your disposal, and which I never intended to disburse upon myself. On more occasions than one has your father hinted to me that it would be advisable to place in his hands any sums which I might derive from that source: but I have invariably shown him that I did not choose to understand the allusion. Indeed, I had resolved to amass and religiously treasure up all amounts arising from Mr. Lavenham's bequest, so that I might be enabled to give him back his own when the day of liberation should come: or if that day should never dawn for him, it was my purpose to bequeath all the accumulations of these revenues to your sisters, Charles. But under existing circumstances, and in order to meet so imperious a demand, I do not hesitate to divert my first savings from their original purpose;—and you will therefore dispose of them in the manner I have stated."

"The first thing in the morning I will instruct a solicitor to take the business in hand," said Charles. "It will not be difficult to arrange, inasmuch as the forged bills are held only by two parties—the one who has already caused Lovel's arrest, and the villain Collinson. Both of them will eagerly snap at payment;—and when the day arrives for Lovel's re-examination, he will be discharged on account of the non-appearance of the prosecutors. I will then give him the remainder of this money which you have so generously placed at my disposal— but only on condition that he leaves the country forthwith. These arrangements once completed, my father will at all events be rescued from the power and relieved from the menaces of that unprincipled villain; and it may yet be possible to save the name of Belmont from a black stigma and a crowning dishonour."

"Yes, my dear Charles," said the Duchess in a low tone: "your father shall be screened from the exposure of his deepest, darkest guilt—but he must make open confession that it was his hand which plunged the knife into my bosom in the conservatory! This must he do as an expiation for his misdeeds and as a tardy but efficient measure of justice, so that Julius Lavenham may be liberated from his dungeon."

"But my father's confession that it was *his* hand which struck the blow," said Charles, "will at once cover *you* with those injurious suspicions from which Mr. Lavenham so generously—so chivalrously sought to shield you! Ah! my dear mother-in-law, when I just now so passionately proclaimed the necessity of doing justice to Mr. Lavenham, I did not altogether weigh the consequences."

"But I have weighed them, Charles," said the Duchess, in a firm tone and with an air of decision; "and I am resolved to encounter them, be they what they may. Leave it to me to manage your father to-morrow, Charles—while you attend to the business which you have undertaken relative to Captain Lovel."

"And what is to be done towards discovering the abode of Virginia?" demanded Charles, in a hasty and fervid tone: "that is, if she be still an inhabitant of this world and not yet an angel in the next," he added, his voice suddenly lowering and melting into accents of mournful tenderness.

"I will myself call to-morrow upon the worthy

landlady of whom you have spoken, and who lives in Camden Town," said the Duchess: "and if there have been anything to conceal, as you appear to suspect and apprehend, she may perhaps become more explicit to me, being one of her own sex, than to you. I think we have now settled all our proceedings, Charles: we have agreed on the course which we shall adopt in respect to Captain Lovel, your father, Mr. Lavenham, our poor Virginia—and Collinson alone remains——"

"Leave him to me, my dear mother-in-law," exclaimed the Marquis of Arden, rising from his seat. "The villain! not contented with having robbed and plundered the poor girl whose apparent condition of orphanage moved him not to pity nor touched his stony heart with remorse,—not contented with having perpetrated that infamy, he would now unhesitatingly blast the happiness of another innocent and artless young creature—my own beloved sister Mary—by dragging her to the altar——Oh! it is a heavy debt that I have now to settle with Mr. Collinson!"

"Be careful, Charles, how you deal with him," cried the Duchess, contemplating the young man with dismay—for she beheld in his looks and manner all the sinister evidences of a terrible resolution.

"Fear nothing on my account, dear mother-in-law," exclaimed Charles: and having hurriedly pressed her hand, he quitted the room.

It was now eleven o'clock at night—and the principal inmates of Belmont House had already retired to their chambers: but although the entire household soon afterwards followed the example, and though silence then prevailed throughout the spacious mansion, yet had not slumber fallen upon every inmate. No: there were sleepless eyes and heavy hearts beneath that roof,—aye, and there were feet that paced to and fro in nervous agitation until an early hour in the morning—when those eyes closed and those feet rested through sheer exhaustion. Such was the case with the Duke of Belmont in one chamber—with the Duchess in another—and with the Marquis of Arden in a third: for they all looked back upon the past with grief, and forward upon the morrow with suspense and alarm.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

### THE DUKE AND THE DUCHESS.

It was precisely half-past nine o'clock in the morning as the Duke of Belmont repaired to the library in consequence of a message which had been delivered to him a few minutes previously by one of the Duchess's dependants. He scarcely had time to wonder what could be the meaning and object of that message, when the Duchess made her appearance: but so shattered was the Duke's mind by all the horrors and all the calamities which crowded upon it, that even in the few moments' interval which did elapse ere his wife joined him, he felt as if the message which had preceded her was the harbinger of some fresh misfortune.

"My dear Augusta," he exclaimed, hurrying forward to greet the Duchess and guide her to a chair, "this is something unusual on your part. A pressing intimation that you desire to speak with me at so early an hour—and on urgent business too——"

"I was fearful your Grace might go out or have some other engagement to attend to, before I could see you," observed the Duchess: and the low, plaintive, mournful tone in which she spoke, struck like an evil augury to the heart of her husband.

"You seem dull and melancholy to-day, Augusta," he said, while his own heart was racking with the excruciations of the damned.

"Have I been so joyous and blythe latterly, that my change of demeanour has become remarkable?" inquired the Duchess, bitterly. "But you, my lord—*you* are much altered——and I pity you from my very soul!"

"Pity me?" exclaimed the Duke, with a sudden and convulsive start. "Why should you pity me?"—and he cast his troubled looks with enhanced uneasiness upon his wife.

"Because you nourish griefs which must render you an object of compassion with every human—at least, with every Christian heart," said the Duchess: and she gazed upon her husband in a manner which seemed to invoke his confidence.

Yes:—and the old man felt how sweet—Oh! how sweet it would be to throw himself into the arms of that woman still so full of grace and beauty notwithstanding the glories of her youthful charms were dimmed and the splendours of her loveliness subdued by care rather than by time,—to throw himself into her arms, we say, and pillow his aching head upon her bosom while he poured forth into her ears the tale of his calamities and his crimes! But, no—the pride of the old man would not permit him to do this: his sorrows he might reveal—his misfortunes he might unfold—but not his crimes! Oh! no—no: he could bear to become an object of sympathy—though even *this* was in some measure regugnant to his natural reserve and aristocratic loftiness;—but to become an object of horror—no—never, never! He would die first!

The Duchess understood full well what was passing in the mind of her husband. All the pain, and anguish, and doubt of the internal conflict were denoted by the expression which swept over his features:—and as she gazed upon him, she was shocked at the tremendous change which care, apprehension, and remorse had wrought in his appearance even within the last twenty-four hours.

"Tell me, my dear Augusta," he said at length, "what is the object of the interview which you have sought with me thus early?"

"I will at once approach the painful subject, my lord," answered the Duchess: "because I am well aware that nothing is more torturing than suspense. Tell me, then, if you can—tell me, I beseech you—what has become of that poor girl, Virginia Mordaunt——"

"Virginia Mordaunt!" exclaimed the Duke, starting with a horrified amazement: then instantly subduing his irritation by an almost superhuman effort, he said in a voice that was still penetrated by a tremulous accent, "Wherefore do you address this question to me?"

"Because your son and I have had a long discourse together," returned the Duchess; "and he has avowed to me his affection—his unalterable

affection for that young needlewoman. Nay, more than that—it has come to his knowledge—no matter how—that your lordship took a part in preventing his marriage with the object of his love——"

"Well, Augusta—and if I did," exclaimed the Duke, almost angrily,—"are you going to upbraid me for thus rescuing my only son from a marriage which would have disgraced him——"

"How know you that he would have been disgraced?" demanded the Duchess, sharply; then, instantly bridling her emotions, and remembering that although *she* might feel as a mother while her daughter was being thus contemptuously alluded to, yet that the Duke only knew Virginia Mordaunt as a poor seamstress, she said in a milder and softer tone, "My lord, the happiness of the Marquis of Arden is too deeply concerned in his affection for the humble maiden, to render it a matter of consideration whether she be rich or poor, well born or of low origin."

"Augusta, we will argue this point another time—on a more convenient occasion," said the Duke, impatiently: for it was now approaching ten o'clock, at which hour Mrs. Lovel was to call.

"There can be no opportunity more suitable than the present," returned the Duchess, with calm deliberation: "inasmuch as you will be forced to give me your full confidence before the day is out."

"What mean you, Augusta?" demanded the Duke, once more contemplating his wife with mingled terror and amazement.

"I mean, my lord, that the time for secrecy and mystery is past," rejoined the Duchess, "and that you should seek counsel and sympathy from those who are able to afford you both and who would be dragged into the vortex of calamities which threaten to engulf yourself. Tell me, then—tell me what has become of Virginia Mordaunt——"

"On my soul, I am ignorant of everything that concerns her!" exclaimed the Duke. "I never spoke to her in my life—I——"

"Then you employed some agent to do the work of mischief," interrupted the Duchess, "and prevent the marriage which was on the point of taking place betwen Virginia and the Marquis some twenty months ago?"

"Yes—I employed an agent, Augusta," replied the Duke, shuddering with a hideous presentiment. "But wherefore these questions?"

"A moment's patience! The agent whom you employed," continued the Duchess, fixing her eyes piercingly upon her husband, "was the same one whom you bribed, according to your own admissions made to me, to warn you of the moment when my speech should return! Yes—that agent was Clementine——"

"Clementine!" repeated the Duke, his eyes glaring with ineffable horror. "What of her? She is no more——"

"Oh! unhappy man," exclaimed the Duchess, rising from her seat: "what demon instigated you to hire the bravo's hand to remove that poor weak woman from your path?"

"Eternal God! is it my own wife who hath become my accuser?" cried the Duke of Belmont, falling back in his chair and covering his face with his hands.

"Fear not that I shall proclaim your crime elsewhere," said the Duchess in a low deep tone. "It is to save, and not to endanger you that I have sought this interview——"

"But how learnt you all this?" demanded her husband, springing up savagely and with a glare of horror in his hollow eyes. "If you received your information from another, then *that other* must be acquainted with my secret and be able to use it against me. But if you have not been thus informed, you must have played the eavesdropper——"

"Is this the time to fasten a quarrel upon me, my lord?" interrupted the Duchess, with mingled dignity and reproach.

"Ah! I understand it all!" exclaimed the Duke, his features ghastly with a vindictive rage, and his ashy lips quivering nervously. "Mrs. Lovel was once my son's mistress—they have met again—she has told him all——And now, perhaps," added the Duke, suddenly changing his voice into a tone of bitter sarcasm and giving vent to the hideous mocking laugh which is sometimes assumed by utter desperation,—"and now, since the secret of my connexion with Lovel is known, you and Charles had better provide between you the money to pay that scoundrel's forgeries—for I know not how to raise a shilling to do it!"

"You speak to me with a heartless irony and a dreadful bantering as if you thought I was an enemy seeking to torture or outrage your feelings," said the Duchess: "but perhaps you will think differently when I assure you that Charles has already gone forth this morning with the necessary funds to save Lovel from transportation—yes, and to ensure his departure from the kingdom the moment he is released from custody."

"Is this true, Augusta?" exclaimed the Duke of Belmont, scarcely able to credit his ears—while the ghastly and horror-stricken expression of his countenance subsided into a look of mingled wonderment and incredulity.

"It is true, my lord—perfectly true," replied the Duchess. "But if you consider that you owe me any gratitude for taking this step and supplying the funds for the purpose, you will at once and unreservedly explain to me the particulars of the device which was practised to separate Virginia from your son."

And as she thus spoke, the Duchess of Belmont resumed her seat with an air which was meant to imply that there was no need to precipitate the interview towards an end.

"Augusta," said the Duke, placing himself near her, but in such a manner that his countenance was averted as he spoke,—"your French lady's-maid was a very demoness of intrigue, cunning, and artifice. 'Twas she who discovered the secret of my son's love for Virginia: 'twas she who proposed to adopt some measure to break off everything between them. And I assented with avidity to the offer that she made to act in my behalf. Thus authorized by me, the wily Frenchwoman insinuated herself into Virginia's confidence, and told her some tale of villanous seduction of which a supposed sister was represented as the heroine. By previous arrangement, Charles, Clarissa, and myself rode through the Regent's Park in the carriage while Clementine was walking there with Virginia. You may guess, then, how easy it was for the Frenchwoman to find a denouement for

her tale. With a well-feigned excitement she pointed out Charles as the seducer of whom she had been speaking to Virginia;—and Clarissa she represented to be Charles's wife."

"And the poor girl was thus made to believe that her suitor was already married?" exclaimed the Duchess, her blood boiling at the diabolical artifice which had thus been practised against her own daughter—that daughter whom she nevertheless dared not acknowledge!

"The result of the stratagem was the flight of Virginia Mordaunt from her lodgings," said the Duke: "and thus was my son saved from a derogatory alliance. But the Frenchwoman claimed a reward so monstrous—so exorbitant, that I was made bitterly to repent of my rashness in accepting her succour."

"And the nature of that recompense which she demanded?" said the Duchess, in an impatient tone of inquiry.

"The hand of my son in marriage!" responded the Duke.

"You are jesting!" exclaimed the Duchess, with the most unfeigned surprise.

"I am serious, I can assure you, Augusta," was the rejoinder. "She declared that she would become Marchioness of Arden—or that she would betray the whole plot which had been carried into effect against my son and the object of his regard. You may imagine how cruelly I was perplexed—how dreadfully bewildered! And it was under these circumstances that accident or Satan threw in my way one of those desperadoes who, having exhausted all their means and worn out the generosity of all their friends, fly to self-destruction as the natural issue from their misery. I rescued him from the fatal resolve which he had taken; and he became my slave—my ready and willing instrument of evil! Still I hesitated to adopt extreme measures towards Clementine: but she herself goaded me to desperation with her importunity. My plans were then taken. Under the most specious and plausible pretences I induced Clementine to self-appropriate one of my daughter's dresses and to take possession of your jewel-casket. She fell into the snare which I thus devised to give a colour to her flight from the mansion. But to place myself and Charles in all possible security relative to what was to follow, and to avert from ourselves even the faintest shadow of a suspicion, I made him accompany me to Lord Merton's entertainment. The tragedy took place while we were *there*—and Lovel was the author of the deed! You now know all, Augusta—and my honour, my safety, my very life are in your hands," added the Duke, whose voice was marked with the accents of despair.

"You have done a fearful deed," said the Duchess of Belmont, a cold tremor passing through her form and convulsing her visibly from head to foot: "but for *that* you will have to answer unto your God! It is not for me, a poor erring mortal, to dare to judge you. But I may help to save you from the fearful consequences of your crime—and to that end is your son already labouring, with the funds which I have placed at his disposal."

"Ah! my son—my son!" murmured the wretched Duke, as he paced to and fro with rapid and uneven steps. "He doubtless abhors his father as a murderer—and next he will hate him as the destroyer of his happiness in respect to Virginia."

"But you can make atonement for at least some of the ills which you have accomplished," exclaimed the Duchess fervently. "Oh! surely, surely you will allow that the day is at length come when all the reparation which you can possibly offer for the past—all the expiation which it is in your power to carry out—must be cheerfully, readily, and promptly conceded!"

"What atonement can I make? what reparation can I offer?" cried the unhappy Duke of Belmont, stopping short in the midst of his troubled walk and standing with clasped hands and appealing looks before his wife.

"Will you be guided by my counsel?" she demanded eagerly: "will you follow my advice?"

"I will—I will," returned the miserable man.

"Oh! now you speak and look as if you were my guardian angel—my saving genius——"

"Then act as if you really considered me in this light," exclaimed the Duchess; "and I will point out to you the expiation which must be made——"

"Name it, Augusta," said the Duke, with all the impatience of suspense.

"The expiation of which I am thinking is twofold," continued the Duchess of Belmont. "In the first place, you must give your consent to the marriage of your son with Virginia Mordaunt, if indeed the poor girl be still alive and if we shall succeed in discovering her abode——"

"I will consent to that marriage, Augusta!" exclaimed the Duke, whose nerves were utterly unstrung and whose mind had become almost as attenuated as that of an idiot. "What more do you require?" he demanded, quivering all over.

The Duchess hesitated for an instant, and then replied boldly and firmly, "That you should make a full and complete statement of the whole truth relative to the scene in the conservatory, and thus procure the immediate emancipation of an innocent individual."

"But this will be to cover *you* with the most injurious suspicions," exclaimed the Duke, in a tone of mingled surprise and vexation: "it will be to avow your imprudence—nay, your weakness in abandoning yourself to the caresses of that man——"

"Enough!" said the Duchess, in a resolute manner. "This is the day of expiation—of atonement—of justice; and I have a duty to perform as well as yourself. Whatever be the consequences to my reputation, that duty must be accomplished; and the opprobrium as well as the punishment of guilt must cease in respect to the innocent!"

"Be it as you say, Augusta, since thus you will it," observed the Duke.

At this moment a door opened and a domestic made his appearance to announce that Mrs. Lovel had called pursuant to his Grace's appointment.

"I will see her in a few minutes," said the Duke: then, the moment the servant had withdrawn, he turned towards the Duchess, inquiring, "What shall I tell this woman?"

"That a solicitor has already received instructions to settle the matters of which she has spoken to you," replied the Duchess; "and moreover that a sum between three and four thousand pounds will be paid to Captain Lovel when he stands upon the deck of an emigrant-ship."

"And when I have dismissed her with these as-

surances," said the Duke, "shall I return hither to you? or is our interview at an end for the present?"

The Duchess was on the point of desiring her husband to come back to her in order that they might discourse upon Collinson's claims, alike pecuniary and matrimonial: but remembering that Charles had especially undertaken to manage the lawyer, her Grace held her peace upon that head and intimated that there was no necessity for the Duke and herself to meet again that forenoon.

The Duke accordingly quitted the library, where the Duchess now remained alone, to ruminate upon all that had just taken place between her husband and herself.

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## CHAPTER XL.

### A HURRIED SERIES OF INCIDENTS.

But the reverie of the Duchess of Belmont did not on this occasion last many minutes without interruption. It was broken by the entrance of the Marquis of Arden, her son-in-law, to whom her Grace immediately communicated the whole particulars of her interview with the Duke. A considerable weight was lifted from the mind of the young nobleman when he thus learnt that his father had manifested so much contrition and docility; and, in his turn, he informed the Duchess that he had secured the services of an active man of business who had gone at once to redeem Lovel's forged bills from the hands of Collinson and the other party holding them.

"I had a particular object in view," said Charles, with a sombre air of decision, "when I bade the solicitor settle with Collinson *first*."

"What mean you, Charles?" demanded the Duchess. "Oh! your looks frighten me!" she exclaimed, with agitated manner and thrilling voice. "Once more I ask what you mean with respect to Collinson?"

"I mean," returned the Marquis of Arden, decisively, "that it is better Collinson should give up Lovel's forged bills *before* he and I happen to meet: or else the lawyer may not live to give them up at all—and his heirs might choose to prosecute the forger instead of agreeing to the compromise. Now do you understand me, mother-in-law?"

But before she could give any verbal answer,—which was scarcely necessary, inasmuch as her looks denoted the trouble with which the young man's words had filled her mind,—the door was opened with hurried violence, and the Duke of Belmont entered the library. His countenance wore an expression of savage and profoundly concentrated rage: his eyes glowered from beneath the corrugated, overhanging brows—the white lips quivered nervously—and the harsh lines into which his visage had contracted, seemed literally dug into the flesh. It was evident that a pent-up volcano was raging in his soul: and the Duchess trembled, while even the young Marquis shrank back in dismay from the awful menace of the old man's aspect.

"Madam," he said, in a thick hoarse voice which gasped for articulation, while he fixed his eyes with hyena-like ferocity upon the Duchess,—"you led me to believe that Mrs. Lovel had betrayed everything to my son—whereas she has betrayed nothing. She has not even seen him for a long time past. What, then, am I to conclude? That one of you has been playing the part of a vile eaves-dropper—acting the spy upon either a father or a husband—or perhaps both of you have been performing the delectable game of listeners?"

"Father, I at once take all your upbraidings to myself," exclaimed Charles, standing forward with arms folded on his breast, but with an air of profound mournfulness rather than of defiance. "You must therefore acquit my mother-in-law," he added, "of any sinister proceeding towards yourself."

"Be it so, sir," cried the Duke, whose glances were positively ferocious as his eyes glared upon his son. "And I presume that you have heard all my secrets—you have listened to everything—you know all——"

"I know too much—too much—at any rate, father!" exclaimed Charles, his own choler now rising. "I know, for instance, that you have stood between me and my happiness—that you have been the means of separating me from her whom I love——O God! how can I retain my patience when I think of all this?"—and the young nobleman's voice thrilled wildly through the room, as he pressed his hands to his throbbing brow.

"Charles—my dear Charles—do not upbraid me—do not curse your father!" exclaimed the Duke, a sudden terror seizing upon him and all his fury subsiding in a moment. "Charles—my dear boy——Augusta, speak to him—speak to him in my behalf!" cried the unhappy man, as he turned in agonizing entreaty towards the Duchess.

"Father, you know not how great a mischief you have done me!" said Charles, in a deep, hollow voice, as he drew his hands abruptly away from his brow and bent upon his sire a countenance that was impressed with blank, indescribable woe. "Look at me—behold my pale cheeks—my sunken eyes—my wasted form! At three-and-twenty I am as old, as worn, and as near the grave as other men ordinarily are at fifty! The vigour of my youthfulness is gone—the blood already runs languidly in my veins—my energies are crushed—my mind is shattered! Hope is to me a withered flower—and despair spreads its vampyre-like wings over my heart! But who hath done all this?—who hath seized me in the giant grasp of cruelty and dashed me down from the pinnacle of my happiness to the abyss of irremediable woe? You, my father—you have done it all. Yes—look upon your work—behold your son hastening to the tomb—and then say what profit thou hast gained by persecuting him thus!"

The voice of the young man was laden with the accents of wildest grief, and his looks denoted an excitement bordering upon frenzy. His father cowered before the outraged, indignant youth, as if his eyes flashed avenging lightnings and his tongue fulminated crushing thunders;—and the Duchess, paralyzed with mingled horror and dismay, gazed with frightened looks upon the awful scene, but spoke no word.

"My son—my dear son—forgive me—I implore you to forgive me!" at length exclaimed the Duke, flinging himself at the young noble's feet and clasping his knees.

"O God! that my parent should be doomed to such humiliation!" cried Charles, his cheeks suddenly glowing with the generous feelings that gushed in a burning flood to his heart: and raising his father from that suppliant posture, he fell upon his neck and wept bitterly.

And the old man wept likewise—and the Duchess, clasping her hands, sobbed aloud. It was a scene of such deep and touching pathos that to be understood it must have been witnessed: no words can describe it!

And when he had thus obtained the pardon of his son, the Duke retired from the library and repaired to his own chamber in order to commune with himself;—and once more were the Duchess and the Marquis of Arden alone together. The noble lady now proceeded to explain to Charles all the details of the treachery which had been practised by the Frenchwoman Clementine with respect to Virginia,—those details which the Duke had so recently confessed, and which now fell like a seathing blast upon the ears of his son. But scarcely had the Duchess finished her hurried recital, when a footman made his appearance with a letter which he handed to the young Marquis.

"Who brought this?" demanded Charles in a tone of angry impatience, as he observed that the missive was clumsily folded, secured with a wafer, and addressed in a scrawling hand.

"Your lordship's tailor received it," answered the domestic: "and although it is addressed to *Mr. Osmond*, yet he says that he knows it is for your lordship. Moreover, being marked '*Immediate*,' he thought he would bring it round himself."

But long ere the servant finished his observations, Charles had torn open the letter and devoured its contents. Joy—suspense—anguish—and despair swept in rapid succession over his countenance;—and throwing the letter to the Duchess, he exclaimed in a rending tone, "She is found—my Virginia is found—but she is dying—my God! my God!"

And though maddened with the desire to hasten to his adored one, he was so overpowered by his feelings that he fell back upon the seat whence he had sprung up wildly, and burst into tears.

The Duchess, with palpitating heart and throbbing brain, ran her eyes over the letter. It was from the widow-woman at whose house Virginia had first lodged in Camden Town; and its contents were brief but painfully explicit. The young maiden, who was living with the widow's sister, lay at the point of death;—and feeling her end approaching, she had assented to grant a last interview to him who was still only known as *Mr. Osmond* alike to herself and the kind friends by whom she was surrounded. The reader will remember that Charles had desired the landlady of the house in Camden Town to forward any communication which she might have for him through one of his West End tradesmen;—and thus was it that he at length received tidings of his Virginia!

But, good God! what tidings were they—and how painful, how heart-rending not only for himself but likewise for the unhappy Duchess—Virginia's mother! Fortunately for them both, the domestic who brought in the letter had quitted the room the moment he had delivered the explanation which we have recorded above: but had curiosity induced him to linger a few instants upon the threshold, he would have heard ejaculations and broken sentences which must have engendered the strangest suspicions in his mind.

"Virginia at the point of death!" cried Charles, in a fit of uncontrolable anguish: "O God! have mercy upon her!"

"My poor girl—my neglected, abandoned, discarded daughter!" moaned the Duchess, with the bitterest lamentations. "Let us hasten to her——"

"Yes—let us hasten to her—we must not delay a moment!" exclaimed the Marquis, now recovering somewhat of his lost energy and springing to his feet. "Come, my dear mother-in-law—let us fly to our beloved one: and God grant that she may live to bless us and be happy——the angel and the darling!"

At this moment the door of the library was again opened; and both the Duchess and Charles, who were on the point of hurrying forth, cast impatient and almost angry looks upon the entering domestic, who appeared in the light of an intruder upon their proceedings.

"Another letter, my lord," said the man: and having delivered the missive, he instantly withdrew.

Charles tore it open; and his eyes glanced over the contents, which ran as follow:—

"January 17th, 1846.

"Last evening, Charles, I was set at liberty. It is my intention to leave England without delay: but I am anxious to bid you farewell. You are aware of the lively interest which I have ever taken in your welfare—and you will not refuse me this favour. I am the more confident that you will grant it, inasmuch as I learnt during my imprisonment that you had called on several occasions to make personal inquiries of the governor concerning my health. May God bless you, Charles, for these manifestations of sympathy!

"I am staying with a friend, whose address I enclose; and I hope to see you in the course of the day.

"May I venture to offer my respectful regards to all the members of your family?

"Your affectionate friend,

"JULIUS LAVENHAM."

"The hand of Providence is in all this!" exclaimed the Marquis of Arden, as he handed the letter to the Duchess who had watched his countenance with fervid impatience while he was perusing the missive: for she saw by his looks that it was of no mean interest.

"God be thanked!" cried the noble lady, in a tone of fervid exultation: "the father has been released in time to embrace his daughter——perhaps to receive her last breath!" she added, her voice and manner suddenly subsiding into a profound and despairing mournfulness.

"Oh! do not destroy the hope that lives in my heart!" exclaimed Charles, with impassioned ardour. "She must recover—God will restore her to us—the darling and the beauty!"

## CHAPTER XLI.

### THE CLOSE OF THE WHITE SLAVE'S CAREER.

Let us suppose that two hours have elapsed since the strange and romantic gush of incidents which occurred at the close of the preceding chapter. The scene is changed from the ducal mansion to the humble cottage—from the fashionable regions of Grosvenor Square to the quiet district of Camden Town.

In a plainly-furnished but neat room, Virginia Mordaunt was stretched upon a couch by the side of which three persons were assembled. That natural loveliness which nothing could altogether destroy, still hung like a charm around her: but it was mingled with a deep and painful interest that in itself was eloquent with a touching pathos. Her form was wasted into a more than sylphid lightness—attenuated to a more than fairy-like symmetry: her complexion, always dazzling fair even in the days of her vigorous health, was now of that delicate transparency which displayed every minute vein that traced its azure path over her brow;—but upon each smooth cheek there was the tinge of the sea-shell pink glowing softly through the diaphanous skin. Alas! that charming hue was but the deceptive beauty that decked the victim for the tomb!

We said that three persons were by the side of her couch. These were the Duchess of Belmont—Mr. Lavenham—and the Marquis of Arden. All had been revealed that was desirable or fitting to be known. In the first instance the Duchess and her son-in-law, on leaving the mansion in Grosvenor Square, had proceeded straightway to the temporary residence of Mr. Lavenham. There a meeting that was painful in many respects took place: rapid explanations were given—and Julius Lavenham learnt that Virginia Mordaunt, the poor seamstress, was his daughter! Oh! he needed not to be asked to accompany the Duchess and the Marquis to the humble dwelling where the poor girl lay upon her death-bed: he yearned to embrace her—to fold her in his arms—to weep over her—and to pray with her! Nor were they long in reaching the cottage: but they alighted at a little distance—and the Duchess entered *first*, to break to her daughter that intelligence which was only too well calculated to startle her dangerously, even though unfolded with the most delicate precaution.

And then Virginia Mordaunt learnt that she was the daughter of the grand and magnificent Duchess of Belmont and of Mr. Lavenham—the offspring of their youthful and illicit love: and she now understood the meaning of those emotions which the Duchess had displayed on that occasion when, two years before, the velvet dress was taken home to Belmont House;—and she likewise comprehended the instinctive yearnings and the natural sympathies which had attracted her towards Mr. Lavenham, when the dark clouds of misfortune gathered over his head. But, although the revelation of her parentage was broken to her with the most delicate caution and with the most careful tenderness,—and although the instant that the last word of the avowal was uttered, she was caught in the warm and impassioned embrace of that mother who thus revealed herself,—nevertheless, the shock, with all its mingled wonderment and joy, was a rude one for the shattered mind and broken health of the poor dying girl!

Nor did that avowal comprise the whole elucidation of mysteries—or rather, the full development of startling truths which were in store for the maiden. For she had next to learn—and likewise from her mother's lips—that her *Mr. Osmond* was in reality the Marquis of Arden, the only son of the Duke of Belmont! And more also—for Virginia, while reclining upon her mother's bosom, which she bathed with tears of elysian bliss, heard likewise that the young Marquis was not married—that the tale of seduction and abandonment told by Clementine, was a detestable fabrication—and that he had not only proved faithful to his love, but was pining and dying with that love so profound—to unalterable!

Oh! who can imagine—for assuredly none can describe—the emotions of joy, and gratitude, and amazement which flowed up, wave upon wave, from the deep fountains of Virginia's heart? And it is because earth knows no language and the tongue has no words capable of doing justice to the intensity—the melting tenderness and the thrilling fervour—of those feelings, that we do but glance over that scene which excited them. For the same reason must we leave to the conception of our readers the meeting which took place between Virginia on the one hand, and her lover and her father on the other,—a meeting for which the Duchess of Belmont had prepared her way to the utmost of her power!

Ah! yes—the first effusion of feelings was chiefly composed of transports: because all other ideas and considerations were absorbed in the one thrilling, exciting, rapturous thought of being restored to each other. But even while the kisses so fondly exchanged, were still warm upon the cheeks of all,—and while the tears of joy so plenteously poured forth were yet glistening upon the lashes of every eye,—each heart sank suddenly beneath the weight of a crushing despair! It was the conviction which pierced through all those agitating emotions,—the dread, the harrowing, the agonizing conviction that death was about to intrude upon the scene!

To the minds of Charles, the Duchess, and Mr. Lavenham, the thought that they must lose the darling girl who was so dear to them, penetrated with the anguish of ten thousand barbed and red-hot arrows piercing to each heart's core: while to the soul of Virginia gushed a flood of emotions that made her feel how hard—how very hard it was to die when there was so much happiness for which she longed to live!

The Duchess of Belmont was affected not only with a profound sorrow, but likewise with a poignant remorse. She remembered that day when Virginia stood before her in the elegant boudoir at the ducal mansion,—when *she*, the mother, found herself face to face with her long-neglected and almost forgotten daughter:—and she now said to herself, "Oh! if I had done my duty *then*, my child would have been spared to me *now!* I should have acknowledged her—or at least, I should have befriended her: but I did neither! Inspired with the selfish fear of endangering my reputation,—shrinking from the thought of incurring the slightest risk of exposure with re-

ference to *the past*, and concentrating all my egotistical regards in what was then the grand and brilliant *present*,—I acted a base, cowardly, unnatural part, and thereby prepared the way for a wretched *future!* And this wretchedness is now at hand—it has come—it is *here!*"

And as these thoughts swept like vultures through the brain of the Duchess of Belmont, she threw her arms around her daughter's neck and pressed that dying girl to her bosom with all the frenzied force of unutterable despair!

On his side, Mr. Lavenham was almost distracted at the thought of having thus discovered the existence of his child in time only to lose her for ever! He knew that she was amiable—well principled—virtuous: he had himself received proofs of her generous nature and her lofty feelings;—and his eyes informed him that, even in her wasting, desolating illness, she was beautiful beyond all power of painting to delineate or of poesy to pourtray. Then, too, as his mental vision swept rapidly over the dark volume of the past,—that volume whose mysteries had in many respects only been revealed to him within the last two hours,—he could not help feeling that Virginia had been neglected—cruelly neglected by her mother, and that the results of such utter abandonment were the crushing toils, acute privations, and varied sufferings which had produced the malady that was bearing her onward to the tomb!

Then, as Mr. Lavenham embraced the dying girl in his turn, he wept over her—Oh! he wept like an infant;—and he strained her to his breast—and the immensity of his affliction made him childish for the moment, so that he besought her, in a rending tone of indescribable anguish, not to die!

But the Marquis of Arden—the fond, the faithful, the adoring Charles,—what were *his* feelings now? Eternal God! why should there be so much bitter woe upon earth? wherefore should such illimitable affliction enter into the current of mortal destiny? Language hath no words strong enough to describe the grief of the unhappy young man. He was at length reunited to his Virginia: but how? and under what circumstances? Oh! his worst fears were confirmed—the many hideous dreams which he had experienced concerning her, were terribly realized. Want—privation—tyranny—cruelty—anguish—sickness—just heavens! all these had she known, that poor girl whose hand would not have even despoiled a flower in thoughtless mood, and whose foot had never trodden upon a worm with heedless step! Was *she*, then, doomed to die thus early!—was Death already hovering over the couch of the innocent, the beautiful, and the well-beloved? Oh! would she not be permitted to live for a few years—or at least for a few months—to taste some small amount of happiness as an indemnity for all the woes, the sufferings, the sorrows which had poisoned the very springs of her existence? Virginia, Virginia! wast thou indeed about to die?

And as all these agonizing thoughts flowed through the mind of the Marquis of Arden, he fell upon his knees by the side of the couch—he took the small delicate hand of the dying girl—he pressed it to his lips—and he covered it with the tenderest kisses and the bitterest tears.

That morning—until the arrival of those who were now so dear to her—the poor seamstress had displayed the holiest, serenest, most Christian resignation to her fate. She had even looked forward without excitement to the possibility—or indeed, the probability of receiving a visit from *Mr. Osmond*, on whom she had intended to bestow her forgiveness, so that she might depart in peace with all the world! But she had not *then* foreseen all that was to take place within a few short hours: she had not *then* anticipated the surprising revelations which were about to meet her ears! She did not know, when breathing her morning prayer and assuring her Maker that she was prepared to surrender up her breath at His bidding, that ere the sun should have passed the meridian on this eventful day, a mother would come to claim her—a father would arrive to acknowledge her—and the object of her virgin love would be restored to her! No—nor did she feel the slightest presentiment of the grateful truths that were in store for her relative to her lover's faith and honour,—and how the unknown, obscure Mr. Osmond was in reality the bearer of a proud title and a lofty name!

In all these particulars had a marvellous change been wrought within the compass of a few short hours! Was the maiden, then, resigned to meet dissolution now? was she prepared to leave the parents whom she had found, and the loved one who was restored to her? Oh! have we not already said that poor Virginia felt how hard it was to die at the moment when the dark clouds of her destiny were breaking and flying as if upon the wings of a whirlwind, and revealing the sunny glory of an azure heaven beyond!

But when she cast her dewy eyes around, and met the looks that were fixed in unutterable sadness and blank despair upon her, she experienced a sudden revival of the Christian spirit of resignation which had animated her soul ere the development of the varied and exciting scenes of the last hour. In the deep despondency which had seized upon her father and her mother, and in the frantic wildness of the affliction to which Charles had become a prey, the poor girl beheld a motive for exercising all her own moral courage and arming herself with all the fortitude which she could possibly summon to her aid. In silence her soul spoke for a few moments,—fervently she prayed, although her lips moved not;—and it seemed as if a responsive voice came whisperingly from the celestial spheres—a voice full of heaven's own blessed melody and which she alone could hear,—breathing hope of eternal bliss in the angel state that was approaching!

And thus was it that with a smile of ineffable sweetness upon her lips,—a smile which was nevertheless mournfully compatible with the deep and touching pathos of the scene,—she said, "Weep not for me, dear parents—weep not on my account, beloved Charles: I am going to another and happier world!"

"Oh! do not talk thus, my darling child!" exclaimed the Duchess of Belmont, with rending voice and distracted manner. "You must live—live to bless us all with your sweet smiles——"

"And become the joy of your father's heart," murmured Mr. Lavenham: "for I love you, Virginia—I love you as tenderly, as profoundly as if you had been with me from your infancy!"

"Dearest, dearest girl," cried Charles, as he pressed her hand to his lips,—"you must not give way to gloomy apprehensions. God will not take

you from us yet: let us put our hope and confidence in Him!"

"I do, Charles," responded the dying maiden, in a voice of heavenly softness and with a look of angelic sweetness: "and I pray that he will comfort you all when I am taken from you!"

"You shall live, Virginia—you shall live!" exclaimed Charles, in the wild frenzy of his anguish. "We have sent for the most eminent physicians—they will be here shortly—and we will take you to the south of France, my angel—to a genial clime where you will recover. And by the time the warm breath of April fans the trees as they put forth their verdure——"

"Ah! then the flowers of Spring will be growing upon my grave!" said Virginia, in a low soft tone and with a tear glistening in her deep blue eye.

The grief of the Duchess became so agonizing and that of Charles so frantic as this melancholy response fell upon their ears, that Mr. Lavenham, whose mental anguish was equally acute, although less violent, was compelled to implore them to moderate their feelings for the sake of the dying girl.

"Yes—again I implore you, dear mother," said Virginia, with the mingled meekness of an angel and resignation of a martyr-saint, "not to weep for me! Again I beseech you, Charles, not to give way to this unavailing woe on my account! You will but embitter my last hour—my last moments——for I feel that they are numbered! Let me thank God that I have known so much happiness and become the object of so much tender love at the close of existence! Mother, dear mother—may heaven bless you! Father, beloved father——God will reward you for all that you have suffered! I knew that you were innocent ——a secret voice whispered within my soul that you were guiltless! And you, Charles—my well-beloved, my worshipped one ——may heaven's choicest blessings be showered upon you——"

"Never, Virginia—never!" exclaimed the young man, passionately. "I cannot live without you:—my heart will break——O God! it is breaking now! You must not die, Virginia—you cannot leave me thus! I have sought you everywhere—I have wandered in every direction to find you—and now at last we meet——Oh! do not leave me, my angel—my adored one!"

"Calm yourself—moderate your affliction, Charles, I implore you!" said Virginia, the tears streaming from her eyes. "I am going to another world where we shall meet again—hereafter——But in the meantime, you will be happy in this——"

"No—that is impossible!" cried Charles vehemently, as he pressed to his heart the thin white hand of the dying girl. "I swear, my angel, never to prove faithless to thy memory——I will cherish thine image, my beauty—my well-beloved:—and soon—Oh! soon, will I sleep by thy side in the grave!"

"Charles—you promise, then, that you will not forget me?" murmured Virginia, in a voice that was broken by emotion and so low as to be scarcely audible: and at the same time a gleam of joy appeared upon her countenance. "Ah! it is sweet to die thus——in the assurance of thy love——and with my parents by my side——"

"Dying!—Oh! heavens—she is indeed dying!" moaned the Duchess in bitter agony.

"The physicians!—why do they not come?" exclaimed Lavenham, now rushing distractedly towards the door.

"Stay!" said the feeble but still sweetly harmonious voice of Virginia: "do not leave me, dear father——the arrival of the physicians will not arrest the advance of death! The moment is approaching——draw nearer still, beloved parents ——moderate your affliction, dearest, dearest Charles——"

She ceased: the dews of death were plastering the hair upon her forehead—the delusive glow had fled from her cheeks, leaving them marble pale—and her lips remained slightly parted when the last words which she had power to articulate fell faintly from them. The Duchess fell upon her knees and pressed one of Virginia's hands to her agonizing bosom—while Julius Lavenham held the other to his lips and covered it with the tears that rained down in blinding torrents from his eyes.

The Marquis of Arden had quitted his kneeling posture, and was now supporting in his arms the drooping form which he had raised from the pillow. Virginia's head reposed upon his breast—and with her dying eyes she was gazing up fondly into his countenance. Oh! the ineffable tenderness—the holy adoration of that last look, which infused some of its own resignation into the heart of the afflicted young man! At all events it subdued the wild frenzy of his grief;—and with an earnest, deep, soul-stirring gaze of boundless love were his eyes fixed upon the maiden's changing features!

Nearly a minute thus passed in a silence that was already partaking of the solemnity of death, when an ejaculation of ineffable anguish burst from the lips of the Marquis of Arden, and thrilled like an electric shock through every vein of the Duchess and Julius Lavenham. For it carried to their souls the rending conviction that all was over and that Virginia was no more!

## CHAPTER XLII.

### THE CATASTROPHE.

It was nine o'clock in the evening when the Duchess of Belmont and the young Marquis of Arden returned to the ducal mansion in Grosvenor Square. Mr. Lavenham had stayed at the cottage, with the resolution of not abandoning the remains of his daughter until the grave should close over them. The Duchess had only been induced to tear herself away from the mournful scene by the earnest representations of Mr. Lavenham and her son-in-law, both of whom reminded her that the strangest suspicions would arise were she to remain absent from Belmont House, and that those suspicions might lead to the exposure of her secret with regard to the parentage of the deceased Virginia. It was however in a condition of the deepest, most woe-begone despondency that her Grace consented to follow the counsels of her old friend and the young Marquis; and as she accompanied the latter home to Grosvenor Square, she said more than once, in a low and ominous tone, "Charles, this is a blow which I shall not long survive!"

And how did the Marquis himself support the fearful loss which he had just sustained?—how did he bear up against the tremendous bereavement which he had that day experienced? At first—and for some hours after Virginia had breathed her last in his arms with her head pillowed upon his bosom—he was like one whose reason was abandoning him: he wept—tore his hair—beat his breast—and burst forth into the most piteous lamentations. But upon Mr. Lavenham taking him aside and imploring him to moderate his affliction in order that he might escort his mother-in-law home and save her from the risk of any suspicions or inquiries that might lead to the most disagreeable discoveries, Charles suddenly seemed to recollect that he had not only to perform the duty now suggested to him, but also *another;* —and a wonderful calmness succeeded that turmoil of agitated feelings. His countenance remained ghastly pale: but his looks, instead of wandering with a terrific excitement, grew fixed and settled—as if in a rigid determination mingled with despair. There was something awful—something darkly sinister in the aspect of the young man now: but its full effect was unobserved by either Lavenham or the Duchess in the absorbing depth of their indescribable woe.

It was nine o'clock in the evening, we said, when the Duchess and her son-in-law arrived at Belmont House—the former a prey to the profoundest despondency, and the latter an image of inflexible resolution. But scarcely had they crossed the threshold of the ducal mansion, when they were met by a crowd of domestics on whose faces they read the horror impressed by some new calamity which had evidently occurred. In fact, such was the state of feeling which prevailed amongst those dependants, male and female, that they did not even notice the altered and peculiar looks of the Duchess and the Marquis as they entered the house, the former supporting herself upon the arm of the latter. But crowding around the noble lady and her son-in-law, they revealed, in broken sentences and with every demonstration of the most unfeigned grief, the tragedy which had taken place. In a word, the Duke of Belmont had committed suicide!

Overcome with dread horror at this announcement, the Duchess fell down as if struck by a thunder-bolt;—and while her female attendants bore her away to her own suite of apartments, Charles put a few hurried questions to the servants who remained behind in the hall. From them he learnt that since the hour when the Duke had parted from his mother-in-law and himself in the library, between ten and eleven in the forenoon, he had remained in his own room. At twelve o'clock punctually Mr. Collinson had called; and a servant went up to the Duke's chamber to inform him that a lawyer had arrived and had joined the young ladies in the drawing-room. His Grace had stated in reply, that he was very much indisposed and that Mr. Collinson must excuse him, at least until the evening. The Duke had moreover forbidden any one to disturb him, coupling the command with the intimation that if he required anything he would ring his bell. Hours therefore passed without a soul venturing to approach his Grace's chamber. Mr. Collinson, after remaining a short time with the young ladies, took his departure, but returned again about seven o'clock, when dinner was served up. Lady Mary Melcombe, the Duke's younger daughter, had now become uneasy relative to the tenacity with which her father kept his chamber; and moreover she was desirous to speak to him. She accordingly repaired to his room and knocked: but no answer was returned. Her uneasiness now rose to the most poignant alarm;—and the domestics were summoned. The door was forced open—and the wretched nobleman was discovered stretched lifeless upon the carpet. At first it was supposed that he had fallen down in a fit; and medical assistance was immediately sent for: but even before the physicians had time to obey the summons, a suspicion of the real truth arose, in consequence of the powerful odour of almonds which prevailed in the room. The discovery of a small phial closely clenched in the nobleman's hand, as the fingers had convulsively stiffened over it in death, confirmed that suspicion;—and the medical attendants, on their arrival, pronounced life to have been extinct for some hours under the fatal effects of prussic acid.

Such were the particulars which Charles gleaned from the domestics. He likewise heard that his two sisters were in a state bordering upon distraction: but his own springs of grief were now so completely frozen up by the icy influence of that stern and implacable resolve which was uppermost in his mind, that he could shed no more tears—give vent to no more lamentations, on account of this new calamity. Besides, knowing what he did relative to the fearful crimes which weighed upon his father's conscience and the bewildering perplexities which environed him, he could scarcely regard as a calamity the escape of even a parent from the presence of damning dishonour and utter degradation.

"Where is Mr. Collinson?" demanded Charles, with a strange abruptness, of the servants whom he had been questioning.

"He is waiting in the library, my lord," was the response: "for he said that, as a friend of the family, it was his duty to remain until the return of your lordship and her Grace."

"A friend!" echoed Charles, his classically chiselled lip curling with exquisite contempt: then turning back for a moment as he was hurrying towards the staircase, he said, "Go and tell Mr. Collinson that I do wish to see him most particularly, and that I will join him in the library in a few minutes."

Having given this command, Charles hastened up to his own chamber, where he locked himself in. Opening a beautiful rose-wood case, he drew forth a pair of pistols, which he proceeded to charge with methodical precision. He then secured them about his person, together with a powder-flask and a small bag containing bullets, so that the pistols might be re-loaded if need should arise.

These preparations being made, the young nobleman unlocked his chamber-door again and slowly issued forth. As he descended the stairs, the lamps shone upon his pale countenance which was impressed with the energy of a stern and inflexible decision. He walked with measured tread, and his feet stepped firmly upon every stair—as if any precipitation or undue haste would lead to an excitement of feeling which was incompatible with the solemnity of the business that he had in hand.

In this mood, so ominously calm and so fearfully sombre, the young Duke of Belmont (for such he had now become by the death of his father) descended to the library, which he entered slowly, shutting the door carefully behind him. Mr. Collinson, who was seated near the fire, instantaneously rose; —and advancing towards Charles, he said in a voice which his habitual hypocrisy prompted him to render as mournful as possible, "My lord, I deeply sympathize with you on the dreadful loss yourself and family have sustained."

"And who lent his accursed aid towards driving my father to desperation?" demanded the young Duke, his eyes settling with a sinister expression upon the lawyer's features.

"I hope your Grace does not mean anything personal," said Collinson, experiencing a vague trouble at the look which he thus encountered.

"I mean, Mr. Collinson," replied Charles, in a voice that was implacable and with a demeanour that bespoke a remorseless hate,—"I mean that you are a villain,—and I will prove you so!"

"Beware, my lord, how you provoke me," exclaimed the attorney, flushing with indignation. "Sorry should I be at such a moment to use menaces: but in my own defence I must observe that the fortunes of the ducal house of Belmont are entirely in my power——"

"I know it," interrupted Charles, making an imperious sign for the lawyer to hold his peace. "There is not a single detail of your extensively ramified villany that is a secret to me: and I presume that you called to-day at noon to inform my sister Mary that you had selected her as your victim?"

"I certainly made her ladyship acquainted with the fact that she was to receive me as a suitor," replied the attorney, now recovering his wonted self-possession, as his mental vision swept over all the circumstances of the case and showed him how completely indeed the Belmont family and fortunes were at his mercy. "But as a matter of course I shall not be indelicate enough to press my suit until after the due interval allowed a daughter to mourn her father's death——"

"Enough on this subject!" ejaculated Charles, with wrathful impatience: then, instantly resuming his cold implacability of voice and manner, he said, "Two deaths, Mr. Collinson, may this day be attributed to your black iniquity—two murders which you have perpetrated!"

"What mean you?" demanded the lawyer, his countenance now flushing with a deeper crimson than before.

"In the first instance, sir," continued Charles, still stern and pitiless, "there is my father's suicide, caused by a black despair to the aggregate horrors of which your iniquity has been no secondary contribution. And in the next place, sir, a young girl—a lovely, innocent, kind-hearted creature,"—and the nobleman's voice faltered; but compressing his lips violently for an instant to keep down the emotions that suddenly arose within him and threatened to burst forth, he said, "Yes—a young, artless, inoffensive girl has perished this day, a victim to the privations, the wretchedness, and the dire penury into which her fate impelled her, but from which she would have been saved had not a villain robbed her of all she possessed! Ah! now you start, Mr. Collinson—and guilt is depicted in your frightened looks: for *you* are that villain—and your victim is poor Virginia Mordaunt!"

"Ah! that document!" ejaculated Collinson, who had missed the paper from his pocket-book, which had been restored to him when he called in the morning: and, as his countenance became livid and ghastly with terror, he said, "Then your Grace has found and perused a certain private communication——"

"Which unmasks you completely, dastard, robber, and plunderer that you are!" exclaimed Charles: then, as his eyes shot fire and a deep hectic spot appeared upon each cheek, he said in a thick tone of concentrated bitterness, "But the moment of vengeance is at hand!"

"Vengeance!" echoed Collinson, his temporary alarm having succumbed once more to his wonted self-possession: "remember, my lord, *two* can play at that game——"

"I mean it to be so!" cried the young Duke of Belmont, as he produced his pistols and laid them upon the table.

Collinson sprang towards the bell: but Charles darted upon him with the sudden fling of a boa-constrictor, and dashed him back with the power of a giant. Then returning the pistols to his pockets, he hastened to cut the bell-ropes and to lock the door, securing the key about his person.

"Now, sir, choose one of these," he said, once more depositing the pistols upon the table.

"What!—a duel, my lord?" cried Collinson, plucking up his spirit—for he was not altogether a coward.

"Yes—a duel to the death!" responded Charles. "Remonstrances, threats, or entreaties will all prove alike unavailing——"

"I scorn to use entreaties!" interrupted the attorney, perceiving that the case was desperate. "But if we fight, my lord, and if only one should fall, the survivor will be accused of murder——"

"True!" ejaculated the young nobleman: then seating himself at the table, he penned a declaration to the effect that the duel about to be fought was by mutual consent and so arranged as to be on fair and equal terms, although without the presence of witnesses. "There, sir: you can place your signature beneath mine," observed Charles, as he rose from the chair and tossed down the pen.

Mr. Collinson cast his eyes over the declaration, and immediately signed it: then, taking up one of the pistols, he said, "At what distance? and how shall we arrange a signal?"

"The length of the room," returned Charles, in answer to the first question: then, glancing at the time-piece, he said, "It is close upon ten—and that clock chimes the hours. At the first note of the shrill bell, we fire!"

"Be it so," said Collinson, stepping back against the wall at one end of the library, while the young Duke of Belmont took his post at the opposite extremity, there being thus an interval of about a dozen paces between them.

They now both fixed their eyes upon the dial which was to give the fatal signal. Collinson's look was full of an eager, nervous intentness, as if he resolved to be the first to fire: but the gaze of Charles was as steady and deliberate as his mood was unruffled in its stern inflexibility.

The hand moved—moments appeared hours!

The silence was solemn in the extreme: the beating of Collinson's heart was as audible as the ticking of the clock—whereas in his youthful opponent every pulsation seemed to be suspended.

Suddenly there was a sharp click as of something giving way in the works of the timepiece;—and this sound—always a warning, but now one of such stupendous omen—was immediately followed by the first note of the silver bell.

And the shrill metallic chime was still ringing through the room, when the louder and harsher sounds of the exploding fire-arms burst forth. A fearful cry of mortal agony escaped from the lips of Collinson as he sprang straight up to an incredible height and then fell dead upon the carpet: while, at the same instant, the young Duke of Belmont dropped heavily and expired without a moan.

The domestics, whose ears the report of the pistols reached, burst into the library and were struck with horror and consternation on discovering the fearful tragedy which had taken place. The physicians, who were in attendance upon the Duchess, were hastily summoned to the scene: but their presence was unavailing—Collinson was shot through the heart, while his bullet had penetrated the young Duke of Belmont's brain.

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## CONCLUSION.

THE remainder of our history, which for the most part has been so sad and mournful, may be summed up in a few words.

The Duchess of Belmont, who had fainted in the hall on hearing of her husband's suicide, was restored to consciousness soon afterwards; and the report of the fire-arms, which had alarmed the domestics, reached her ears also. But as if this were not enough to overwhelm the unhappy lady with terror, the hurried and unguarded manner in which her physicians were abruptly summoned elsewhere, convinced her that some new and fearful calamity had occurred. It was impossible to conceal the truth from her—no, nor even to break it gradually and cautiously; for the moment her son-in-law's name was mentioned in connexion with that of Collinson, all the dark threats which the young noble had so recently uttered in respect to the lawyer, recurred vividly to her memory. She therefore divined the full horror of what had happened, even before the whole truth was actually explained to her in words;—and dashing her hands with frantic violence against her temples, she burst into the mingled shrieks and lamentations of wild delirium. A brain fever supervened—and three days afterwards the once brilliant, beautiful, and magnificent Duchess of Belmont was a corpse!

The remains of Virginia Mordaunt repose in the most picturesque spot in one of the suburban cemeteries;—and three or four times a week, for upwards of two years after her death, Julius Lavenham was accustomed to repair thither and scatter fresh flowers upon the green sward that covers the grave. Yes—and when no loiterers were near, he would fall upon his knees and pray aloud in his anguish that the spirit of the departed Virginia would look down from the mansions of the blest and pity her unhappy sire who yearned so deeply to join her there. Though Mr. Lavenham was still in the middle-age of life, yet his hair was as white as snow and his form bowed as if with the weight of centuries. Nor did he long survive the tremendous misfortunes and excruciating woes which had changed him thus;—but at the expiration of the above-named period of two years, heaven was merciful and released him from a longer sojourn in this sphere of sorrow. He died after a short illness; and, in pursuance of his last request, his remains were interred in the same grave where his daughter slept.

The Duke and Duchess of Belmont and the unfortunate Charles were all buried in the family vault:—but little pomp, ostentation, or empty show were observed at their funerals. The ducal title now became extinct; and the estates themselves were shortly afterwards brought to the auctioneer's hammer. The creditors were paid about ten shillings in the pound; and the aristocracy of the West End seemed to think it highly to the late Duke's credit that he had not run far more deeply into debt.

Lady Clarissa and Lady Mary retired to the country-mansion of a dowager aunt, with whom they took up their abode. The loss of position was as keenly felt by the elder sister as the shocking calamities which had robbed her of her nearest relatives: but, on the other hand, Lady Mary's grief was utterly devoid of selfishness, and therefore the more poignant as well as the more lasting. Two years after the fearful catastrophe which had occurred, Lady Clarissa had so far recovered her spirits as to be enabled to encourage the addresses of an old fox-hunting country 'squire—three times her age, but enormously rich;—and in the course of a few months she became his wife. But it was not until very lately,—indeed, upwards of four years from the date of the calamities which had swept like a desolating torrent through the ranks of the Belmont family, hurrying away some to destruction and leaving the others behind to mourn their loss,—it was not until the lapse of four years, we say, from that memorable date, that Lady Mary Melcombe could be induced to accompany the Earl of Mostyndale to the altar. Not that she loved him less than formerly:—Oh! no—his tender and unremitting attentions, since the fatal events above alluded to, had endeared him more than ever, if possible, to the affectionate young lady. But her mind—her spirits—her very being, had received so dread a shock that it required a long interval of perfect repose and tranquillity to enable her to look with even the faintest smile or the least hope upon the circumstances of life again. Youth is not however the period for utter despair—and the tender assiduities of a faithful lover may succeed in pouring a balm into the spirit that is most deeply wounded: and thus was it with the amiable and kind-hearted Mary Melcombe. A few months only have elapsed since she became the Countess of Mostyndale;—and little as we like the British Aristocracy generally, we nevertheless record our fervid hope that all possible happiness will await that excellent lady and her generous-minded husband.

Captain Lovel was set at liberty, the prosecutor who had originally caused his arrest having been paid in full and therefore declining to appear against him. The villain, who was both forger

and murderer, therefore regained his freedom: and he found little difficulty in persuading Julia Barnet to accompany him on a continental tour. But being detected in some mal-practices at Vienna, he was thrown into gaol, and on being brought before the criminal tribunal, was sentenced to work for ter years in the quicksilver mines of Idria. There he still remains: while the unfortunate Julia Barnet, having found her way back to England, has added another to the frightful catalogue of lost females who ply their loathsome trade in the streets of London.

The worthy widow-woman of Camden Town, and her sister at whose cottage poor Virginia died, were enriched by the bounty of Mr. Lavenham, who retook possession of his property on the death of the Duchess of Belmont and Charles, and who bestowed a considerable portion thereof upon the good creatures at whose hands his daughter had received so much disinterested kindness. The remnant of his fortune was devoted, at his death, to charitable and philanthropic purposes.

Mrs. Jackson, the veritable type of the inferior class of middle-women, is pursuing her old avocations and living comfortably upon the ill-paid toils of others;—and Mrs. Pembroke, the personification of the superior order of middle-women, has amassed a large fortune, rides in her carriage, goes to church regularly every Sunday, and contributes largely to all the religious Societies that hold annual meetings at Exeter Hall.

With regard to the establishment of Messrs. Aaron and Sons, would to heaven we could announce that the earth had opened and swallowed it up, or that the red right arm of Jehovah had hurled the avenging thunder-bolt upon its roof! But it is not so. That establishment still exists, and the system whereon it is based flourishes more than ever;—and while poor Virginia, one of the countless victims of that diabolical system, sleeps in the silent grave, the toils of the WHITE SLAVES whom she has left behind her are still contributing to the colossal wealth accumulated within the walls of that PALACE OF INFAMY.

THE END.