RUPERT · GODWIN

M. E. Braddon

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RUPERT GODWIN ***

RUPERT GODWIN

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

“LADY AUDLEY’S SECRET,” “AURORA FLOYD”
“VIXEN,” “ISHMAEL,” “WYLLARD’S WEIRD”
ETC. ETC.

Stereotyped Edition

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PUBLISHERS' ANNOUNCEMENT.

Rupert Godwin was written for, and first appeared in, a cheap Weekly Journal. From this source the Tale was translated into the French language, and ran as the leading story in the *Journal pour Tous*. It was there discovered by an American, who re-translated the matter back into English, and who obtained an outlet for the new translation in the columns of the *New-York Mercury*. These and other versions have been made without the slightest advantage to the Author; or, indeed, without the faintest approach to any direct communication to her on the subject. Influenced by the facts as here stated, the Author has revised the original, and now offers the result for what it is, namely, a Tale of Incident written to amuse the short intervals of leisure which the readers of popular periodicals can snatch from their daily avocations.

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RUPERT GODWIN.

CHAPTER I.

A SAD FAREWELL.

In a charming residence, half cottage, half manor-house, embosomed in the woodland scenery of Hampshire, lived a family who might have formed the model for a poet's ideal of domestic happiness. The home-circle was not a large one. It consisted of only four persons—Captain Harley Westford, of the merchant service, his wife, son, and daughter. The Captain and his wife were both in the fairest prime of middle age. Life for them seemed at its brightest and best. Clara Westford's girlish beauty might, indeed, have vanished with the snows of departed winters, the blossoms of bygone spring-times; but another kind of beauty had succeeded—the calm loveliness of the matron whose life has been cloudless as one long summer's day, pure as the untrodden snows of some far Alpine region.

Yes; she was very lovely still. Beauty has its Indian summer, and the glory of that later splendour is scarcely less than the early freshness of spring-time. Mrs. Westford possessed even a rarer charm than mere perfection of face or figure. Every look, every movement, was instinct with that indefinable grace for which we can find no better name than good breeding. She had that winning manner the French call graciousness. Those who were intimate with the Captain and his wife whispered that Clara Westford came of a nobler race than that of her husband.

It was said that she had left the house of a wealthy father, to begin the battle of life with the frank, genial, handsome merchant sailor, and that she had thus made herself for ever an outcast from the family to which she belonged.

No one knew the real story of that runaway marriage. The Captain and his wife kept the secrets of the past locked in their own breasts. Mrs. Westford could very seldom be induced to speak of her marriage; but when she did speak, it was always in words that expressed the pride she felt in her husband.

“I know that his family has no place amongst Burke’s landed gentry, and that his grandfather was a trader on the high seas, like himself,” she would say; “but I also know that his name is honoured by the few to whom it is familiar, and that in his native town, Westford and honesty are synonymous terms.”

Only one shadow ever darkened that rustic dwelling among the verdant woods and fair spreading pastures of Hampshire; and that shadow was a very terrible one.

It came when the husband and father was obliged to leave the dear ones who made his home a kind of paradise for him. Partings were very frequent in that simple household. The Captain’s professional duties called him often away to scenes of peril and tempest, far from that happy nook in peaceful England.

To-day the June sunshine is bright on the lawn and flower-beds in the Captain’s garden; but the shadow comes with the sunshine, and the bright midsummer noontide is an hour of sadness for the seaman’s household.

The Captain and his wife are walking slowly, arm in arm, under the shelter of a long alley of hazel and filbert trees. It is a lovely day at the close of June; the roses are

in their fullest splendour; the deep blue sky is unshadowed by a cloud; the hum of bees and carolling music of birds make all the air melodious with nature's simple harmonies; a thousand butterflies are fluttering above the flower-beds on the smooth lawn before the windows of the old Grange. Every quaint diamond-paned casement and broad mullioned window winks and blinks in the warm sunlight, till the old house seems full of eyes. The yellow stone-crop on the gabled roof, the deep crimson of the brickwork, are sharply defined against an ultramarine sky, and make a picture that would gladden the eyes of a pre-Raphaelite. The sunshine steeps every leaf and every flower in its warm radiance—it floods the trees with silvery light, it transforms and glorifies the commonest objects, until the earth seems unfamiliar and beautiful as fairyland.

On such a day as this, it seems almost impossible to believe that sorrow or heartache can have any existence upon this glorified earth; we almost forgot that hearts can break amid beauty and sunshine.

Clara Westford's noble face is pale and wan this sunny morning. Dark circles surround her eyes—earnest eyes, from whose clear depths the very soul of truth looks out. All through the past night this true-hearted wife has watched and wept on her knees before Him who can alone protect the wanderer.

"Oh, Harley," she exclaimed, in a low, tremulous voice, while her slender fingers tightened their grasp upon the Captain's arm, "it is so bitter—so bitter; almost too bitter to bear. We have parted often before to-day; and yet to-day, for the first time, the anguish of parting seems more than I can endure."

There was a look of agony in the wife's pale face, as she turned it towards her husband, that expressed even more than her passionate words. There were no tears in

the large violet-hued eyes; but there was a quivering motion about the compressed lips that betrayed a world of suffering.

At sea, or in any hour of peril and contest, Harley Westford possessed the courage of a lion; but the aspect of his wife's grief transformed him into the veriest coward. He strove manfully, however, to conceal his emotion, and it was in a tone of affected gaiety that he replied to Mrs. Westford.

"My darling," he exclaimed, "this is really foolish, and quite unworthy of a seaman's wife, who should have a soul above fear. This parting ought not to be a hard one; for is not this to be my last voyage? After this one trip to China, by which I hope to make a sackful of golden guineas for you and the dear ones, I mean to settle down for the rest of my life in this dear old Grange, a regular landsman, a gentleman farmer, if you like; going in for pigs, and prize cattle, and monster turnips, and all that kind of thing, like a country squire to the manner born. Why, Clara, you ought not to shed a tear, this time!"

"There are no tears in my eyes, Harley," his wife answered, in the same low, faltering voice, so terribly expressive of mental anguish; "there is something in my sorrow too deep for tears. I have shed tears always on the day of our parting, and I know that my cowardly weakness has often unmanned you, Harley; but I can shed no tears to-day. There is an awful terror in my heart. My dreams for the last week have been full of trouble and foreboding. My prayers last night brought no consolation. It seemed to me as if Heaven was deaf to my cries. I feel like some unhappy wretch who wanders blindfold upon the brink of a precipice—every step may plunge me into an abyss of darkness and horror. O, Harley, Harley, have pity upon me! I know there is danger in this voyage—deadly, unseen peril. Do not go! Have mercy upon my

anguish, Harley, and do not go!"

Again the slender hands tightened convulsively upon the sailor's arm. It seemed as if the agonized wife would have held her husband despite himself in that passionate grasp.

Captain Westford smiled sadly.

"My darling," he said, "foolish as I know your fears to be, I might perhaps indulge them if my word were not pledged to this voyage; but my word is pledged. And when did Harley Westford ever break his promise? There is not a sailor amongst my crew who does not look forward to this trip as a means of taking home comfort to his wife and little ones. They all confide in me as if I were their brother as well as their captain; and I know their plans, poor fellows, and the disappointment they would feel if anything prevented the voyage. No, darling, you must be bold and brave, like a true-hearted sailor's wife as you are. The *Lily Queen*—your ship, Clara; christened after you, the queen of all earthly lilies—the *Lily Queen* sails from London Docks at daybreak to-morrow, and, if he lives, Harley Westford sails with her!"

The wife knew that all further remonstrance was useless. She knew that her husband valued his word and honour more than his life—more even than her happiness. She only breathed one long sigh, which sounded like the last murmur of a despairing heart.

"And now listen to me, my dearest one," said Harley Westford, in tones which he strove to render cheerful. "Listen to me, my own brave, true-hearted wife; for I must talk to you of serious business before the Winchester coach turns the sharp corner yonder by the village pond."

He looked at his watch as he spoke.

“Only one more half-hour, Clara, and then good-bye!” he exclaimed. “Now, darling, listen. You know that, thanks to Providence, I have been enabled to save a very decent little fortune for you and yours. Close against my breast I carry a pocket-book containing bank-notes to the amount of twenty thousand pounds, the entire bulk of my fortune, withdrawn from different foreign investments, by the advice of friends, who have given me warning of an approaching crisis in the money-market. There seems to be always something or other wrong in the money-market, by the way. Directly I return from China I shall invest this money, with the earnings of my present enterprise, in the best and safest manner I can. In the mean time, I shall place the money in the hands of the present head of the banking firm in which my father had the highest confidence and in whose house he kept an account for thirty years of his life. In such hands the money will be safe until my return And, to guard against any chance of accident, I shall send you the banker’s receipt for the twenty thousand pounds, and for the title-deeds of this house and land, which I shall also lodge in his hands. You will receive these from me before I set sail; and then, as my will is in the hands of my lawyer, you and the children will be safe, come what may.”

“O, Harley,” murmured Clara Westford, “every word you say makes me more and more wretched. You talk as if you were going to certain death.”

“No, darling, I only talk like a prudent man, who knows the uncertainty of life. But I will say no more, Clara. With twenty thousand pounds, and the freehold of this old Grange, with fifty acres of the best land in Hampshire spreading round it, you and the dear ones cannot be ill provided for. And now, dearest, nearly half my time has gone, and I must go and say good-bye to my children.”

The Captain stepped from the shady alley to the broad sunshine of the lawn. Opposite him were the windows of a pretty morning-room, sheltered by a long verandah, half hidden under honeysuckle and roses. The cages of the pet birds hung under this verandah, and a Skye terrier was lying on the silky white mat stretched before one of the long French windows, blinking his lazy eyelids in the meridian sun.

A girl of about seventeen appeared in this window. As the Captain stepped out upon the lawn she came running towards him.

Never, perhaps, had the June sunlight shone upon a lovelier creature than this white-robed girl who came to meet the Captain. Her beauty had a sunny freshness which seemed in harmony with the summer morning. Her features were small and delicately-formed; the nose, forehead, and chin of the purest Grecian type. Her eyes, like her mother's, were of the deepest violet hue, large, lustrous, and earnest, fringed by long auburn lashes. Her hair was of that golden tint, so rare in nature, and which art has been wont to simulate, from the age of Roman Lydias and Julius down to our own enlightened era.

This was Violet Westford. They had called her Violet because of those deep-blue eyes, which were only to be matched by the hue of the modest hedgerow flower that hides its beauty under sheltering leaves. They had called her Violet; and well did the sweet romantic name harmonize with the nature of Clara Westford's daughter, for the girl was almost as unconscious of her exquisite loveliness as the timid blossom after which she had been christened.

"Dearest father," she exclaimed, passing her little hand through the Captain's arm, while Mrs. Westford sank faint and exhausted upon a garden-seat on the lawn, "mamma has been very cruel to detain you so long, while

your poor Violet has been longing for a chance of saying good-bye. I have been counting the minutes, papa, and the coach will be at the gate almost immediately. O, papa, papa, it seems so hard to lose you!"

The beautiful blue eyes filled with tears as the girl clung to her father; but in Violet Westford's face there was no trace of that awful shadow which blanched the cheeks and lips of her mother to a death-like whiteness. Violet only felt a natural grief at this parting with a father whom she idolized. There was no presentiment of impending peril weighing down her heart.

"Lionel has gone to get Warrior saddled," she said; "he is going to ride by the cross-road to Winchester. He will be there to meet you when the coach arrives, and will only part from you when the train leaves the station. How I envy him that half-hour at the station! Men are always better off than women," murmured the petted beauty of seventeen, with the most bewitching *moue*.

"My darling, hark! There is the coach."

The guard's horn playing a joyous polka made itself heard among the trees as the Captain spoke. At the same moment Lionel Westford rode out of an old-fashioned ivy-covered archway, which formed the entrance to the stables. The coach stopped at the low wide gate opening into the Grange gardens, and the guard's horn had an impatient sound in the ears of Violet Westford.

Mrs. Westford rose from the rustic bench, calm and tearless, but deadly pale. She advanced to her husband, and put her icy hands in his.

"My beloved," she murmured, "my all in all, I can only pray for you. I must ask you one question, Harley. You spoke just now of a banker; tell me his name, dearest. I have a particular reason for making this inquiry."

“My father’s bankers were Godwin and Selby,” answered the Captain; “the present head of the firm is Rupert Godwin. My own darling, good-bye.”

The horn playing that cheerful dance-music sounded louder and more clamorous than ever, as Harley Westford pressed one kiss upon his wife’s white lips and tore himself away. So hurried, so agitated, had the Captain been in that sad parting, that he had been utterly unconscious of the one low agonized cry which broke from his wife’s lips at the sound of Rupert Godwin’s name.

But as the coach drove away, bearing with it the husband and father, Clara Westford tottered forward a few paces, and then fell back swooning on the grass.

Violet returned from the garden-gate to see her mother lying upon the ground, white and motionless as a corpse. The girl’s terror-stricken shriek brought a couple of women servants running from the house. Mrs. Westford was no puling sentimentalist; and deeply as she had always felt the pain of parting from the husband she so fondly loved, she had never before been known to lose consciousness. She had, indeed, been distinguished for the heroic calmness with which she had always endured her sorrow setting a noble example to her son and daughter.

The servants, assisted by Violet, carried the unconscious wife into the house, and laid her on a sofa in the cool drawing-room, carefully darkened by the Venetian shutters.

One of the women then ran to fetch the village doctor, while Violet knelt by her mother’s side, bathing the pale forehead with toilet vinegar.

Presently the dark-blue eyes were slowly opened and turned towards Violet with a fixed and almost awful

stare.

“Rupert Godwin! Rupert Godwin!” cried Clara Westford in tones of anguish. “O, not to him, Harley! O, no, no, no! Not to him! Rupert Godwin! I knew that there was peril, deadly peril, in store for you; but I never dreamt of that danger.”

Again the eyes closed; the head fell back upon the sofa-pillows.

The doctor came; but neither he nor any other doctor upon this earth could have ministered to her, whose disease was of the mind rather than of the body.

Mrs. Westford fell from one fainting-fit into another. She was conveyed to her own room, where she was tenderly watched by her daughter, and by her son Lionel, who returned from Winchester after having seen his father start by the London train.

The young man adored his mother, and was both grieved and alarmed by her sudden illness. He insisted upon taking up his post in a pretty little boudoir adjoining Mrs. Westford’s bedroom, and he sat there hour after hour, listening to every sound in the sick chamber.

The old Grange, so gay with happy voices only a few days before, was now silent as the house of death. The doctor ordered his patient to be kept in unbroken quiet, and his orders were implicitly obeyed.

But though Mr. Sanderson, the village surgeon, was a man of considerable experience, he found his patient’s illness of a nature to baffle his best care, his highest skill.

“The mind is ailing, Miss Westford,” he said, in answer to Violet’s anxious questions; “the parting of to-day has affected your mother very keenly, and hers is an illness that time alone can heal. In the meanwhile I can only recommend perfect repose. The mind has been over-

excited by painful emotions, and we must allow time for recovery. A night's rest may restore the brain to its normal state. To-morrow all may be well."

CHAPTER II.

RUPERT GODWIN THE BANKER.

The express-train from Winchester bore Harley Westford quickly across the fair expanse of country between the old cathedral city and the smoky roof-tops of the metropolis. Past swelling hillside and sunlit meadow, past winding river and secluded village, rushed the mighty monster. London, black, grimy, but with a certain rugged grandeur of its own, like some dusty Cyclops, mighty in his gigantic stature,—London, the commercial centre of the world,—loomed in sight of the merchant Captain, whose heart was divided between the dear ones he had left in the rustic Grange at Eastburgh, and the scenes of adventure, and perhaps peril, that lay before him on the high seas.

Harley Westford was in heart and soul a sailor. He had the spirit of a Columbus, and would gladly have gone forth in search of new worlds wherewith to enrich his Queen and country, if fate had permitted him so noble an adventure. His heart warmed at the thought of his Chinese expedition—an expedition which promised to make a noble addition to his fortune. For himself, no man could have been more indifferent about money. He had the true sailor's recklessness of spirit, and would have flung his gold right and left, had he been alone in the world, as carelessly as the untutored salt, who, from sheer bravado, puts a bank-note between his bread-and-butter and eats it, in order to demonstrate his contempt for the sordid pelf. But for his children he was eager to

earn the means of comfort and independence, so that no hard battle of life might await those pampered children, that idolized wife, who as yet had known only the sunshine of existence.

He reached London at about half-past one o'clock, and drove straight to Lombard-street, in which noble commercial thoroughfare the banking-house of Messrs. Godwin and Selby was situated.

The name of Selby had long ceased to be anything more than a name. The last Selby had expired placidly in a comfortable mansion at Tulse Hill, some little time after the battle of Waterloo. The firm was now solely represented by Rupert Godwin, the only son of the late head of the firm, Anthony Godwin, and of a noble Spanish lady, who had given supreme offence to her family by marrying a wealthy British trader, rather than one of the penniless hidalgos who were eager to unite their unimpeachable pedigrees and quarter their knightly arms with hers.

The lady was proud, passionate, and self-willed. She preferred the British trader to the descendants of the Cid, and left the shadowy glories of her native land for the comfort and splendour of her husband's noble old mansion, where she ruled him with despotic power till the day of her death.

Two sons and three daughters were born to the proud Castilian beauty; but those children of the South languished under the cold English sky. The youngest son, Rupert, was the only one of the family who lived to attain manhood. He inherited his mother's Spanish beauty, together with her wilful and passionate nature.

This Rupert Godwin was a man of five-and-forty years of age, who had inherited a noble fortune from his father, and who had obtained another fortune with the hand of

his wife, the only daughter of a city millionnaire, an amiable but not over-wise damsel, who had worshipped her husband as a kind of demigod, and who had faded quietly out of existence soon after the birth of her second child, not by any means passionately lamented by Rupert Godwin.

He was a man who had begun the world very early, and had exhausted the common round of life's pleasures and dissipations at an age when other men are still enjoying the freshness of youth's morning. He had been his own master from the age of sixteen, for the simple reason that neither his father nor his tutors had ever been able to conquer his indomitable spirit, or restrain his determined will.

His father had been much shaken by the early deaths of his children and the loss of his wife, who died when Rupert was fifteen. He allowed this last surviving son to do as he pleased, and dawdled through his lonely existence at his country-house, in the company of his medical attendant and a valet who had grown grey in his service.

While the father's placid days glided by at the country seat in Hertfordshire, the son travelled from one place to another, sometimes abroad, sometimes at home, spending money lavishly, and seeing a great deal of life, more or less to his own satisfaction, but not very much to his moral improvement.

At three-and-twenty he married; but those who knew him best augured little happiness from this marriage. He accepted his wife's devotion as a matter of course, allowed her to live her own life at the noble old house in Hertfordshire, while he followed the bent of his inclinations elsewhere, honouring his household by his presence during all seasons of gaiety and festivity, but studiously avoiding the delights of domestic retirement.

The business of the bank always afforded Mr. Godwin an excellent excuse for absence. There were branch-houses in Spain and in Spanish America, and these branch-houses were under the personal supervision of the banker.

For many years the name of Rupert Godwin had been in the minds of City men a tower of strength. But within the last few weeks there had come a crisis in the fortunes of great commercial firms, and all at once there were strange whispers passing from lip to lip amongst the wise men of the Stock Exchange. It was well known that for some years Rupert Godwin had been a great speculator. It was now whispered abroad that he had not been always a fortunate speculator. He had been bitten with the mania of speculation, men said, and had plunged wildly into all manner of schemes, many of which had ended in ruin.

Such whispers as these are fatal in their influence upon the credit of a commercial man. But as yet these dark rumours had not gone beyond the narrow circle of wiseacres; as yet no hint of Rupert Godwin's losses had reached those whose money was lodged in his keeping; as yet, therefore, there had been no run upon the bank.

The banker sat in his private room, with his books spread open before him, while with a white face and a heavily-beating heart he examined the state of his affairs. Daily, almost hourly, he expected a desperate crisis, and he tried in vain to devise some means of meeting it.

There was only one human being who was admitted to Rupert Godwin's confidence, and that was his head clerk, Jacob Danielson.

Ever since Rupert's earliest manhood this Danielson had been in his employment, and little by little there had grown up a strange bond of union between the two men.

It could not be called friendship, for the banker was of

too reserved a nature to form a close friendship with any one—least of all with an inferior; and whatever the confidences between him and his clerk, he was always haughty and commanding in his tone and manner towards his dependent.

But Jacob Danielson was the depository of many of his employer's secrets, and seemed to possess an almost superhuman power of reading every thought that entered the brain of Rupert Godwin.

It may be that the banker knew this, and that there were times when he felt a kind of terror of his shabby, queer-looking dependent.

Nothing could be wider than the contrast between the outward appearance of the two men.

Rupert Godwin had one of those darkly splendid faces which we rarely see out of an old Italian picture—such a face as Leonardo or Guido might have chosen for a Herod or a Saul.

He was tall and broad-chested, his head nobly poised upon his shoulders. His dark flashing eyes had something of the falcon in their proud and eager glance; but beneath the calm steady gaze of more honest eyes those falcon glances grew shifting and restless.

Jacob Danielson was strangely deficient in those physical perfections which had so furthered his master's fortunes.

The clerk was a wizen little man, with high shoulders, and a queer, limping walk. His small but piercing gray eyes looked out from under the shelter of a protruding forehead, fringed by two shaggy eyebrows. His thin lips were apt to be disturbed by a twitching motion, which at times was almost painful to witness.

Jacob Danielson was one of those walking mysteries

whose thoughts, deeds, and words are alike beyond the comprehension of other men. No one understood him; no one was able to fathom the secrets hidden in his breast.

He lived in a dingy little lodging on the Surrey side of the Thames, a lodging which he had occupied for years, and where he had never been known to receive the visit of any human being.

It was known that he drank deeply, but he had never been seen in a state of intoxication. There were those amongst his fellow-clerks who had tried to make him drunk, and who declared that there was no spirit potent enough to master the senses of Jacob Danielson.

To his employer he was a most indefatigable servant. He *seemed* also a faithful servant; yet there were times in which the banker trembled when he remembered the dangerous secrets lodged in the keeping of this unsympathetic, inscrutable being.

While Rupert Godwin sat in his private apartment meditating over the books of the house, and dreading the bursting of that storm-cloud which had so long brooded above his head, Harley Westford was hurrying towards him, eager to deposit in his hand the savings of twenty years of peril and hardship.

A hansom cab carried the Captain to the door of the banking-house. He alighted, and made his way into the outer office of the firm, where he addressed himself to the first person whom he found disengaged. That person happened to be no other than Jacob Danielson, the chief clerk.

“I want to see Mr. Godwin,” said the Captain.

“Impossible,” Jacob answered coolly. “Mr. Godwin is particularly engaged. If you will be good enough to state your business, I shall be very happy to—”

“Thank you. No; I won’t trouble you. My time is very precious just now; but as my business is important, I’ll wait till Mr. Godwin is disengaged. When a man comes to place the savings of a lifetime with a banking firm in which he has confidence, he feels a sort of satisfaction in depositing his money in the hands of the principal.”

Jacob Danielson’s thin lips twitched nervously. The savings of a lifetime! A stranger eager to place his money in Rupert Godwin’s hands at a time when the banker expected only the frantic demands of panic-stricken depositors, eager to snatch their treasures from a falling house!

Jacob looked with keen scrutinizing eyes at the honest sailor, half suspecting that there might be some trap hidden beneath his apparent simplicity; but no one looking at Harley Westford could possibly suspect him of cunning or treachery.

“The poor fool has walked straight into the lion’s den,” thought the clerk; “and he’ll be tolerably close-shaved before he walks out of it.”

He sat at his desk for some minutes, scratching his head in a reflective manner, and looking furtively at handsome hazel-eyed Harley Westford, who was swinging his cane, and rocking himself backwards and forwards on his chair in a manner expressive of considerable impatience.

Presently the clerk dismounted from his high stool. “Come, I see you’re in a hurry, sir,” he said, “so I’ll go into the parlour and ascertain what Mr. Godwin’s engagements are. Shall I take your card?”

“Yes; you may as well do so. My father was a customer of the firm, and Mr. Godwin may have heard my name before to-day.”

He *may* have heard your name, Harley Westford! That name is written in letters of fire on the heart of Rupert Godwin, never to be erased on this side of the grave.

Jacob Danielson carried the card into the banker's sitting-room, and threw it on the table before his master, without once deigning to look at the name inscribed upon it.

"Some unfortunate fool has come to deposit a lump of money in your hands, sir," he said coolly; "he's very particular about placing it in *your* hands, so that he may be sure it's safe. I suppose you'll see him?"

"Yes," answered the banker haughtily; "you can show him in."

The cool insolence of his clerk's manner galled him cruelly. He had borne the same insolence without wincing in the hour of his prosperity; but now that he felt himself upon the verge of ruin, Jacob Danielson's familiarity stung him to the quick. A deposed sovereign is quick to feel insolence from his lackeys.

It was only when the clerk had left the room that Rupert Godwin looked at the card lying on the table before him.

His glance was careless at first; but in the very moment when he recognized the name inscribed upon the slip of pasteboard, his face changed as few faces have power to change.

The sallow skin darkened to a dull leaden tint; a kind of electric flame seemed to kindle in the dark eyes.

"Harley Westford!" he muttered. "And it is to me, his bitterest enemy, that he brings his wealth; and at such a time as this! There is a Nemesis who plans these things."

The banker crushed the card in his sinewy hand, and

after that one passionate gesture controlled his emotion by a strength of will which was like iron in its unyielding nature. His face, so suddenly distorted, became as suddenly calm and placid, and he looked up with a friendly smile as Harley entered the room.

No warning presentiment restrained the sailor at this last moment. He handed the pocket-book to the banker, and said quietly, “That, Mr. Godwin, contains the hard-won earnings of twenty years. Be so good as to count the notes. You’ll find a thousand for every year—not so bad, take it all in all. I had the money invested in foreign loans, and it brought me very handsome interest, I can assure you. But some wise friends of mine have taken fright. There’s to be war here, and war there—two or three thrones expected to topple over during the next six months, and three or four glorious republics on the point of intestine war. ‘Sell out,’ say my friends. ‘What! and give up ten per cent.?’ say I. And then they remind me of the cautious old Duke’s axiom: ‘The better your interest, the worse your security.’ So I ‘cave in’ at once, as the Yankees say; and here I am, safe out of the lion’s claws, and ready to accept the current rate of interest for my capital.”

“I congratulate you on your escape,” answered the banker. “There’s more than one storm brewing on the Continent, and foreign stock is dropping every day.”

“Well, I’m glad I’ve done right. You see, I’m going to risk my life upon one more journey before I settle down in the pleasant harbour of home. I don’t know anything about this house, myself, but I know my father trusted your father to his dying day. I shall feel quite comfortable when my money is safely lodged in your hands. You find the amount correct, I suppose?”

Rupert Godwin was counting the little packet of notes which he held in his hand as the Captain spoke. Harley

Westford did not see that the banker's hand trembled slightly as it grasped the fluttering pieces of tissue paper.

Twenty thousand pounds! Such a sum trusted in his keeping at such a moment might be the salvation of his credit.

"I have one charge more to confide in your hands," said the Captain, "and then I can leave England in peace. This sealed packet contains the title-deeds of a small estate in Hampshire, on which my wife and children reside; with your permission, I will lodge the packet in your hands."

As he spoke, Harley Westford laid a sealed packet on the table.

"I shall be happy to accept any charge you may confide in me," the banker answered with a courteous smile.

"And you'll allow me decent interest on my money?"

"On deposits placed with us for a year certain we allow five per cent."

"I think that settles everything," said the sailor; "and now I can face danger, or death, without fear. Come what may, my wife and children are provided for. Let my fate be what it will, they are beyond the power of evil fortune."

Rupert Godwin, bending over the papers before him, smiled to himself as Harley Westford uttered these words —a strange, almost satanic smile.

"Stay!" exclaimed the Captain, "you ought to give me some kind of receipt for that money, and those deeds, ought you not? I don't pretend to be a man of business; but you see in these affairs a family man is bound to be precise—even if he happens to be a sailor."

"Most decidedly; I was waiting the opportunity of

giving you your receipt," replied the banker coolly.

He touched a little hand-bell on the table before him, and the next minute Jacob Danielson appeared in answer to the summons.

"Bring me some blank forms of receipt, Danielson."

The clerk obeyed; and Rupert Godwin filled-in the receipt for twenty thousand pounds.

To this he affixed his own signature, and then handed the paper to Jacob Danielson, who signed his name below that of his master, as witness. The banker also filled-in and duly signed an acknowledgment of the sealed packet containing the title-deeds of the Grange.

With these two documents in the breast-pocket of his light outer-coat, Harley Westford departed, delighted with the idea that he had rendered the fortunes of his wife and children thoroughly secure.

The same hansom cab that had driven him from the railway station to the bank in Lombard-street drove him to the Docks, where he alighted, and made his way on board his own vessel, the *Lily Queen*.

Her freight had been taken on board some days before, and all was ready for departure. A bright-faced, good-looking man of about five and twenty was pacing up and down the deck as the Captain came alongside the vessel.

This young man was Gilbert Thornleigh; first mate of the *Lily Queen*, and a great favourite of Harley Westford's. He had been down to the Grange with his Captain, and had fallen desperately in love with Violet in the course of a three days' visit to that rustic paradise: but it is needless to say that the sailor kept the secret of his inflammable heart. The Captain's beautiful daughter seemed as high above him as some duchess crowned with a diadem and robed in ermine might appear to some young captain of

household troops.

Captain Westford greeted Gilbert with a hearty grasp of the hand.

“True to my time, you see, my lad,” he said.

“Yes, Captain; always true.”

“And this time I can leave England with a light heart,” said Harley; “for I have made all secure for my wife and children. No more foreign loans and Otaheite railway debentures and Fiji Island first-preference bonds, my lad, which bewilder a plain man’s brains when he tries to understand them. I have placed the whole lump of money in the hands of an old-established English banker, and in my pocket here I have Rupert Godwin’s receipt for the cash.”

Gilbert Thornleigh stared aghast at his Captain.

“Rupert Godwin!” he exclaimed. “You can’t mean that, Captain? You can’t mean that you have placed your money with the firm of Godwin and Selby?”

“Why not, lad? Why shouldn’t I place it with them?”

“Because it is whispered that they are on the verge of ruin. I had a few hundreds in their hands myself until yesterday; but my uncle, an old City man, gave me a word of warning, and I drew every farthing of my money before the bank closed last night. But don’t be uneasy, Captain, the rumour may be a false one. Besides, it’s not too late; you can withdraw your money.”

Harley Westford’s face grew suddenly white. He reeled like a drunken man, and clung to the bulwark for support.

“The villain!” he exclaimed; “the infernal scoundrel! He knew that the money belonged to my wife and children, and he smiled in my face while he took it from me!”

"But there is time enough yet, Captain," said Gilbert Thornleigh, looking at his watch; "the bank will not close before four o'clock, and it's now only three. You can go ashore and get your money back."

"Yes," cried Harley Westford, with a terrible oath, "I will have my money—or the life of that villain! My children! My wife! The scoundrel could look me in the face and know that he was robbing two helpless women! No, no, my darlings, you shall not be cheated!"

"Captain, there is not a moment to lose."

"I know, lad; I know," answered Harley, passing his hand across his brow as if to collect his scattered senses. "This news upset me a bit at first, but I shall be all right presently. See here, my lad; you know how I have always trusted you, and now I must place a still greater trust in your hands. Come what may, the *Lily Queen* sails at daybreak to-morrow. If I am on board her by that time, well and good. If not, she must sail without me, and you, Gilbert Thornleigh, go as her Captain. Remember that. I will have no delays; the men are all on board her, her cargo is expected and waited for out yonder. There has been too much delay as it is, and it's a point of honour with me not to lose another hour. I trust you, Gilbert, as if you were my son. Heaven only knows when I may see blue water again. If this man Rupert Godwin is indeed on the verge of ruin, he will scarcely relinquish twenty thousand pounds without a struggle. But, come what may, I will have the money from him, by fair means or foul. In the mean time Gilbert, I trust the command of the vessel to you in case of the worst. Remember, she sails to-morrow morning."

"Without fail, Captain, and you with her, please Providence!"

"That," answered Harley Westford solemnly, "is in the

hands of Heaven."

He placed all the necessary papers in the young man's custody, and after a few instructions, hurriedly but not carelessly given, he wrung Gilbert's extended hand, and then sprang into the boat which was to take him ashore.

He called the first cab that was to be found outside the Docks, and told the man to drive at a gallop to Lombard-street.

The bank was closing as the Captain alighted from the vehicle. Mr. Godwin had just left for his country-house, the clerk told Harley, and no further business could be transacted that day.

"Then I must follow him to his country-house," answered the Captain. "Where is it?"

"Wilmingdon Hall, on the North road, beyond Hertford."

"How can I get there?"

"You can go by rail to Hertford, and then get a fly across to the Hall. It's only a mile and a half from the station."

"Good," answered Harley Westford. Then, after directing the cabman to drive his fastest to the Great Northern Terminus, he stepped once more into the vehicle.

"Neither Rupert Godwin nor I shall know peace or rest until that money has been restored to its rightful owner!" cried the Captain, raising his clenched hand, as if he would have invoked the powers of Heaven to witness his oath.

He little knew how terribly that oath was to be fulfilled.

CHAPTER III.

AN IMPORTUNATE CREDITOR.

While Harley Westford was making his way to Hertford by express-train, Mr. Godwin sat over his wine in one of the splendid apartments of Wilmingdon Hall.

Wilmingdon Hall was no modern villa erected by a wealthy speculator, one of the merchant princes of the commercial age. It was a noble relic of the past; one of those stately habitations which we find here and there embosomed in woods whose growth is of a thousand years. For centuries the Hall had been the residence of a grand old race; but reckless extravagance had driven the lords of the mansion away from its ponderous gates, to give place to the rich commoner whose wealth made him master of the old domain.

The Hall was built in the form of a quadrangle, and was large enough to have accommodated a regiment of soldiers. One side of the quadrangle had been built in the early Tudor period, and had been disused for many years. The stone mullions of the windows darkened the rooms, and the tapestry hung rotting on the walls of the gloomy bedchambers and the low-roofed saloons of a bygone age.

There were few of the banker's household who would have been bold enough to enter this northern wing of the mansion, which was, of course, reported to be haunted; but Mr. Godwin himself had been often known to visit the silent chambers, where the dust lay thick upon the mouldering oaken floors. The banker had indeed caused

an iron safe to be placed in one of the lower rooms; and it was said that he kept a great deal of old-fashioned plate and jewellery, intrusted to him by his customers, in the cellarage below this northern wing.

Very few persons living in this present day had ever descended to these cellars; but it was reported that they extended the whole length and breadth of the northern side of the quadrangle, and even penetrated into the adjoining wings. It was also said that in the time of the civil wars these cellars had been used as prisons for the enemy, and as hiding-places for the faithful adherents of the good cause.

The servants of Mr. Godwin's numerous household often talked of those gloomy underground chambers, but not one among them would have been courageous enough to descend into the dark and unknown vaults. Nor were the cellars ever left open to any hazardous intruder, as the ponderous old keys belonging to them, and to all the rooms in the deserted northern wing, were lodged in the safe keeping of Mr. Godwin himself, and no doubt stowed away in one of the numerous iron safes which lined the walls of his study. There was some legend of a subterranean passage leading from some part of the grounds to the cellarage; but no one now in the household had ever ventured to test the truth of this legend. Was there not also the legend of a White Lady, whose shadowy form might be met at any hour in those darksome chambers,—a harmless lady enough while in the flesh, a poor gentle creature, who had broken her heart and gone distraught for love of an inconstant gentleman in the military line; but a very troublesome lady in the spirit, since she appeared to devote her leisure to sighing and wailing in passages and cupboards, and to the performance of every variety of scratching, and knocking, and scraping, and tapping known to the most

ingenious of ghosts.

In the neighbourhood of Wilmingdon Hall Mr. Godwin was looked upon as the possessor of almost fabulous wealth. He was regarded as a kind of modern magician, who could have coined gold out of the dead leaves which strewed Wilmingdon woods in the autumn, if he had chosen to do so.

The June evening was as beautiful as the June morning had been. The western sky was one grand blaze of crimson and orange, as Rupert Godwin sat over his wine in his spacious oak-panelled dining-room. He was not alone. On the opposite side of the table appeared the wizen face of the clerk, Jacob Danielson.

Crystal decanters, diamond cut, and sparkling as if studded with jewels, glittered in the crimson sunset, and fragrant hot-house fruits were piled amongst their dewy leaves in dishes of rare old Sèvres china. Luxury and elegance surrounded the banker on every side; but he had by no means the air of a man who enjoys the delights of the Sybarite's *dolce far niente*. A dark frown of discontent obscured his handsome face, and the violet-perfumed Burgundy, which his clerk was sniffing with the true epicurean gusto, had no charm for the master.

Rupert Godwin had felt himself compelled to conciliate his clerk. Did not Jacob know of the twenty thousand pounds—that twenty thousand pounds respecting which dark plots were now being woven in the banker's mind?

That sum might have restored Mr. Godwin's shaken credit for a time; but what would he be able to do when the Captain returned from his Chinese voyage, and demanded the restoration of his money?

Rupert Godwin hated Harley Westford with a deeply-rooted hatred, though he had never looked upon the sailor's face until that day. The hatred which had long

smouldered in the banker's breast arose out of a dark mystery of the past—a mystery in which Clara, the Captain's wife, had been concerned.

Under these circumstances, Rupert Godwin, ever selfish, false, and unscrupulous, resolved on appropriating the sailor's fortune. Ruin stared him in the face. He had speculated wildly, and had lost heavily. He resolved on leaving Europe for ever, and carrying with him the twenty thousand pounds intrusted to him by Harley Westford.

He had spent some of the pleasantest years of his youth in South America, where a member of his family occupied a position of some importance as a merchant.

"Under a feigned name, and in that distant land, no one will be able to discover the whereabouts of Rupert Godwin, the runaway banker," he thought; "and with twenty thousand pounds for my starting-point, I may make a second fortune, larger than my first. Julia shall accompany me. My son may remain in England and shift for himself; there has never been much love between us, and I do not want to be hindered at every turn by some Quixotic scruple of his. Chivalry and commerce won't go in harness together. Bayard would have made a bad thing of it on the Stock Exchange."

Thus ran the banker's thoughts as he sat brooding over his wine; but every now and then his restless eyes glanced furtively towards the face of his clerk.

He feared Jacob Danielson. The fear as yet was shadowy and unreasoning; but he felt that the clerk knew too many of his secrets, and might become a hindrance to his schemes. He felt this, and in the meantime he was anxious to conciliate, and if possible hoodwink, Jacob Danielson.

"Yes, Jacob," he said presently, taking up the thread of

a former conversation, “this twenty thousand may enable us to weather the storm. If the first calls made upon us are promptly paid, confidence must be restored, and the rumour against us will die away.”

“Very likely,” answered the clerk, in that cool dry tone of voice which was peculiarly unpleasant to Rupert Godwin; “but when the sea captain comes home and wants his money—what then?”

“By that time we may be again in a strong position.”

“Yes, we *may*! But how?”

“Some of the speculations in which my money has been risked may improve. My eggs are not all in one basket. Some of the baskets may prove to be sounder than they appear just now,” answered the banker, who tried in vain to appear at his ease under the piercing scrutiny of Jacob’s sharp grey eyes.

“Do you believe that, Mr. Godwin?” asked the clerk, in a tone that was strangely significant.

“Most decidedly.”

“Humph!” responded Jacob, rubbing the iron-grey stubble upon his chin with his horny palm, until the harsh rasping noise produced by that action set his employer’s teeth on edge. “I am glad you have so much confidence in the future.”

Rupert Godwin winced as he felt the sting contained in these simple words. He felt that to throw dust in the eyes of Mr. Danielson was by no means an easy operation. But he was no coward. He was a bold bad man, whose heart was not likely to fail him in any desperate venture.

“Bah!” he thought, as his strongly-marked brows contracted over his dark eyes, “what have I to fear from this man? True, that he knows of the twenty thousand

pounds; but what harm can his knowledge do me when I am far away from England and my creditors? In that money lies the means of new wealth."

His head drooped forward upon his breast, as he abandoned himself to a reverie that was not altogether unpleasant, when suddenly a voice, solemnly impressive in its tone, sounded in the quiet of the June twilight.

"Mr. Godwin," said the voice, "I come to demand from you the twenty thousand pounds which I lodged in your keeping to-day."

A thunderbolt descending from heaven to shatter the roof above him could scarcely have affected the banker more terribly than did the sound of that unceremonious demand.

He looked up, and saw Harley Westford standing in one of the long French windows which opened upon the lawn. The Captain stood on the threshold of the central window, exactly opposite Rupert Godwin; and in the dim declining light the banker could see that Harley Westford's face was deadly pale. It was the fixed and resolute countenance of a desperate man.

For the first few moments after those words had been spoken Rupert Godwin was completely unnerved; but, with an effort, he shook off that feeling of mental paralysis which had taken possession of him, and assumed his usual ease of manner.

"My dear Captain Westford," he said, "your sudden appearance actually alarmed me; and yet I am not generally subject to any nervous fancies. But this place is supposed to be haunted; and I give you my word you looked exactly like a ghost just now in the June gloaming. Pray be seated, and try some of that Chambertin, which I can recommend. Danielson, will you

be good enough to ring for lamps? The darkness has crept upon us unawares."

"Yes," answered the clerk, "we have been so deeply interested in our own thoughts."

There was something like a sneer in Jacob Danielson's tone as he said this; and the banker felt as if his inmost thoughts had been read by his clerk.

"Well, Captain Westford," said Mr. Godwin in his most careless tone, "to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? You wish to make some new arrangement about the investment of your money; perhaps you are not satisfied with the rate of interest allowed by our house. You want to dabble in some speculative investment."

"Mr. Godwin," exclaimed the sailor, "I am a plain-spoken man, and I don't know how to beat about the bush. In a very few words, then, I want my money back."

"You are afraid to trust it in my hands?"

"I am."

"You have heard some false rumour, no doubt; some story got up by notorious City scoundrels. Some anonymous circular has reached you, perhaps, intended to undermine the credit of one of the best considered banking-firms in the City of London. I have heard of such stabs in the dark; and if I had my will the anonymous slanderer who destroys his neighbour's credit should be hung as high as the assassin who takes his neighbour's life."

"The rumour which I have heard may be true or false," replied the Captain quietly. "I trust for your sake, Mr. Godwin, that it is false. I think it very likely that it may be so. But I am dealing with that which is dearer to me than my own heart's blood. I am dealing with the money which represents the future comfort and safety of my

wife and children. There must be no risk, not the shadow of risk, about that money. Ask me to trust you with my life, and I will trust you freely; but I will not leave that money in your hands. At the risk of giving you mortal offence I come to demand its restoration."

"And you shall have it in due course, my dear Captain Westford," answered the banker, throwing himself back in his chair and laughing aloud. "Pray, excuse me, but I cannot help being amused by your simplicity. You sailors are as bold as lions on the high seas, but the veriest cowards when you come into the neighbourhood of the Stock Exchange. I really can't help laughing at your fears."

"Laugh as much as you please, Mr. Godwin; only, give me back my money."

"Most decidedly, my dear Captain Westford; but as I don't happen to carry your fortune about with me in my waistcoat-pocket, you must wait till business hours to-morrow."

The sailor's countenance darkened.

"I relied on catching you in Lombard-street before the bank closed," he said, "and I have given orders for the sailing of my vessel to-morrow at daybreak. If I am not aboard her, she sails without me."

The banker was silent for some moments. The lamps had not yet been brought into the room, and in the darkness a sinister smile passed over Rupert Godwin's face.

"Your vessel sails without you," he said presently; "but of course your officers will await fresh orders from you?"

"No, they have no occasion to wait," answered the Captain; "they have received all necessary instructions. If I am not on board my vessel before daybreak to-morrow,

my first mate will assume the post of Captain, and the *Lily Queen* will leave the Pool without me."

Two men-servants entered the room with lamps at this moment. In the brilliant yet subdued light of the moderator-lamps, Rupert Godwin looked like a man who was on good terms with himself and all the world. And yet Heaven alone knew the intensity of the struggle going forward in this man's mind.

"My dear Danielson," he exclaimed, after glancing at the clock upon the chimney-piece—"my dear Danielson, have you any notion of the time? It is now past nine, and unless you start at once, you'll scarcely catch the 10.30 train from Hertford."

"It is like you, to be so kind and thoughtful, Mr. Godwin!" the clerk said, looking searchingly at his employer. "Yes, my time is up, and I must be thinking of getting off."

"I'll order one of my grooms to drive you to the station," said Mr. Godwin; and before Jacob could remonstrate, he rang the bell and gave his directions to the servant who answered it.

Meanwhile Harley Westford stood a little way from the table, pale and silent, and with a resolute look upon his frank handsome face.

During all this time he had not once seated himself; during all this time he had not once removed his gaze from the countenance of the banker. He wanted to discover whether or not Rupert Godwin was an honest man.

"I am waiting to hear your decision about that money, Mr. Godwin," he said quietly; "remember, that to me it is a matter of life and death."

"If you will step into my study. I shall be at your

service immediately, Captain Westford," answered the banker; "I have only a few words to say to my clerk, and then I will join you."

A servant entered at this moment to announce that the dog-cart was ready to take Mr. Danielson to the station.

"Show this gentleman into my study," said Rupert Godwin, "and take lights there immediately."

Harley Westford followed the servant. When he entered the dining-room he had carried his light overcoat upon his arm: this coat he now left hanging loosely upon a chair.

"Now, my dear Jacob," said the banker, with every appearance of unconcern, "let me see you off, and then I will go and settle with this importunate sea-captain."

"But how will you settle with him?" asked Danielson in a low suppressed voice.

"Very easily. I will persuade him that the rumour he has heard against our credit is entirely false, and shall by that means prevail upon him to leave his money in my hands until his return from China."

"But he seems determined upon having the money back immediately. I fancy you'll find him rather a tough customer."

"Trust my diplomacy against his determination. Come, Jacob, you will certainly lose your train."

The banker almost pushed his clerk towards the dog-cart which was waiting before the Gothic porch of Wilmingdon Hall. Jacob mounted the vehicle, and the groom drove off at a smart pace.

Then, for the first time, Rupert Godwin sighed heavily, as he stood alone in the porch, and a dark cloud fell over his face.

"It is difficult work," he muttered to himself; "awful work, let me plan it which way I will. But let me remember Clara Ponsonby—my love and her disdain. Let me remember the past, and *that* memory may give me nerve and resolution to-night."

He stood for some minutes in the porch, looking out into the summer darkness. No star had yet risen in the June heavens, and the lawn and gardens of Wilmingdon Hall were as dark as the deepest recesses of the forest. After those few minutes of silent thought, the banker breathed one more sigh, profound as the first, and turned to re-enter the house.

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW WAY TO PAY OLD DEBTS.

Rupert Godwin went at once to the library, where Harley Westford was waiting for him.

"Come, my dear Captain," he said, as he entered the spacious room, the walls of which were lined with books, whose costly and artistic bindings announced alike the wealth of a millionnaire and the perfect taste of an accomplished bibliopole,—"come, Captain, let us understand each other fully. You want this money to-night?"

"I do. My demand may perhaps be unreasonable, as this house is not your place of business, nor this an hour in which you are accustomed to transact business; but the peculiar circumstances of the case must plead my excuse. I tell you again, Mr. Godwin, to me this is a matter of life or death."

"And if I refuse to give you the money to-night you will apply for it to-morrow, as soon as the bank opens?"

"Unquestionably."

"And if then there was any delay in the production of your money, what would you do?"

"I would dog your footsteps day and night; I would haunt you like your own shadow; I would stand upon the steps of your banking-house in Lombard-street and proclaim you as a thief and a scoundrel, until that twenty thousand pounds was produced. *My* money!" cried the

Captain in passionate accents; “it is not my money; it is my wife’s money, my children’s money; and you had better try to take my life than to rob me of that.”

“Come, come, my dear sir,” said the banker, with his blandest smile, “pray do not excite yourself. I was only putting a case. I daresay if I were a dishonest man you would be what is vulgarly called an ugly customer; but as I have no intention of withholding your money for an hour longer than is necessary, we need not discuss the matter with any violence. I told you just now that I was not in the habit of carrying twenty thousand pounds about me. Under ordinary circumstances, therefore, I should not be able to give you your money to-night. You say your vessel sails at daybreak to-morrow?”

“She does.”

“And you will be a loser if you cannot sail with her?”

“A very considerable loser.”

“Very well, then, Captain Westford,” answered the banker; “you have not behaved very generously to me. You have intruded yourself upon my domestic privacy, and have insulted me by most unjust suspicions. In spite of this, however, I am prepared to act generously towards you. As the circumstances of the case are exceptional, I will strain a point in your favour. It happens, strange to say, that I have in this house a sum of money amounting to more than the twenty thousand pounds which you lodged in my hands.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes. It is a strange coincidence, is it not?”

The banker laughed as he made this remark. Had Harley Westford been a suspicious man, skilled in reading the darker secrets of the human heart, something strained and unnatural in that laugh might have struck upon his

ear, awakening a vague terror. But he suspected nothing. He was quite ready to believe that he had wronged Rupert Godwin by his impetuous demand for the return of his money.

“I happen to have an eccentric old lady amongst my customers, whose fortune of some seven-and-twenty thousand pounds was, until a few days since, lodged in the hands of different railway companies,” said the banker, in his most business-like tone. “But a week or so ago she wrote to me in a panic, caused by some silly report she had heard, desiring me to sell out of these companies, and to keep her money in my hands until she gave me further directions respecting the disposal of it. But the best part of the business is, that she begged me to keep the money at my country-house, for fear, as she said, of a robbery in Lombard-street. Did you ever hear of anything so absurd?”

Again Mr. Godwin laughed, the same forced unnatural laugh as before.

“However, Captain Westford,” he continued, “the old proverb very truly tells us, ‘It is an ill wind that blows nobody good.’ You shall profit by the old lady’s eccentricity. If you will come with me to the other side of my house, where I keep all valuables intrusted to me, I will give you Bank of England notes to the amount of twenty thousand pounds.”

“I thank you very much,” answered the Captain.

“No thanks, I am glad to do as much for the sake of ——your wife.”

The banker made a long pause before uttering those two last words.

He opened an iron safe, artfully disguised by doors of carved oak, and took from it a heavy bunch of keys, all

labelled with slips of parchment. These keys belonged to the northern wing of the Hall.

As the two men were about to leave the room, the door was opened, and a woman appeared upon the threshold.

Never had Harley Westford looked upon beauty more splendid than that which now greeted his sight.

A girl of some nineteen years of age, whose darkly-flashing eyes and Spanish style of beauty proclaimed her the daughter of Rupert Godwin, stood before him. But all that was stern and cold in the banker's face was softened into beauty in that of his daughter.

The eyes were oriental in their dark lustre, and there was a dewy softness mingled even with the eager brightness of their gaze. A crimson glow relieved the pale olive of the clear skin; and half-parted lips, whose vermilion recalled the hue of the pomegranate, displayed two rows of small white teeth that glittered in the lamp-light.

The girl's figure was tall and commanding, but she was graceful as an Andalusian countess.

Such was Julia Godwin, the only daughter of the banker and of the poor neglected lady who had been his wife.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, papa!" exclaimed Julia; "where have you been hiding yourself all the evening?"

The banker turned upon his daughter with a frown.

"Have I to tell you again, Julia, that this is a room which I devote to business, and that I will not be intruded upon here?" he exclaimed sternly. "This gentleman is with me on an affair of vital importance, and I must beg that you will retire to your own apartments, and leave us

undisturbed."

"O, very well, papa," said Julia, pouting her rosy under-lip in evident vexation, and lingering on the threshold with the privileged pertinacity of a spoiled child; "but it is dreadfully weary work sitting alone a whole evening in this melancholy old house, where one expects to see a ghost walk out of the panelling at any moment after dark. Mrs. Melville has gone to town to dine with some old friends, and will not come back till to-morrow morning; so I am all alone. And I looked forward to such a pleasant evening with you. However, I'm going, papa; only I do think you're very unkind, and I——"

The dark frown upon Mr. Godwin's face silenced his daughter's complaining voice, and she retired, murmuring to herself about her father's unkindness.

Even the sternest men are liable to some weaknesses; and it must be confessed that Julia Godwin was a spoiled child, the favourite companion of a doting father.

Between Rupert Godwin and his son there was neither affection nor companionship. A strange and unnatural dislike divided the father and his only son; and it was in his daughter that the proud man had centred all his hopes.

"Come, Captain Westford," said the banker, when Julia had vanished, "it is growing late. The last train from Hertford leaves at a little before midnight. Will you be able to walk as far as the station?"

"Three times that distance, if necessary," answered the seaman heartily.

"Come, then."

Rupert Godwin took the lamp in one hand and the bunch of keys in the other. He went into the hall, followed by Captain Westford.

“There will be no vehicle required for this gentleman,” the banker said, to a servant whom they met in the hall; “he will take a short cut across the park, and walk back to Hertford.”

Rupert Godwin led the way along corridors carpeted with velvet pile, and adorned with pictures and statues, and great china vases of exotic flowers, whose rich perfumes filled the air. All was luxury and elegance in this part of the house, and through the open doors Harley Westford caught glimpses of exquisitely-furnished apartments, in which the carved oaken wainscots and richly-adorned ceilings of the Elizabethan age contrasted with the most graceful achievements of modern upholstery.

But suddenly the scene changed. At the end of a long corridor the banker unlocked a ponderous oaken door, and led the way into a dark passage, where the atmosphere seemed thick with dust, and where there was a faint musty smell that seemed the very odour of decay.

They were now in the northern wing of Wilmingdon Hall, amongst those disused chambers to whose dull solitude it pleased the banker sometimes to betake himself.

Harley Westford looked round him with a shudder.

“We seamen are rather superstitious fellows,” he said; “the air of this place chills me to the bone, and I should expect to meet a ghost in these dark passages. The place feels like a grave.”

“Does it?” exclaimed the banker; “that’s strange!”

Again, if Harley Westford had been a suspicious man, he might have detected something sinister in the tone in which those words were spoken.

The banker unlocked a door leading into a small low-

roofed chamber which bore the aspect of being sometimes occupied by a business man.

There were iron safes along one side of the room, and a desk and a couple of chairs stood in the centre of the bare oak floor. There was a long narrow window, guarded by iron bars and by heavy shutters on the outside. At one end of the room there was a door, also heavily barred with iron.

Nothing could be more dreary than the aspect of this apartment, dimly illuminated by the lamp which Rupert Godwin placed upon the desk.

“It is in this room that I keep any objects of special value intrusted to me for any length of time,” he said, as Harley Westford’s eyes wandered slowly round the apartment. “Those safes contain money and securities. That door leads to a cellar in which I keep plate.”

He opened one of the safes and took out an iron box.

“This is Miss Wentworth’s fortune,” he said, “twenty thousand pounds of which I am about to deliver to you.”

He set the box upon the desk; and while the Captain was looking at it with an almost respectful gaze, as the casket which contained so much wealth, Rupert Godwin turned once more to the safe.

This time Harley Westford did not see the object which he took from that iron repository.

It was something that flashed with a blue glitter in the light of the lamp—something which the banker concealed in the sleeve of his coat as he turned towards the sailor.

“Come,” he said, with his most careless manner, “you must see my mysterious cellar before you leave this old haunted wing of the Hall. You are not afraid of the ghosts, I suppose, in my company?”

“Neither in yours nor alone,” answered Harley; “a sailor is never afraid. He may believe in the appearance of strange visitants upon this earth, but he does not fear them.”

The banker unlocked the iron-barred door, and pulled it open.

It revolved very slowly on its ponderous hinges, revealing a flight of steep steps that led downwards into impenetrable darkness.

“So that is where you keep your treasures!” cried the sailor; “a regular Aladdin’s cave!”

“Yes,” answered Rupert Godwin; “if you are an amateur of old silver, you would find plenty to interest you in that vault—candelabras that have lighted the banquets of the Tudors, tankards that Cromwell’s thick lips have touched, tea-pots and salvers made by Queen Anne’s favourite silversmith, the tarnished treasures of some of the best families in England. Take the lamp and look down.”

Harley took the lamp from the table, and approached the threshold of the door.

He stood for some few moments looking thoughtfully down into the gloomy vault below.

“A queer place!” he said; “darker than the hold of a slave-ship off the African coast.”

As he uttered the last few words, the arm of the banker was suddenly raised, and that mysterious something which flashed with a blue glitter in the lamp-light descended upon the sailor’s back.

Harley Westford uttered one groan, staggered forward, and fell headlong down the steep flight of steps leading to the cellar.

There was a crash of broken glass as the lamp fell from his hand; then a dull heavy thud, which was re-echoed with a hollow sound in the vault below—a sound that prolonged itself like the suppressed roar of distant thunder.

The banker thrust his hand into his breast, then pushed the heavy door upon its hinges, and turned the key in the lock.

“I do not think he will come to Lombard-street to demand his money, or stand upon the steps of my house to denounce me for a thief and a scoundrel,” muttered Rupert Godwin, as he dropped the bunch of keys into his coat-pocket.

Then he groped his way from the room, and crept cautiously along the narrow passage leading to the occupied portion of the house.

He had left the door of communication ajar, and he saw the light shining through the aperture.

He seemed to breathe more freely as he emerged into the carpeted corridor, and locked the door behind him.

As he was turning the key in the lock, Julia Godwin came out of one of the rooms near at hand.

“Where is your friend, papa?” she asked, with a look of surprise.

“He has gone back to London.”

“But how did he go? I saw you both go into the northern wing just now, and I have been sitting in my own room with the door open listening for your footsteps ever since. I am sure he has not passed along this passage.”

For a moment the banker was silent.

“How inquisitive you are, Julia!” he said at last. “I let

that gentleman out of the side-door in the northern wing, as he wanted to get across the park by the shortest way."

"Ah, to be sure. But what could take you into that horrible northern wing?"

"Business. I have important papers there. Go back to your room, Julia; I cannot stay to be questioned."

The girl looked at her father with an expression of mingled wonder and anxiety.

"Papa!" she exclaimed, "you are as pale as death. I never saw you look like this before. And it is not like you to be so cross to me. I am sure that something has happened to vex you, something very serious."

"I had rather unpleasant business with that man; but it is all over now, and he has gone. Let me pass, Julia; I have important letters to write before I go to bed."

"Good-night then, papa," said Julia, holding up her face to be kissed. But before the kiss could be given, she recoiled from her father, with a sudden movement, and a low cry of terror.

"See there!" she exclaimed, pointing to his breast.

"What is the matter, child?"

"Blood, papa! A spot of blood upon your shirt."

The banker looked down, and saw a little splash of blood upon the spotless whiteness of his cambric shirt-front. "How silly you are, Julia!" he said. "My nose bled a little just now, as I was stooping over some papers. My brain is overloaded with blood, I think. There, there—good-night, child."

He pressed his lips upon the girl's uplifted brow. Those cold bloodless lips sent a chill through her veins.

"What is the matter with papa, to-night?" she thought,

as she returned to her own apartment; “I’m afraid something must have gone wrong in the City.”

The banker walked slowly to the dining-room, where Harley Westford had first broken in upon his reverie.

The lamps were still burning on the long table of polished oak; the wines still glowed with ruby lustre in the diamond-cut decanters.

But the room was not empty. Seated by the table, with the *Times* newspaper in his hand, Rupert Godwin beheld Jacob Danielson, the man who of all others he would have least wished to encounter at that moment.

The banker had buttoned his coat across his breast after that meeting with his daughter, and the blood-stain was no longer visible. But he could not repress a sudden start at sight of his clerk.

“You here, Danielson!” he exclaimed; “I thought you were on your way to London.”

“No; I was too late for the train, and so walked back to ask a night’s hospitality. I might have gone by the midnight train, of course; but then, you see, my landlady is a very particular sort of person, and it wouldn’t do for me to go back to my lodgings in the dead of the night; so I venture to return here. I hope I shall not be considered an intruder.”

“O, not at all,” answered Rupert, dropping suddenly into an arm-chair. “Will you be good enough to touch the bell?”

“Certainly. You are looking very pale.”

“Yes, I was seized with a spasm of the heart just now. I am subject to that sort of thing,” replied the banker, coolly. Then he added to the servant who entered the room, “Bring me some brandy.”

The man brought a decanter of brandy. Rupert Godwin half filled a tumbler with the spirit, and drained it to the last drop.

“And so you lost the train, and walked over here?” he asked of Danielson, presently.

“Yes; I dismissed your man with the dog-cart before I discovered that the train had started, so I had no alternative but to walk back.”

“You must have walked uncommonly fast,” said the banker, thoughtfully.

“Yes, I’m rather a fast walker. But where’s our friend the Captain?”

“Gone, half an hour ago.”

“You contrived to pacify him, then?”

“O, yes. He agreed to let me have the use of his money till his return from China. I shall pay him rather a high rate of interest.”

“Ah, to be sure,” answered the clerk, rubbing his chin in that slow and meditative manner which was peculiar to him, and staring thoughtfully at his employer, who drank another half-tumbler of brandy. “And so the Captain walked to the railway station. You directed him to go by a cross cut through the park, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

“By the grotto and fernery, eh?”

“Yes; I sent him that way,” answered the banker, rather abstractedly.

“Strange!” said the clerk. “I ought to have met him, for I came that way.”

“Very likely he took the wrong path; these sailors never are very good hands at steering their course on shore.”

"No; to be sure. And the careless fellow has left his coat behind him, I see," said Danielson, pointing to Harley Westford's light overcoat, which hung on the back of a distant chair.

"Very careless," answered the banker. "And now, as I am rather tired, I will wish you good-night, Danielson. The servants will show you to your room. Try some of that cognac. It is quite a liqueur."

"It ought to be rather mild," answered the clerk; "for I never saw you take so much brandy as you've drunk within the last five minutes."

Rupert Godwin left the dining-room, and went up the broad oak staircase to his own apartment—a lofty and spacious chamber, furnished with dark carved oak, relieved by hangings of green velvet.

Here the mask fell from the assassin's face; here the guilty man dared to be himself.

He dropped heavily into a chair, and covering his face with his hands, groaned aloud.

"It was horrible," he muttered, "very horrible; and yet they say revenge is sweet. Years ago I hungered for vengeance as some famished animal may hunger for his prey. And now it is mine. I am avenged, Clara Ponsonby. You will never look upon my rival again."

The banker plunged his hand into his waistcoat, and drew from thence a long Spanish dagger of bright blue steel.

From the point half-way towards the hilt, the blade was stained with blood.

"His blood!" muttered Rupert Godwin; "the blood of the man I have hated for twenty years, and only met for the first time to-day! The ways of destiny are strange."

The banker rose from his chair, and went to an old-fashioned ebony cabinet, in a secret drawer of which he placed the dagger.

“No living creature but myself knows the secret of that spring,” he said to himself. “They must be clever who find the weapon that killed Harley Westford.”

Then after a pause, he murmured:

“The weapon that killed him! Can I be certain that he is dead?”

And again, after a pause, he muttered:

“Bah! How should he survive to-night’s work? The stroke of the dagger was sure enough; and then the fall down the steep flight of steps. Can there be any doubt of his death? And again, if he survived the dagger-stroke and the fall, he must perish from loss of blood, cold, or even famine.”

There was something demoniac in the face of Rupert Godwin as he contemplated this horrible alternative.

“And the twenty thousand pounds are mine!” he exclaimed triumphantly, after a long pause: “mine—for ever; to deal with as I please. That sum may help me to sustain the shattered credit of my house. Fresh speculations may float me back to fortune. I may surmount all my difficulties, as I have surmounted the difficulty of to-night. What is it, after all?—this crime, which is so hideous to contemplate, so awful to remember? One bold, sudden stroke, and the thing is done. This man’s life comes to an end, as it might have come to an end a few days hence in some squall at sea. What is the world the worse for his loss, or how am I the worse for what I have done?”

This was the argument which this man held with

himself in that first pause after the commission of the dread act which must separate him for evermore in thought and feeling from men with clean hands and sinless hearts.

He was not sorry for what he had done. He was disturbed by no feeling of compassion or regret for his victim. But he felt that he had done a deed the weight and influence of which upon his future existence he had yet to discover.

It seemed to him as if some physical transformation had been worked upon him since the doing of that awful deed. He no longer breathed, or moved, or spoke, with a sense of ease and freedom. His respiration was troubled, his limbs seemed to have lost their elasticity; when he spoke, his voice sounded strange to him.

“It is a kind of nightmare,” he said to himself, “and will pass away as quickly as it came. I have lived in lands where men hold each other’s lives very lightly. Am I the man to play the coward because this insolent sailor’s days have been cut shorter by so many months or years? Why did he come here to brave and defy me in my own house? He did not know what a desperate man he came to defy. He did not know what good cause I had to hate him.”

Excited by such thoughts as these, the banker paced up and down his spacious room, with his arms folded, and his head bent upon his breast.

Suddenly he stopped, and a look of terror passed across his face.

“The receipt!” he exclaimed. “Powers of hell! the receipt for the twenty thousand pounds! What if that should have fallen into other hands?”

Then, after a pause, he muttered:

“No, it is scarcely possible. The man would have kept it

in his own possession. It is buried in the dark vault where he lies, never to rise again upon this earth."

But in the next moment the banker remembered the coat which Harley Westford had left in the dining-room.

"If by any chance the receipt should be in one of the pockets of that coat!" he thought, as he stood motionless in the centre of the room. After a moment's hesitation, he snatched a candle from the dressing-table, left his room, and went down to the hall below.

He went into the dining-room. There all was deserted. The lamps were out; Jacob Danielson was gone; but the Captain's coat still hung on the chair where he had left it.

Rupert Godwin ransacked the pockets; but there was no shred of paper to be found in any one of them.

"What if Danielson should have examined them before me, and should have secured the receipt!" exclaimed the banker. "That would indeed be destruction. But no; surely, careless as these seafaring men may be, Harley Westford would never have carried the only document representing his fortune in the pocket of a loose overcoat."

CHAPTER V.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

Slowly, very slowly, did Mrs. Westford recover from that attack of brain-fever which had been brought on by the grief and excitement of her parting with her husband. It was no ordinary grief which had reduced her to this alarming condition—she had succumbed beneath the influence of a strange and unconquerable presentiment which had oppressed her during the long night of watching that preceded Captain Westford's departure.

Long and patiently through those bright midsummer days did Violet watch in the sick-chamber, while Lionel, scarcely less devoted, was faithful to his post in the pretty boudoir adjoining his mother's room. Never had a mother been blessed by more affectionate children; never had more loving eyes kept watch by a sick-bed.

But sometimes in the pleasantest hour of the June evening, when the western sky was rosy with the last glory of the setting sun, Lionel Westford would insist upon Violet going out for a constitutional walk, while he took her place beside his mother's bed.

"It is no use talking, Violet," he said; "if you don't get a little fresh air after a long day's watching and fatigue, you will make yourself as ill as poor mamma, and it will be small comfort for her to find you an invalid when she recovers. Go, dear, and take a nice long ramble in the forest, and come back fresh and blooming to get a good night's rest. Remember, Miss Vio, in the absence of papa I

am your responsible guardian. So no disobedience, miss. Put on your hat and depart."

If the light-hearted young man had been a close observer, he would have wondered, perhaps, at the blushes which dyed Violet's cheeks whenever these evening rambles were discussed.

Hesitating and confused in her manner, she would seem one minute as if she most earnestly wished to go, and in the next would plead almost piteously to be allowed to stay in the peaceful sanctuary of her mother's room.

But Lionel was obstinate where he thought Violet's welfare was concerned, and insisted on these evening rambles.

"I should go with you and see that you took a regular constitutional, miss," he would say; "but I am determined that our mother shall never be left entirely to hired service, however faithful and devoted that service might be. If you don't like going alone, you can take one of the servants with you; but you need scarcely go out of earshot of the house."

All this time Clara Westford lay feeble and helpless, her mind disordered by feverish visions, in which she always saw her husband surrounded by peril and tempest.

The doctor reported favourably, but he owned that her recovery might be slow and tedious.

The mind had been very much shaken, he said, by the shock of that parting with Harley Westford.

So when the sun was low in the west, Violet was wont to leave her mother's room and to go out alone into the forest glades that stretched beyond the gardens of the Grange.

No English scenery could be more lovely than that Hampshire woodland, with its rich undergrowth of fern and hazel, its glimpses of sunshine and depth of shadow.

And surely no lovelier nymph ever adorned a classic forest than she who now wandered forth in the quiet evening, with wildflowers twisted in the ribbon of her broad straw hat.

So she went forth one evening about a week after that interview between the banker and his victim at Wilmingdon Hall.

She crossed the broad lawn, went along the narrow path that led through the shrubbery, and left the Grange gardens by a little wooden gate that opened at once into the forest. Her face was pale now, though it had been rosy with bright blushes when she left her brother. She did not keep within earshot of the house, as Lionel had supposed she would do, but struck at once into a narrow footpath that wound in and out amongst the grand old trees, and wandered on, sometimes slowly, sometimes at an almost rapid pace, till she came to a grassy patch of land shut in by a tall screen of elm and beech, with here and there the spreading branches of an oak. It was a most lovely spot, an enchanted circle wherein Vivien might have hushed the magician to his charmed sleep. The fern grew tall amongst the broad brown trunks of the old trees, and in the distance a glassy sheet of water reflected the evening sky.

It was a lovely spot; and it was not untenanted. A young man sat on a low camp-seat, with an artist's portable easel before him.

He was not working at the water-colour sketch on the easel. He was sitting in rather a melancholy attitude, and his eyes were fixed upon that opening in the forest in which Violet appeared.

He was very handsome; dark, with deep grey eyes fringed by long black lashes—eyes which more often looked black than grey. He was very handsome, and his appearance was that of a man upon whom the stamp of gentle blood had been indelibly fixed. The air of high breeding was a part of himself, and not borrowed from the clothes he wore; for no costume could be more indefinite in its character than his velveteen shooting-jacket and grey waistcoat and trousers, which might have been alike suitable to a gamekeeper, a pedlar, or a gentleman on a pedestrian tour.

No sooner had the first glimpse of Violet Westford's white dress appeared in the forest pathway than the young artist sprang from his seat and ran to meet her.

"My own darling!" he exclaimed; "how late you are, and how long the time has seemed—how cruelly long!"

Now, when a gentleman addresses a lady as "his own darling," it must be presumed that the lady and gentleman have met very often, and are on very good terms with each other.

"I could not come earlier, George," the girl said gently; "and even now I feel as if I were very wicked to come at all. O, if mamma were well, and I could tell her of our engagement! If I could take you to her! O, George, you do not know her, if you think that your poverty would stand in your way. She would never ask me to marry a man I did not sincerely love. And if she liked you, I'm sure she'd be the last person to consider whether you were rich or poor."

The young man sighed heavily, and did not immediately answer this maidenly speech.

But after a pause he said:

"Your mother may be a very generous woman, Violet,

but there are others who are not so generous. There are some who worship only one god, the Golden Calf; some there are who bow themselves down before that modern Moloch, and would offer up the hearts' blood of their own children as mercilessly as the Carthaginians cast their offspring into the furnaces that burned beneath the feet of Belsamen. You do not know the world, my Violet, as I know it, or you would never talk of poverty being no barrier between us."

"But neither my father nor my mother are money-worshippers," pleaded the loving girl. "Papa is the most simple-hearted of men, and I have only to confess to him that I have been foolish enough to fall in love with a poor unknown artist, whose sole fortune consists of a sheaf of brushes, a palette, a portable easel, and a camp-stool, and he will give his consent immediately—that is to say, as soon as he knows you, George; for, at the risk of making you very conceited, I must confess that he can't know you without liking you."

"My dear foolish girl!"

"Wasn't mamma charmed with you last Christmas, when we met you at the ball at Winchester? only she mistook you for a man of fortune, and little knew that you were a poor wandering artist, lodging at a cottage in the forest. You have really such an aristocratic air, that one would imagine you had twenty thousand a year."

A dark shade passed over the young man's face.

"If I had five hundred a year, my darling, I should have contrived to get an introduction to your father before he left England, and should have boldly asked for this dear little hand. But I am a pauper, Violet. I am a dependant, and the lowest of dependants, for I am a dependant on a man I cannot esteem."

Violet Westford looked at her lover's gloomy face with

an air of mingled distress and bewilderment.

“But it will not be always so, George,” she said. “You will be a great painter some day, and then all the world will be at your feet.”

The young man’s moody expression vanished as he looked down at the bright face lifted to his.

“My beautiful young dreamer!” he exclaimed. “No; I have no such ambitious visions of triumph and greatness; but I hope some day to win a name that will at least give me independence. To that end I work; and you know that I work hard, my darling.”

“Yes, indeed, I am sometimes afraid your health will suffer.”

“There is no fear of that, Violet. See here. You must see the result of my day’s labour, and approve, or I shall not rest happily to-night. You are all the world to me now, Violet.”

The young painter led the girl to the easel, and she stood by his side for some minutes gazing in silent rapture upon the water-colour drawing before her.

She had no artistic knowledge—no experience; and yet she felt somehow that the work before her bore upon it the divine impress of genius.

It was only the picture of that forest glade, with the deep fern, the broad sheet of unrippled water, the rosy glow of the sunset, and the figure of a deer drinking.

But the soul of a poet had inspired the hand of the painter, and there was a quiet beauty about the picture that went home to the heart.

“O, you will be great, George!” exclaimed the girl, after that long silent gaze upon the picture. “I feel that you will be great.”

She looked up at him with her earnest eyes of darkest deepest blue, and clasped two little loving hands about his arm.

He needed no higher praise than this. Glory might come to him by-and-by, and gold with it; but this one passionate thrill of delight was the thing neither glory nor gold could buy for him.

For some little time the lovers wandered together in the forest glade, supremely happy, forgetful for a while of all the earth, except that one verdant spot hidden in the heart of the woodland.

Then, as long streaks of crimson dyed the grass, Violet hurried homewards, with her lover still by her side. It was only when they were near the gate opening into the gardens of the Grange that the young painter reluctantly withdrew.

Heaven knows, their meetings were pure and innocent as if they had been denizens of the fairy realms of Oberon and Titania; but Violet felt a pang of something like guilt as she returned to the sick-room, and seated herself once more by her mother's bed.

"How hard to keep a secret from such a darling mother!" thought the girl, with a sigh. "I will tell her all directly she recovers. George cannot refuse me that privilege. I will tell her all, and she will smile at our folly and sympathize with our hopes, and believe, as I do, in that bright future when George Stanmore will be the name of a great painter."

Comforted by such thoughts as these, a sweet smile crept over Violet Westford's face as she watched her mother's slumbers, which to-night were more peaceful than they had been since the Captain's departure.

The story of Violet's acquaintance with the wandering

artist is a very simple one.

The lovers first met at a ball at Winchester—a grand county ball, where only people of unblemished respectability were admitted. Here Mrs. Westford and Violet met Mr. Stanmore, who came with one of the officers stationed there, an old school-fellow, as he said. The young stranger made a very favourable impression upon both ladies, and danced several times with the younger.

After this, Lionel and his sister frequently encountered the stranger in their winter walks and drives in the forest. He made no secret of his profession, but told them at once that he was a landscape-painter, and that he was living in very humble lodgings in the forest, in order that he might study nature face to face.

Sometimes they found him seated in a little canvas tent, buttoned to the chin in a thick greatcoat, and working hard at a study of some grand old oak, gaunt and brown, against the wintry sky.

Little by little, therefore, the young people grew very intimate with Mr. George Stanmore, the artist. Lionel was much pleased with his new acquaintance. But during the warm spring months Lionel Westford had been away at the University, and Violet had been obliged to walk alone in the forest, for Mrs. Westford's active charities engaged the greater part of her time, as she devoted herself much to visiting the poor in the villages within a few miles of the Grange.

Sometimes Violet accompanied her upon these missions of charity; but there were many days upon which the young girl went alone into the forest, sometimes on foot, sometimes riding a pet pony, that had been honoured with the name of Oberon.

But, whether she rode Oberon or went on foot, and

whichever pathway she took, Violet Westford was sure to meet George Stanmore.

The rest is easily told. They had seen and loved each other. From the very first, unknown to either, that Divine lamp of love had shone in the breast of each—innocent unselfish love, which the trials of life, the cruel tempests of the world, might distress and torture, but could never wholly quench. It was true love, which knows no base alloy of selfish fear or mercenary caution. Violet Westford would have united her fortunes to George Stanmore though he had been a beggar and would have blindly trusted Providence with her future; and the only prudential motive that withheld the young man from pressing his suit was the fear that she whom he so tenderly loved might suffer by his impetuosity.

“Not till I have won independence will I ask her to be my wife,” he thought. “No, not till I can look the world in the face, reliant upon my own right hand for support.”

CHAPTER VI.

THE STORY OF THE PAST.

Clara Westford recovered slowly, but she did recover; a faint flush came back to the wan cheeks, a new brightness lit up in the eyes that had been so haggard.

That process of recovery was very painful. When the invalid's weary hours of delirium and stupor wore over—when unreal afflictions, visions of horror and dread, had ceased to torture the agonized and bewildered mind, real sorrow, stern and cruel, awaited Clara Westford.

The first syllables that fell from her lips, when reason returned, formed a question about her husband.

"Was there any letter?" she asked. "Had any letter come from Harley?"

Alas, for that anxious wife, the answer was in the negative; no letter had arrived from the Captain.

Neither Violet nor Lionel had been rendered uneasy by their father's silence. They fancied that if he had not written, it was because he had had no opportunity of sending a letter.

But the wife was distracted by a thousand fears. Her husband had left her declaring his intention of depositing the entire amount of his savings in a banker's hands, and immediately sending her the receipt for the money.

The fortune itself was a secondary consideration in Clara Westford's mind; yet she knew her husband's

anxiety upon that point, and she could not but wonder that he had omitted to write to her on the subject before leaving England; or failing to write before setting sail from London, she wondered that he had not contrived to send a letter ashore before losing sight of the English coast.

She was distracted by fears, so shadowy in their nature that she could scarcely give utterance to them. Her children perceived her uneasiness, and endeavoured to set her fears at rest.

“My dearest mother,” exclaimed Lionel, “do you think, if there were really cause for fear, that *I* should not also be uneasy? Do you forget the old proverb, which tells us that ill news flies fast? If anything had been amiss with my father before the *Lily Queen* lost sight of England, Gilbert Thornleigh would have been sure to write to us. You know how devoted he is to my father; and, indeed, to all of us,” added the young man, looking with peculiar significance at Violet, who blushed, and moved to an open window near her to avoid that searching gaze.

Everybody at the Grange had perceived the impression made by Violet on the simple-hearted first mate of the *Lily Queen*.

Clara Westford tried to smile upon the loving son and daughter, who watched her every look with anxious eyes. She smiled, but it was the smile of resignation, not of peace. Her heart was racked by hidden torture, yet she suffered no cry of despair to escape her lips. For the sake of Lionel and Violet she tried to suppress all outward evidence of her anguish, and waited, hoping day after day that ere the sun set a letter might reach her, sent by some homeward-bound vessel, to assure her of Harley Westford’s safety.

“He knows how much I suffer when he is away,” she

thought. “He will not fail to write whenever the opportunity occurs.”

It was a fearful time—a long, dreary interval of suspense and anxiety. Lionel was happy; for, with the careless, light-hearted confidence of youth that has never been clouded by sorrow, he trusted blindly in the future. All his father’s previous voyages had been prosperous, why should not this voyage be like the rest?

And Violet, she too was happy, with the wondrous happiness of a first love—true, pure, and boundless. Now that her mother was restored to health, it seemed to her as if there were no cloud upon the brightness of her life. What if George Stanmore were poor? Her father would return, and poverty would be no disgrace in the eyes of that most generous of fathers.

So the summer time passed happily for the lovers, who met often in the beautiful woodland, sometimes alone, sometimes in the presence of Lionel, who saw that the painter admired his sister, but had no suspicion of any deeper feeling existing between the two. This is a subject upon which brothers are very slow of understanding. They think their sisters very nice girls, but are rather surprised than otherwise when some masculine friend declares that the nice girl is something akin to an angel.

If Lionel had suspected the truth, he would scarcely have interfered to cross the path of that true love. He had no mercenary ambition, either for his sister or himself; and the hard schooling of adversity had not yet taught him prudence.

The summer waned; bright hues of crimson and amber mingled with the verdant green of the forest, the fern grew brown, the country children came whooping through the echoing glades, bent on the plunder of aloe and hazel, beech and chestnut; the days grew shorter, and

the little family at the Grange spent long quiet evenings in the lamp-lit drawing-room.

But still there was no letter from Harley Westford—no tidings of the *Lily Queen*.

Mrs. Westford and her son and daughter had many friends amongst the neighbouring county families; but they saw little company during this period, for Clara had always held herself very much aloof from society during her husband's absence.

All who were intimate with her admired and loved her: but there were some who knew little of Clara Westford, and who pronounced her proud and exclusive.

She was proud, because her husband's position as a merchant captain was beneath that of the county gentry, who had never dabbled in trade or speculation, and who could not quite realize the fact that the owner of a trading-vessel might be a gentleman.

Clara was proud for his sake; not for her own.

"I will go to no house where my husband is not esteemed an honoured guest," she said.

She was exclusive, because her affection was concentrated into one focus. She loved her husband and children with a deep and devoted love, and she had little affection left for the world outside that happy household.

Three months had passed since the sailing of the *Lily Queen*; and yet there were no tidings of the Captain.

To Clara, and to Clara alone, this was a cause of alarm. Lionel and Violet still trusted blindly, almost too happy to believe in the existence of misfortune.

One bright autumn day Clara Westford sent her son and daughter on a shopping expedition to Winchester. She was pleased to see them employed and happy; for she

had no wish that any part of her burden should be borne by them. It was a relief to her to be alone, so that she might give way to her own sorrow, free from the loving scrutiny of those watchful eyes.

She sat in the Grange drawing-room, a large low-ceilinged apartment, with long windows opening on to the lawn.

The day was warm and bright; and the open windows admitted the pure air from the gardens and woodland. Clara Westford sat in a half-reclining position in a low arm-chair near one of the windows. A little table loaded with books was by her side; but the volumes lay there unopened and unheeded. She could not read; her thoughts were far away—on those terrible and unknown seas where the *Lily Queen* was sailing.

Never, perhaps, in the earliest bloom of her girlhood, had Clara Westford looked lovelier than she did to-day.

It was the subdued beauty of womanhood, calm and quiet as the mellow light of the moon compared with the full glory of the noontide sun.

She was exquisitely dressed, for she was too completely high-bred to neglect her toilette on any occasion. She was not a woman who made sorrow or anxiety an excuse for slovenly attire. Her chestnut hair was coiled in thick plaits at the back of her small classical head, and fastened with a simple tortoiseshell comb. Her silk dress was of a golden brown, which harmonized exquisitely with the fair clear complexion and chestnut hair—the brown which Millais has immortalized in the dress of his red-coated squire's fair-haired daughter. A large turquoise, set in a rim of lustreless gold, clasped the small white collar, and a stud of exactly the same fashion fastened each simple cuff of spotless cambric. A few costly rings, all of turquoise and gold, adorned the tapering white hands,

and these were the only ornaments worn by the Captain's wife.

She sat alone, thinking—O, how fondly, how mournfully!—of her absent husband, when suddenly the curtains of the window farthest from her were pushed aside with a jangling noise, and a man entered the room.

Clara Westford looked up, startled by that sound, and a half-stifled shriek burst from her lips.

"You here!" she cried. "*You* here!"

The intruder was no other than Rupert Godwin, the Lombard-street banker.

He advanced slowly towards the spot where Clara Westford sat. His dark face was just a little paler than usual, and there was a stern resolute look in his eyes.

"Yes," he answered quietly, "it is I, Clara Westford. After twenty years we meet face to face for the first time to-day, and I look once again upon the woman who has been the curse and torment of my life."

Clara Westford shrank back into the cushioned chair almost as if she had been recoiling from a blow.

"O, merciful Heaven!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands passionately; "after twenty years of happiness am I to hear that hated voice again?"

"Yes, Clara," answered the banker; "for twenty years there has been a truce. To-day the war begins again, and this time it shall not end until I am conqueror."

The Captain's wife clasped her hands before her face; but she uttered no further appeal. She sat shivering, as if chilled to the very heart by some sudden blast of freezing wind.

"Ah, Clara, you are as beautiful as ever, but you have lost some of your old haughty spirit," said the banker.

“The merchant captain’s wife is not so proud as the baronet’s daughter.”

“A hundred times more proud!” cried Clara, dropping her hands from her face, and looking suddenly at Rupert Godwin. “A hundred times more proud! For she has her husband’s honour to protect as well as her own.”

“Bravely spoken, Clara—nobly spoken! You are the same imperious beauty still, I see, and the conquest will be a noble one. This time I will not fail!”

“Why are you here?” cried Mrs. Westford. “How did you discover this place?”

“From your husband. But you shall know more of that by-and-by.”

“From my husband? Ah! he came to you, then?—you saw him before he sailed?”

“Yes; I saw him.”

“He deposited money to a large amount in your hands?”

The bunker looked at Clara Westford with an insolent smile.

“My dear Clara, you must surely be dreaming!” he exclaimed. “Your husband deposited no money in my hands, nor was he in a position to do so.”

“What do you mean?”

“Simply, that when Harley Westford came to me he was a beggar. He came to borrow money to pay for some part of the cargo of his ship, and he deposited with me the title-deeds of this estate, as a security for the amount advanced to him.”

“He borrowed money from you!” cried Clara, clasping her hands upon her forehead with a convulsive gesture.

“Why, he told me that he meant to lodge twenty thousand pounds in your hands!”

“He told you a falsehood, then; for the whole of his earnings were lost in some foreign speculations in which he had involved himself, and it was only with the help of borrowed money that he could start upon this new venture. Do not look at me with that incredulous stare, my dear Clara; I do not ask you to accept this fact on the simple evidence of my word. I have documents bearing your husband’s signature to prove the truth of what I state. When you hold those papers in your hands you may be able to believe me.”

“O, it’s too terrible!” exclaimed the wretched wife; “it is too bitter. Harley, my husband, under an obligation to you—to you, of all other men upon this earth!”

“Yes,” answered the banker, with a smile. “It was strange that he should come to me, was it not? Very strange! It was one of those startling accidents which go to make the drama of social life.”

There was a pause. Clara Westford was silent. She was thinking of her last interview with her husband, and recalling the words he had then spoken.

Could it be that he had deceived her as to the state of his affairs? Could it be, that, with the weakness and cowardice of intense affection, he had sought to hide from her the approach of ruin?

It might be so; such things had been. Love shrinks, with a cowardly weakness, from inflicting pain upon the thing it loves.

“He might have trusted me,” she thought sadly. “Did he think I should fear poverty that was to be shared with him? After twenty years of union can he know me so little as to think that?”

Clara Westford hated and despised Rupert Godwin, and she would have been inclined to disbelieve any assertion made by him to the detriment of the man she loved; but she ceased to doubt him when he boldly offered to produce her husband's signature in confirmation of his words.

"Let me see Harley's own handwriting in support of this statement," she said presently; "then, and not till then, can I believe you."

"All in good time, my dear Clara. You shall see your husband's signature, believe me; perhaps only too soon for your own comfort. But we need not forestall that time. In the meanwhile, let us look back upon the past. After twenty years of truce the war is to begin again; and this time it shall be a duel to the death. Let us look back upon the past, Clara Westford—let us recall that old story."

"What, Mr. Godwin!" cried the Captain's wife indignantly. "Are you not ashamed to recall the hateful part you played in that story?"

"I only want to prove to you how well I have remembered. Let me recall that story, Clara."

There was no answer. Mrs. Westford turned from him and covered her face with her hands once more, as if she would fain have shut out sight and sound; but, in a cold merciless voice, Rupert Godwin began thus:

"Twenty-two years ago, Clara Westford, I spent the autumn at a fashionable watering-place on the south coast. The place was crowded that season with all that was most elegant, most distinguished, most aristocratic. But even amongst that highborn crowd I did not find myself an intruder. The reputation of my father's wealth went with me, and there was a kind of golden glory about

my untitled name. I had been educated in the greatest cities of the world, and was completely a man of the world, with no vulgar prejudices as to religion or morals. My youth had been somewhat stormy, and those who pretended to know most about me whispered dark histories in which my name was mingled—not pleasantly. In a few words, Clara, I was not a man to be trifled with, or fooled, by a girl of seventeen."

There was a brief pause, and then the banker continued:

"There were many beautiful women at that pleasant seaside town; but the loveliest of them all, the acknowledged belle, the observed of all observers, was the only daughter of Sir John Ponsonby, a rich Yorkshire baronet of very old family. Need I tell you how lovely she was, Clara? She is lovely still; with a more subdued beauty, but with as great a charm as she bore in her brilliant youth. She was a dazzling creature. I met her at a charity-ball—on the sands—in the reading-rooms—on horseback with her father, a thoroughgoing Tory of the old school, and as proud as Lucifer or a Spanish hidalgo. I met her constantly, for I haunted all the places where there was any chance of seeing her. The very sight of that girl dazzled me like the sudden glory of the sun. I loved her, with a mad, wild, unreasonable passion; and I determined that she should be my wife."

For a moment Clara Westford uncovered her face, and looked at the banker with a quiet scornful smile.

"Ah, I understand the meaning of that smile, Clara," said Rupert Godwin. "I was presumptuous, was I not, when I determined to win this woman for my wife? But remember, she had fooled me on; she had smiled upon me, and encouraged me by her sweetest words, her brightest glances. She was surrounded by a crowd of admirers; but I was one of the most distinguished

amongst them; and it seemed to me that she singled me out from the rest, and took more pleasure in talking to me than to the others. There were strangers who thought so too; and the likelihood of our speedy marriage was soon the public talk of the place."

"She was a weak, frivolous girl," murmured Clara; "but she meant no wrong."

"She meant no wrong!" echoed the banker. "There are men who commit murder, and then declare they meant no wrong. This woman did me a deep and bitter wrong. She fed my mad passion, she encouraged my wild devotion; and then, when I went to her, confident, hopeful, blindly believing that I was beloved again—when I went to her and told her how dearly she was loved, she turned upon me, and slew me with a look of cold surprise, telling me that she was the promised wife of another man."

The banker paused for a few moments; then, in a suppressed voice, a voice which was low and hoarse with stifled passion, he proceeded:

"I was not the man to take this quietly, Clara Westford. I was not one of those puling creatures who avow their power to forget and forgive. In my heart there was no such thing as forgiveness; in my nature there was no such thing as forgetfulness. I left Clara Ponsonby with a tempest of passion raging in my breast. That night, after roaming alone for hours on the broad open sands, far away from the glimmering lights of the town, where no living creature but myself heard the long roar of the ocean—that night, with my clenched hand lifted to the stars of heaven, I swore a terrible oath. I swore that, sooner or later, Clara Ponsonby should be mine—not as my honoured wife, but mine by a less honourable tie. The cup of degradation she had offered to me—to *me*, the

proud descendant of a proud race—*her* lips should drain to the lowest dregs. I was not a man to work in the dark. I saw my lovely Clara next day, and told her of the oath that I had sworn. She too came of a proud race, and she defied me."

"She did," answered the Captain's wife, "as she defies you now."

"For six months the contest lasted," continued the banker. "For six months that silent warfare was waged. Wherever Clara Ponsonby was seen, I was seen near her. I followed her from place to place. Her father liked and trusted me, so she could not banish me from her presence without betraying her secret engagement to another—a man who was her inferior in station, and whom her father would have refused to admit as a claimant for his daughter's hand. Clara was dumb, therefore; and, however odious my presence might be, she was compelled to submit to its infliction. I stood behind her chair in her opera-box. I rode beside her carriage when she drove in the Park. I did *not* succeed in ousting the low-born rival for whose sake I had been rejected; but I *did* succeed in humiliating Miss Ponsonby in the eyes of the world. Before that season was over the fashionable circle in which Clara lived was busy with slanderous rumours against her fair fame. I had managed very cleverly. I had friends—sycophant followers—always ready to do my bidding. An idle jest, a significant shrug of the shoulders, a little damaging gossip at a club-dinner, and the business was accomplished. Before that season came to its close Clara Ponsonby's reputation was blighted. The poisonous whispers reached her father's ear—I took care they should; and the proud old man, believing in his daughter's disgrace, cast her from his household, declaring that he would never look on her face again."

A convulsive sobbing shook Clara Westford's frame; but she uttered no word—no cry.

"In that hour I fancied myself triumphant," continued Rupert Godwin. "Abandoned, desolate, ruined in reputation, I thought that Clara Ponsonby would have sought the luxurious home which she knew I had prepared against this day. My letters had told her of my hopes, my plans; the new home that awaited her; the passionate devotion that might still be hers. My emissaries watched her as she left her father's house; but —O, bitter anguish and disappointment!—it was not to me that she came. She went to Southampton, and embarked on board a steamer bound for Malta; and a month afterwards I read in the *Times* an announcement of the marriage of Harley Westford, captain of the merchant vessel *Adventurer*, to Clara Ponsonby. At Malta she had joined the man to whom she was engaged. His life had been spent far away from the circles in which she moved, and no breath of scandal against her had ever reached his ear. That, Clara, is the end of the first act of the drama. The second act began three months ago, when Harley Westford, your husband, the man for whose sake you insulted and scorned me, came into my office in Lombard-street."

Clara Westford suddenly rose from her seat and turned towards the banker, proud and defiant of look and gesture.

"Leave this house!" she exclaimed, pointing to the door. "It is disgraced and degraded by your presence. Twenty years ago, when you intruded yourself upon me, you found me in my father's house, from which I had no power to dismiss you. This house in my own, Rupert Godwin. I command you to leave it, and never again darken its threshold by your hated shadow!"

"Those are strong words, Clara, and I cannot do

otherwise than obey them. I go; but only for a time. The time will come when I may have a better right of entrance to this house. In the meanwhile, I depart; but before I do so, let me show you a paragraph in this newspaper, which may perhaps have some interest for you."

As he said this, Rupert Godwin handed Mrs. Westford a copy of the *Times*, in which one paragraph was marked by a heavy black line drawn against it with a pen.

The paragraph ran as follows:—

"The underwriters of Lloyd's are beginning to have serious fears about the trading vessel *Lily Queen*, which sailed from London Docks on the 27th of last June, bound for China, and has not since been heard of."

The paper dropped from Clara Westford's hands; she could read no farther, but with a long shriek of agony fell senseless on the floor.

"Ah, Clara!" exclaimed the banker, looking down at that prostrate form with a cruel smile upon his face, "I said truly that the second act of our life-drama has begun."

CHAPTER VII.

THE STOLEN LETTER.

The banker took no measures for reviving Clara Westford from the fainting-fit into which she had fallen after the perusal of that paragraph in the *Times*.

She had fallen backwards, and her pale still face was turned towards the ceiling.

Rupert Godwin knelt beside her, and examined that white statuesque face with a long and earnest scrutiny.

“Quite unconscious!” he exclaimed, as he lifted Mrs. Westford’s unresisting hand, and watched it fall inert and lifeless. “Death itself could scarcely be less conscious of surrounding events. Nothing could be better.”

The banker rose from his knees, and with a soft and cautious footstep walked slowly round the room.

It was charmingly furnished, and it bore the traces of constant occupation. There was an open work-table, an open piano, a box of water-colours, and upon a table by one of the windows there was an elegant little walnut-wood easel. In a comfortable corner near the fireplace stood a desk in different coloured woods, with an easy-chair before it. The lid of the desk was closed, but a bunch of keys hung from the lock.

“It looks like her desk,” muttered the banker, “and if so I can scarcely fail to find what I want.”

He glanced once more at the figure lying on the sunlit

floor.

Clara Westford had not stirred.

Then, with careful fingers, Rupert Godwin lifted the lid of the desk and looked within.

In a row of pigeon-holes before him he saw numerous packets of letters, some tied with common red tape, others with blue ribbon.

"Those are *his* letters," muttered the banker, with a sneer. "I would wager a small fortune that those are *his* letters which she has tied with that dainty blue ribbon. Sir John Ponsonby's haughty daughter can be as sentimental as a school-girl, I daresay, where her dashing Captain is concerned."

He took out one of the packets.

Yes, upon the uppermost envelope was written—"From my husband."

"Let me see how the fellow signs his name," said Rupert Godwin. "Perhaps he uses only initials, and I shall be balked that way. I must have his full signature."

The banker drew one of the letters from the packet, and took it from its envelope.

It was a very long letter, and it was signed in full —"Harley Westford."

"Yes, the Fates favour my schemes," muttered Rupert Godwin, as he put the single letter in his waistcoat-pocket, and replaced the packet in the pigeon-hole from which he had taken it.

Then, after one last look at Clara Westford, he left the room.

He went to the hall, where he rang a bell violently. A female servant hurried to answer his summons, and

started back in alarm at the sight of a stranger.

“I am an old friend of Mrs. Westford’s,” said Rupert Godwin; “but unhappily I am the bearer of very ill news. Your mistress has fainted; you had better run to her at once. Stay; what is the name of your doctor?”

“Doctor Sanderson, sir, in the village. He lives at the house with the green blinds, please sir. The first on the left as you pass the Seven Stars, please, sir.”

“I’ll send him, then, immediately.”

“Thank you, sir; thank you.”

The girl ran away, eager to be with her mistress; and the banker left the ill-fated house, whose peace had fled before his ill-omened coming.

He went to the village, and found the house where the surgeon lived. He left a message for that gentleman, and then walked to a little inn where he had left his dog-cart and groom.

He stepped into the vehicle and drove towards Winchester, whence he had come that day. On the road, a little pony-carriage passed him, driven by a girl with bright golden hair, set off by a coquettish little turban hat. A young man was lolling by her side.

That bright happy-looking girl was Violet Westford.

The banker started as if he had seen a ghost, and looked back after the vehicle with an eager gaze.

“Yes, that girl must be her daughter,” he thought. “How the sight of her recalls the past!—the very day when I met Clara Ponsonby riding by her father’s side—the day when sudden love sprang up in my heart, an ‘Adam at his birth.’ And from that hour to this I have loved her. Yes, I have loved her, though hatred and vengeful thoughts have mingled strangely with my love. I

love her; but I would bring her to my feet. I worship her; and yet I would humiliate her to the very dust."

With such thoughts as these in his mind, Rupert Godwin drove back to Winchester, and alighted at the chief hotel in the old city.

He had come to Winchester; but not alone. Crime has terrors and penalties which even the cleverest criminal cannot escape. Rupert Godwin knew that he was to some extent in the power of his old clerk Jacob Danielson, and he determined to make that clerk his accomplice.

"If the old man is with me in my schemes, and accepts a reward for his service, he can never betray me," he argued with himself.

The banker knew that Jacob Danielson was the slave of two passions—two fatal passions, which render a man the easy prey of any tempter.

These two passions were avarice and the love of strong drink. Jacob Danielson was, in his pettifogging way, a miser; and he was an habitual brandy-drinker.

To get brandy, or to get money, he would have been tempted to sell his soul to the legendary fiend of mediæval times, who seems to have been always on the look-out for that kind of bargain.

The banker had watched his clerk almost as closely as the clerk had watched him, and he knew the weak points of Danielson's character.

"He would like to be my master," thought Rupert Godwin, "and he possesses knowledge that might give him a powerful hold over me; but, in spite of that, I will make him my slave."

In the mean time the banker had determined upon conciliating his clerk in every way. The hand of steel in

the velvet glove was exemplified by Mr. Godwin's policy. He had brought Danielson to Winchester with him; and that gentleman was enjoying free quarters at the hotel, and drinking as much brandy as he pleased to call for.

The banker's policy was very simple. He wanted to destroy the only creature he feared, and he thought that he should be able to effect that work of destruction through the agency of Danielson's own vices.

He found the clerk sitting in a parlour at the hotel—a very pleasant apartment, looking into a garden. A decanter half full of brandy stood on the table; but the clerk was sitting in a moody attitude, with his arms folded, and he was not drinking.

The banker looked at his subordinate with a suspicious glance. Rupert Godwin did not care to see his clerk thus deeply absorbed in thought.

Sharp and rapid in all his habits and manners as Danielson ordinarily was, he seemed this afternoon almost like a creature absorbed in a dream. He turned his eyes slowly towards the banker, and looked at him with a strange unseeing gaze, almost as a blind man might have looked at the sun with his dull sightless orbs.

"Why, Jacob," cried Rupert Godwin, "what's the matter with you? You look like a man who has newly awakened from a trance."

"I have been in a trance," answered the clerk in a dreamy tone. "I was out in the street just now, and I saw a ghost pass by."

"A ghost?"

"Yes; a ghost, such as men often see in the broad sunlight—the ghost of my dead youth. I saw a woman—the living image of the only one creature I ever loved; and she seemed to me like a phantom."

The clerk sighed as he stretched out his tremulous hand to the decanter and refilled his glass.

“But there’s comfort here,” he muttered; “there’s always comfort in this. There’s not many sorrows that this won’t drown, if a man can only get enough of it.”

Never had the banker seen his clerk so deeply moved. “Why, Jacob,” he exclaimed, “this does indeed surprise me! I thought you were a man of iron—hard as iron, pitiless as iron, strong as iron; I never knew you had a heart.”

“No more I have,” answered the clerk; “not now—not now. I had a heart once, and it was broken. I was a fool once, and I was made to pay for my folly. But that’s long gone by. Come, Mr. Godwin, I’m myself again. You don’t pay me to dream; you pay me to work, and I’m ready for your work, whatever it is. You didn’t bring me down to Winchester for my pleasure, or for yours. You brought me because you had something for me to do. What is it? that’s the question.”

“A question not to be answered just yet, Jacob,” replied the banker. “We’ll dine first, and go to business afterwards. The evenings are chilly, so I’ll order a fire.”

The order was given, and the fire lighted; a well-chosen little dinner was served presently, and the two men seated themselves at the table, which glittered with cut glass and massive plate.

“Strange,” thought Rupert Godwin, as he looked furtively at the wizen face of the clerk, “this man talks of the ghost of his dead youth! Have not I too, seen the phantom of the past—that girl with the violet eyes and the golden hair? She seemed to me like the ghost of the Clara Ponsonby I fell in love with two-and-twenty years ago.”

The clerk was by this time quite himself again, and he had resumed that half-servile, half-ironical manner which he generally had with his master.

“This is indeed luxury,” he said, rubbing his dry withered palms, as he looked from the handsomely furnished room to the glittering dinner-table. “It is not every day that I dine like this. You are a good master, Mr. Godwin.”

“I mean to be a liberal one,” answered the banker; “and I will pay you well, if you serve me faithfully. I make no pretence of generosity, but I will pay handsomely for handsome service.”

“Good, Mr. Godwin; the wisest men are those who pretend the least.”

The banker knew that it was useless to play the hypocrite with Jacob Danielson. Clever as Rupert Godwin was, he always felt that the clerk’s sharp rat-like eyes could fathom the remotest recesses of his mind.

There was only *one* secret that he believed to be hidden from Jacob Danielson. That was the secret of Harley Westford’s disappearance.

Little more was said during dinner, for the waiters of the hotel were in attendance throughout the repast. Mr. Godwin kept his clerk’s glass filled with a succession of expensive wines; and the waiters opened their eyes to their widest extent as they saw the little wizened man pour the sparkling liquids down his throat as fast as they could supply them.

The banker himself did not drink; and this fact did not escape Jacob Danielson, who smiled a cunning smile as he perceived his employer’s abstinence.

At last the cloth was removed, and dessert was placed upon the table—the conventional dessert peculiar to

provincial hotels, flanked by a decanter of tawny port, and a jug of claret which the head-waiter declared to be genuine Lafitte, and which figured in the wine-carte at eighteen shillings a bottle. The head-waiter hovered about the table for a few minutes after that noted claret had been set before Mr. Godwin, poked the fire with a profoundly studious air, as of a man who had given a lifetime of study to the science of poking fires, looked meditatively at the two gentlemen as if deliberating upon the possibility of their wanting something else, and anon silently departed.

Then, with the curtains closely drawn, and the waxen lights gleaming from their tall silver branches, the two men drew their chairs closer to the hearth, and settled themselves for the evening.

"Now then for business," exclaimed the clerk, as the sound of the head-waiter's boots died away in the distance.

The banker was not quick to reply to this address. He was sitting looking at the fire, brooding darkly. His task was not an easy one, for he was about to ask Danielson to become his accomplice in a crime.

At last he spoke.

"Danielson," he said, gravely, "you and I have been involved in many transactions, some of which the world would scarcely call honest."

"Some of which the world would call decidedly dishonest," answered the clerk, with a sinister grin.

"But, then, is it an honest world?" asked the banker.

"O yes; a very honest world, until it is found out."

"Ay, there's the difference. The detected villain is a scoundrel only fit for the gallows; the undetected villain

may pass for a saint."

There was a pause, and then the banker said, in a tone which he endeavoured to render indifferent:

"You remember that merchant captain—the man called Harley Westford—who came to Wilmingdon Hall to demand the return of that money which he had deposited with me?"

"O yes; I remember him perfectly."

"I am sorry to tell you that the poor fellow is dead."

"Indeed!"

Jacob Danielson looked very steadfastly at the face of his employer, but there was no surprise in the tone in which he uttered that one word "indeed."

"Yes; the *Lily Queen* has been lost, and all hands with her."

"But how do you know that Harley Westford was on board the *Lily Queen*?"

"How do I know it? Why, because he was captain and owner of the vessel, and because he declared his intention of sailing with her, without fail. Why should he not sail in the *Lily Queen*?"

"I can't imagine any reason," answered the clerk, with his steadfast gaze still fixed on the banker's face, which had grown suddenly pallid. "I really can't imagine any reason; but then, you know, such singular things happen in this life. There may have been something—some accident, to prevent Captain Westford's departure."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Rupert Godwin. "Utterly impossible! I tell you, man, Harley Westford sailed in the *Lily Queen*, and has gone down to the bottom of the sea with her and her cargo."

"And in that case Harley Westford's heirs may come upon you at any moment for the twenty thousand pounds deposited in your hands."

"They might come upon me for it, if they had any evidence that it was ever placed in my hands," replied the banker. "But what if they have no such evidence?"

"There is the receipt which you gave Harley Westford."

"Yes; and which has no doubt gone down with him to the depth of the ocean."

"What if he lodged that receipt in other hands before sailing on his Chinese expedition?"

"*That* is scarcely likely. No man ever foresees his own doom. At any rate, I speculate upon the chance that Harley Westford carried the receipt with him, and that it perished with its owner. In that case, there is only one person who knows of the twenty thousand pounds—and that person is yourself. Can I trust you?"

"You have trusted me before."

"Yes; and with important secrets, but never with such a secret as this. Will the gift of a thousand pounds, to be paid in ten instalments at intervals of six months—will such a gift as that buy your fidelity?"

"It will," answered Jacob Danielson.

"Then I will execute any deed you choose to draw up, engaging myself to pay you that money. And now, I want something more than your silence. I want your service."

"You shall have both."

"Good!" replied the banker. "Now, then, listen to what I have to say. When Harley Westford deposited his fortune in my hands, he also deposited the title-deeds of a small estate in this county. Those deeds and that estate

must be mine."

"But how so?"

"By virtue of a deed executed by Harley Westford before his departure—a deed, giving me sole possession of the estate if a certain sum, lent by me to him, was not repaid within six months of the date of his signature."

"O, indeed! The estate will be yours by virtue of such a deed as that!"

"Yes; a document formally drawn up by a lawyer, and signed by you as witness."

"But I never witnessed any such deed," answered the clerk.

"Your memory fails you to-night, my dear Danielson; you will have a better memory to-morrow, especially if I give you fifty pounds on account of our bargain."

The banker said this with a sinister smile. The clerk fully understood him.

"Make it a hundred," he exclaimed, "and you will find that I have an excellent memory."

"So be it. And now I want you to try and remember if you have any friend—a lawyer's clerk, we'll say—who knows how to draw up a legal document in which there shall be no flaw, and who is also clever at imitating the handwriting of other people."

"Let me think a little before I answer that question," replied Danielson.

He sat for some minutes thinking deeply, with his sharp eyes fixed upon the fire.

"Yes," he said at last, "I do know such a man."

"And you will have the deed prepared and executed at once?"

"I will. The man will want money for his work."

"He shall be paid handsomely," answered the banker.

"And how about the signature which he is to imitate?"

Rupert Godwin took the stolen letter from his pocket, and tore off the Captain's autograph. This he handed to Jacob Danielson.

"You understand what you have to do?" he asked.

"Perfectly."

No more was said. The clerk's brains seemed no more affected by the wine that he had taken than if he had been drinking so much water. He sat looking, sometimes at the fire, sometimes at the thoughtful face of his employer; and every now and then he refilled his glass from one of the decanters standing near him.

But, drink as deeply as he might, his mind seemed entirely unaffected by what he drank. Rupert Godwin, watching him furtively even in the midst of his own reverie, perceived this.

"The man is made of iron," he thought, as he went to his own room, after bidding Jacob Danielson good-night. "With many of my secrets in the possession of such a man as this, how can I ever know rest?"

And then, after a pause, he muttered:

"Rest!—rest! When have I ever rested since—"

Only a groan finished that broken sentence.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DAY OF DESOLATION.

Bitter, most bitter, was the anguish which awaited Violet and Lionel Westford when they returned from their pleasant little excursion to Winchester.

They had gone forth that morning in all the light-hearted carelessness of youth, pleased with the beauty of the fair world in which they lived, scarcely able to believe that sorrow, deep and lasting sorrow, could exist in so lovely a universe.

But now the blow, the first most cruel blow which crushes out the warm life of youth, had fallen.

Never again could these two bright young creatures feel as they had felt; never again could they almost doubt the existence of sorrow.

The cup of anguish was offered to their young lips—the bitter draught was to be drained to its uttermost dregs.

Violet found her mother lying once more on the bed to which she had been so long a prisoner. The doctor had attended her; but he could do nothing. The miserable woman lay in a stony stupor, with her face turned towards the wall. No passionate sob relieved the anguish of her aching heart. She suffered in silence. It seemed as if her heart was changed to stone.

The surgeon, who had known Violet and Lionel from their childhood, was waiting in the drawing-room, and

begged to see them before he left the house. They went to him without delay, and found him seated near a table, with a newspaper in his hand.

“Mamma has had some bad news,” exclaimed Violet, whose face was wet with the tears she had shed at the aspect of her mother’s grief. “O, Mr. Sanderson, I am sure that it is so. This is no common illness. Some one has brought news, bad news, of papa. For pity’s sake, do not torture us by this agony of suspense; let us know the worst.”

“Yes,” said Lionel, with forced calmness, “let us know the worst.”

The surgeon looked at them with sad, compassionate eyes.

“Perhaps it is better so,” he said thoughtfully. “The news that has so affected your poor mother is not of a very certain nature,” he continued, “and may not be so bad as it seems. We can still hope for the best, Miss Westford. Providence is very merciful, and joy sometimes is near at hand when we are in the depths of despair.”

“Tell us the worst,” cried Lionel passionately; “you are trifling with us, Mr. Sanderson.”

The surgeon placed the newspaper in the young man’s hand.

“Read that,” he said, pointing to the marked paragraph respecting the *Lily Queen*; “and may God grant that it is only a false alarm!”

Lionel read the paragraph—not once only, but three separate times; and a deadly chill crept to his heart as he read. Presently he felt a little hand trembling on his shoulder. He turned and saw Violet’s white face staring blankly at the fatal newspaper.

“O, no; no, no!” she cried piteously; “not lost—not lost! My father—my dear, dear father!”

“Let us hope not, dear Miss Westford,” answered the surgeon, in the most cheering tones he could assume. “These business men are always very quick to take alarm. Let us trust, my dear friends—let us trust in Heaven that all may be well.”

“No,” cried Lionel vehemently, “I will trust no longer. Something tells me that my father is lost. Can I forget my mother’s illness? That illness was caused solely by a presentiment that harm would come to my father upon this voyage. For twenty years she had been a sailor’s wife, yet never before had she felt such a presentiment of evil. I was a presumptuous fool, and I laughed at my mother’s fears. I know now that they were well founded. My father’s ship has been wrecked; she and all her crew have perished.”

The young man was interrupted by a hysterical shriek from Violet, who fell sobbing into his arms.

“You will kill your sister, if you talk like that, Mr. Lionel Westford,” exclaimed the doctor angrily.

Lionel was silent. He carried Violet to her own room; and that night Mr. Sanderson had to attend two patients at the Grange.

As for the young man himself, a terrible despair seemed to have fallen upon him. All through that long miserable night he paced up and down the empty rooms absorbed in melancholy thoughts.

“Why was I not a sailor like him?” he thought. “Why was I not with him in the hour of trial and danger? It might have been my fate to save him, or at the worst to perish with him! I feel myself a base coward when I think of my idle luxurious existence, and remember how my

father has hazarded his life to earn the money I have been squandering at University wine-parties and boating excursions. And now that noble life has been lost in the last effort to increase the fortune of his children."

Miserable and dreary were the days and weeks that succeeded that fatal visit of Rupert Godwin to the Grange.

For a long time Clara Westford and her daughter lay in their darkened rooms, victims to a kind of low fever.

During this weary time Lionel was something more than an ordinary son and brother to the mother and sister he adored.

Night after night when the hired nurses had grown weary of their task—when the servants of the household, sincerely as they were attached to their mistress and her daughter, had from mere exhaustion been compelled to abandon their watch, the devotion of the young man still sustained him. There was something wonderful in this patient self-abnegation in one who, until the day of calamity, had seemed so light-hearted and frivolous.

Lionel Westford's task was not confined to watching in the sick-room. He made many journeys to London during that weary time. Again and again he visited every place where there was any hope of obtaining tidings of the missing vessel; but no good news rewarded his patience, and before the time of his mother's recovery he had learned the worst.

A fragment of the lost vessel had been found floating near a rocky coast—a fragment which bore the name of the *Lily Queen*.

With a broken heart Lionel Westford returned to the Grange. Bitter as this loss was to him, the thought of his mother's anguish was almost a deeper grief.

He returned to her, and watched once more by her sick-bed. This time he could watch and tend her day after day, night after night. He had no longer need to leave her, for he knew the worst.

At last, after the long intervals of stupor and delirium were past, Clara Westford was pronounced well enough to be removed from her bed to a chair near the fire.

The windows were closed. Without all was dark and dreary. The trees were leafless; and the December wind sighed mournfully amongst the bare branches. The sky was of a dull iron grey—no glimmer of sunshine relieved its coldness.

But Clara Westford's room was no comfortless apartment, even in the depth of winter. Voluminous curtains half shrouded the windows, and the invalid was propped up by pillows in a luxurious easy-chair, that had been wheeled close to the low fireplace of polished steel, in which the red flames were reflected with a cheerful dancing motion that was very pleasant to see. The broad marble mantelpiece was crowded with valuable Oriental china, rare old Japanese monsters, and curious specimens of crackle, brought home by the Captain for the gratification of the wife to please whom had been the chief delight of his existence. A portrait of Harley Westford smiled with the sailor's own bright genial smile above the chimney-piece; and a tapestry screen, of Violet's workmanship, protected the invalid from the heat of the fire.

Clara had not been seated long in that comfortable chimney-corner when the door was opened, and Lionel came into the apartment, half-leading, half-carrying, his sister. Violet had also risen to-day from her sick-bed, but not for the first time. Her illness had not been quite so long nor so severe as that of her mother, and she had been the first to rise.

But she was still very feeble, and in her loose white robes she looked wan and phantom-like. She was no longer the brilliant sunny-haired girl who had fascinated the young painter at the Winchester ball.

“Violet,” exclaimed Mrs. Westford, “how pale and changed you are! O, my darling girl, you too have been ill?”

“Yes, dear mother.”

“And I was never told of your illness!” murmured Clara, reproachfully.

“Why should you have been made more wretched by any such knowledge, dear mother?” said Lionel. “Violet has been taken care of.”

“Yes, indeed, dear Lionel,” exclaimed the girl, lifting her eyes with a grateful glance to her brother’s face; for she knew that during that bitter time Lionel had been the good genius of the household.

“My poor Violet,” murmured the mother, clasping her daughter’s hand with quiet tenderness,—“my poor Violet, the sunshine of life has been clouded very early for you. I have had twenty years of unsullied brightness, but for you the storm-cloud has come very soon. My poor children—my beloved children!”

The mother laid her weary head on her son’s shoulder. Lionel drew his arm round her with a caressing gesture. Violet had sunk upon a low ottoman at her mother’s feet; and, grouped thus, the three were silent for some moments.

Lionel was pale as death. The dreaded question would be asked presently, and the answer must be given.

He wondered that his mother had not questioned him long before this.

Alas for her broken heart, the reason of her silence was her instinctive consciousness that all hope was past. If there had been joyful tidings, her son would have only too gladly imparted them. And then Clara Westford had watched the young man's face, and she had seen the traces of despair imprinted there only too plainly. She clasped the strong hand that was supporting her feeble frame.

"Lionel," she murmured, "why do you try to hide the truth from me? Do you think I cannot understand my children's looks, and read my sorrows in their sad faces? There is no news of your father!"

"No, mother; there is no news of—my father."

"But there is news," gasped Clara, "of his ship!"

"Only the saddest tidings," exclaimed the young man, sinking on his knees beside his mother's chair. "O, mother—mother! for our sakes try to endure this calamity. Look up, dear mother, and be comforted. Remember, *we have only you*."

Those last words told all. Clara Westford knew that she was a widow.

CHAPTER IX.

A PITILESS CLAIMANT.

After that sad scene in Mrs. Westford's bedchamber, peace seemed to reign in the household of the Grange.

Bitter and profound was the grief felt by each member of that little household; but the heroic hearts battled bravely with their sorrow. Very little was said of the lost husband and father. Those who had so dearly loved him, who now so deeply lamented him, dared not speak that familiar name; but he reigned supreme in the thoughts of all.

In Clara Westford's bedchamber a black curtain hung before the sailor's portrait. Another portrait in the drawing-room was also shrouded in the same manner.

Violet looked very pale and fragile in her deep mourning robes. Her golden hair gleamed with all its old brightness under the black crape bonnet; but there was a settled sadness in the dark blue eyes which had once beamed with such bewitching smiles.

Everyone in the neighbourhood of the Grange now knew that Harley Westford's ship had been lost, and many friends gathered round the widow to condole with her in the hour of her affliction.

But, alas, their presence only tortured her. She wanted to be alone—alone with her despair, alone with the image of her lost husband. If she had been of the old Catholic faith, she would have gladly fled to the quiet

shelter of some convent; where the remainder of her joyless days might have been devoted to charitable works and pious meditations, and where no sound of the clamorous outer world might have reached her weary ears.

She endured her grief in silence, but the anguish was not the less keen. The thought of her loss was ever present to her—not to be put aside even for a moment. She spent days in wandering listlessly from room to room, recalling the happy hours which had been spent with *him* in each familiar chamber. Everything reminded her of him, every association was torture. Even the society of her children afforded no consolation to her. Their burden was not like hers, she said to herself. The future might bring them new hope; for her all hope, all joy, was buried with the past.

Amongst the friends who came to the Grange was a Mr. Maldon, a retired attorney, who had made a large fortune in Chancery practice, and who was a person of some importance in the neighbourhood.

This gentleman questioned Clara about her husband's property. What proceedings was she about to take? What was the extent of her children's fortune?

Then Clara related to him Rupert Godwin's extraordinary statement about the money advanced by him to Harley Westford, and the title-deeds lodged in his hands as a security for that loan.

"Strange!" exclaimed Mr. Maldon. "I always thought your husband had saved a comfortable little fortune."

"I thought the same," answered Clara, "and I think so still. Upon the day of his departure my dear husband told me he was about to deposit a sum of twenty thousand pounds in the hands of Rupert Godwin."

"And Mr. Godwin denies having received that money?"

"He does; and he further declares my husband to be his debtor. But I will never believe it, unless I see the proof in Harley's own handwriting."

"My dear Mrs. Westford, this is all very mysterious," exclaimed the lawyer. "I don't see how we can possibly doubt such a man as Mr. Godwin. His position is that of one of the commercial princes of this country. He would not be likely to advance any false assertion with regard to his claims upon your husband."

"I do not know that. I have a very bad opinion of Rupert Godwin," Mrs. Westford answered coldly.

"You know him, then?"

"I knew him once, very long ago; and I knew him then to be one of the meanest and worst of men."

The lawyer looked at Clara with a bewildered stare. "That is very strong language, my dear Mrs. Westford."

"This matter is one upon which I feel very strongly. I believe that my husband lodged twenty thousand pounds in Rupert Godwin's hands; and I believe also that Rupert Godwin is quite capable of cheating myself and my children out of that money."

"Well, well, my dear Mrs. Westford," exclaimed the bewildered attorney, "I think you allow your prejudices to mislead you in this matter. But in any case, I will make it my business to go up to town and see Mr. Godwin immediately. You shall be protected from any attempted wrong. I liked and respected your husband. I love and admire yourself and your children. And you shall not be cheated. No, no, you shall not be cheated; old Stephen Maldon must indeed be changed, if he can be done by the sharpest banker in London."

The lawyer lost no time in paying a visit to the City, where he had a long interview with Rupert Godwin. The result of that interview was that the banker showed Stephen Maldon a deed signed by Harley Westford, and duly witnessed by Jacob Danielson, and by John Spence, a lawyer's clerk. The document bore the date of June 26th, in the previous year.

This deed gave Rupert Godwin full power to take possession of the Grange estate, pictures, plate, furniture, and all appertaining to house and homestead, on or after the 25th March in the present year, unless the sum of six thousand five hundred pounds was paid to him in the interim.

It was now late in January. For only two months more would the widow and orphans be secure in their once happy home.

Mr. Maldon was a very clever lawyer; but he could see nothing in the deed shown him by Rupert Godwin that would justify any dispute of the banker's claim.

The catastrophe seemed very terrible, but none the less inevitable because it was a hard thing for the widow and orphans. The law does not take widows and orphans into any special consideration. The estate must be abandoned to Mr. Godwin, unless the six thousand five hundred pounds could be paid on or before the ensuing quarter-day.

Mr. Maldon searched amongst the Captain's papers at the Grange, but he could not find any document calculated to throw the smallest light on the sailor's affairs. He called upon the Winchester attorney who had made Captain Westford's will, and carefully studied the wording of that document.

The will left all property, real and personal, to Clara, who was appointed sole executrix. But the will was dated

a year earlier than the deed in the possession of Mr. Godwin, and there was no evidence that the sailor was possessed of any property except his Hampshire estate, when he sailed on his fatal voyage.

The lawyer knew that men have often deceived their wives as to their pecuniary position. Might not Harley Westford have invented that story of the twenty thousand pounds, in order to lull those he loved with a false sense of peace and security?

“A generous, impulsive sailor would be the worst possible man of business,” thought Stephen Maldon. “What more likely than that Harley Westford was a ruined man, while all the world fancied him a rich one?”

Meanwhile, the weeks sped by. Soon, very soon, the 25th of March would be at hand.

Clara Westford knew full well that she must expect no mercy from Rupert Godwin.

The heroism of her nature asserted itself, and she prepared herself with calm resignation to leave the home where she had been so unspeakably happy.

She had no money of her own—positively none; for she had fled from her father’s roof to become the wife of Harley Westford, and had been disinherited by him in favour of a grandchild, the daughter of an only son, who died at two-and-twenty years of age, leaving a baby girl, on whom stern Sir John Ponsonby doted with senile fondness.

Never had the sailor heard a hint or a whisper of that cruel slander which had blighted Clara Ponsonby’s youth —never had he heard the association of her name with that of the notorious young *roué*, Rupert Godwin.

From the moment of her marriage, Sir John Ponsonby’s daughter disappeared entirely from the circles in which

she had been once a star of some magnitude.

She had gone to her husband quite penniless, and he had loved her more fondly than if she had been dowered with a million.

Now, when she examined into the state of her affairs, now that she was widowed and alone, and had no longer Harley's strong arm to lean upon, she found that her circumstances were indeed desperate.

The yearly bills of the tradespeople who supplied the Grange were all unpaid, and amounted to some hundreds. The servants' wages must also be paid; and to meet these claims Clara Westford had no money whatever.

The little stock of ready-money which her husband had left with her was entirely spent. He had promised to send his wife remittances from time to time, as it had been his habit to do; but he, and any money he possessed, had gone down to the fathomless depths of the ocean with the good ship *Lily Queen* and all on board her.

Only one resource remained to the widow. Her jewels, the costly gifts of a generous husband, these alone remained, and these must be sold in order that the tradespeople and servants might be paid.

There was a bitter pain in parting with these trinkets, every one of which had a tender association of its own.

But Clara Westford bore this sharp pain with quiet resignation. She arranged her jewel-box, and delivered it to her old friend Mr. Maldon, with instructions for the sale of the jewels at some London auction-room. They were sold, amongst others, at Debenham and Storr's, as the property of "a lady going abroad."

She was, indeed, going abroad—abroad into a world that to her inexperienced steps must needs be a trackless wilderness, full of pitiless thorns and brambles.

The valuables thus disposed of realized about four hundred pounds. With this sum Mrs. Westford discharged every claim upon her; leaving a balance of some thirty pounds.

Thirty pounds! And with this pitiful sum the widow and orphans, who had never known what it was to have a wish unfulfilled that money could gratify, were to begin the battle of life!

CHAPTER X.

HIDDEN IN THE YEW-TREE.

It was the eve of the 25th of March—that day whose approach had been so dreaded by Clara Westford and her children,—the day on which they were to be banished for ever from their happy home.

As yet the banker had given no notice of his intentions with regard to his victims. But Clara knew how little mercy she had to expect from him, and she had determined on saving herself and her children the agony of humiliation.

She would not wait for Rupert Godwin to act. She would not be turned out of her happy home by the man whose blighting influence had darkened her youth. She determined therefore, to leave the Grange early on the morning of the 25th.

But when she announced this determination to Violet, the girl expressed considerable surprise.

“Why should we be in such a hurry to leave the dear old place?” Violet exclaimed. “This Mr. Godwin may not press his claim upon the Grange. They say he is enormously rich, and surely he would be happy to let us stay here till he has a tenant for the place. We may be allowed to live here for some time to come, dear mother, till you are better and stronger, and more fit to face the world.”

Mrs. Westford shook her head.

“No, Violet,” she answered firmly; “I will not remain one hour under this roof when it becomes the property of Rupert Godwin.”

“Mamma, you speak as if you knew this Mr. Godwin?”

“I know that he is one of the vilest of men,” answered Mrs. Westford. “Do not question me further, Violet; my resolution is not to be shaken upon this point. Believe me when I assure you that I am acting for the best. And now, write to your brother, dear, and ask him to meet us at the Waterloo Terminus to-morrow at one o’clock.”

Lionel had been in London for the last few weeks, endeavouring to obtain a situation in some office.

But the young man, highly educated though he was, found it extremely difficult to procure any kind of employment, however humble.

His University education availed him little. London seemed to swarm with clever young men, all engaged in the struggle for daily bread. Lionel Westford’s heart sank within him as he made application after application, only to fail alike in all.

For every situation that offered there seemed a hundred competitors. And ninety-nine out of this hundred must endure the misery of failure.

Lionel had secured a very cheap and humble lodging on the Surrey side of the Thames, and had made arrangements for the reception of his mother and sister as soon as they left the Grange.

O, what a dreary change was that darksome London lodging, after the luxurious country-house, the lovely gardens, the horses and grooms, the dogs and guns, and all those things which are so especially dear to a young man!

On his own account, however, Lionel Westford never once complained. His only thought was of his mother and sister; his most earnest desire that he might be enabled to shield *them* from all the bitterest ills of poverty.

He thought very seriously of his future career. His classical learning seemed unlikely to be of the smallest use to him; unless, like Goldsmith and Johnson, he accepted the slavery of a schoolmaster's drudge. How bitterly he regretted his careless youth, his want of a profession, which would give him at least something! He asked himself whether there was yet time for him to adopt a profession. There was the Church. Yes; but he must waste two or three years before he could hope for a curacy worth from fifty to a hundred per annum. There was the law; but, alas, he was too familiar with the proverbial miseries of briefless youth idling in the garrets of the Temple.

It was a living he wanted, an immediate living, and in search of this he tramped the streets of London with untiring feet; but day by day went by, and he seemed no nearer to the object of his desire.

The afternoon of the 24th of March was dull and cheerless. The wind howled among the branches of the old trees about the Grange; the grey sky was cold and sunless.

Yet upon this afternoon, cheerless and cold though it was, Violet Westford opened the little garden-gate leading out into the forest, for the first time for many months.

Never since her illness had she seen or heard of the artist, George Stanmore.

She had fully expected that he would have come to the Grange to inquire about her during that long illness; and

she had contrived to ask Lionel, in an apparently careless manner, if he had heard anything of his friend Mr. Stanmore.

But the answer had been in the negative. George had therefore taken no steps to discover the cause of Violet's absence from her favourite forest haunts. This seeming neglect and indifference had cruelly stung the girl's heart.

"His pretended attachment to me was only a passing fancy, perhaps," she thought; "and I daresay he was amused by my sentimental folly in believing all his protestations of regard. I can understand now why he shrank from seeing my mother, and making an open avowal of his love."

The idea that she had been the dupe of a sentimental delusion was very bitter to the girl's sensitive mind. Her pride was outraged, and from the time of her recovery she had shunned the forest pathways, with an obstinate determination to avoid all meetings with her false lover.

But now that she was going to leave the Grange for ever, an irresistible impulse took possession of her, and she felt that she could not quit the neighbourhood of the forest without making some endeavour to ascertain the cause of George Stanmore's neglect.

Might not he, too, have been ill? Or might he not have been compelled to leave the forest? It was almost easier to believe anything than that he could be false.

Thus it was that Miss Westford's love overcame her pride; and once more she opened the little gate leading to her beloved woodland—the sweet scene which had been familiar and dear to her from infancy.

The forest pathways looked dreary this cold March afternoon, but the change in the aspect of the woodland was not so striking as the change in her who now passed

through that rustic gateway.

The brilliant girl, whose smiling face was once like the sunlight, looked now wan and pale as some misty shape that glides about the mountain-tops in the evening dimness.

She walked with feeble steps along the grassy path, for the beating of her heart seemed to paralyze her strength. She went straight to the cottage where the landscape-painter had lodged; but the walk was a long one, and the twilight was gathering fast when she reached the modest little habitation, nestling amongst grand old trees.

The firelight from the cottage window streamed out upon the chill gray twilight, and there was a look of homeliness and comfort in the aspect of the simple place.

A sudden pang pierced through Violet's heart as she looked at that cosy little cottage, with the neat, well stocked garden, and the red firelight in the window.

"If my mother and I had such a home as that, we might think ourselves very happy," she thought; "and yet I daresay the people who live here have often envied our wealth and luxury."

A woman was standing at the open door of the cottage as Violet approached the gate, and she came out into the pathway to welcome her visitor.

"Lor, Miss Westford!" she exclaimed, "you a'most frightened me, standing there so dark and ghostly like. Do step in, miss, and rest yourself a bit by the fire. It's quite chilly these March afternoons. How sad it do seem to see your black dress, and to think of the poor dear kind free-spoken gentleman that's gone! Ah, deary me, deary me, he were a good friend to all us poor folks, and there's many will miss him in these parts. Take a chair close to the fire, miss. I am so glad to see you getting about once

more, though you're looking but sadly yet. I was at the Grange many times to ask after you during your illness."

Violet's heart beat convulsively. She began to think that George Stanmore had employed this woman as his messenger.

"It was very good of you to inquire after me," she faltered.

"Lor, miss! wasn't it likely I should be wishful to know how you was? Haven't I known you ever since you was a little bit of a child? and hasn't your dear ma been a good friend to me times and often? and didn't your pa send me a bottle of his own old East-Indy Madeery, last Christmas was a twelvemonth, when he heard I was ailing?"

In all this there was no mention of Mr. Stanmore. Violet's heart sank. She could not bring herself to question the simple dame, and she was not sufficiently skilled in diplomacy to extort the information she was so eager to obtain without direct questioning. She looked hopelessly round the comfortable little cottage chamber, wondering what she could say next. She was very pale; but the red light of the fire gave a false glow to her face, and the good-natured cottager did not perceive her visitor's agitation.

"How neatly you keep your cottage, Mrs. Morris!" Violet said at last, feeling that she must say something. "It's quite pleasant to see your place, it looks such a picture of comfort."

"You're very good to say so, miss, I'm sure," answered Mrs. Morris. "But talking of pictures, and talking of comfort, we ain't half as comfortable now, since we've lost our lodger."

Violet's heart gave a great bound. He was gone, then! But how—and where?

“You’ve lost your lodger?” she said. “You mean Mr. Stanmore?”

“Yes, miss. Mr. Stanmore, that painter gentleman. He left us all of a sudden, the very first week as you was taken ill; and, what’s more, it was against his own wishes as he went.”

“Against his own wishes! How so?”

“Why, you see, miss, this is how it was. I was ironing in that window one afternoon, when I saw a dark, foreign-looking gentleman standing at our gate, and with such a frown upon his face that he set me all of a tremble like, which I scorched one of my good man’s shirt-fronts as brown as a coffee-berry for the first time this ten years, having had an aunt, Rebecca Javes by name, which was brought up to the clear-starching and laundry-maid at Sir Robert Flinder’s, three miles on this side of Netley Abbey, and has shown me to iron a shirt-front with her own hands more times than I could count——”

“But the foreign-looking gentleman——”

“Yes, miss. That’s just what I was a-saying. There he stands as large as life. In he walks, right into our place, as cool as you please. ‘Is my son at home?’ he asks. ‘Your son, sir!’ I answered. ‘Lor, bless me, no; I don’t know any such person.’ ‘O yes you do,’ he says. ‘The person who painted that picture yonder is my son, and he lodges in your house.’ With that he points to one of Mr. Stanmore’s landscapes, that’s been set to dry on my little table yonder. ‘Mr. Stanmore your son!’ I cried out. And I assure you, miss, you might have knocked me down with a feather. ‘He is capable of calling himself Stanmore, or any other false name,’ answered the dark gentleman; ‘but whatever he calls himself, the man who painted that picture is my wicked and undutiful son.’

“Before he could get out another word, Mr. Stanmore

walked in, with his hat on, and his drawings and things under his arm. He'd just come in from the forest.

"'I am here, father,' he said, 'to answer for my sins, whatever they may be;' and he said it as proud-like as if he'd been a prince of the royal family.

"So then the two gentlemen walked upstairs to Mr. Stanmore's sitting-room, and our walls being thin, you know, miss, I could hear a good deal of what was said; not the words exactly, but the tones of voice like, though I'm sure as to bemean myself by listening, I wouldn't do it, there, not if you was to lay me down twenty pound; and I could hear as the two gentlemen seemed at variance, as you may say; and at last down comes Mr. Stanmore's father, as stiff as a poker, and as black as any thunderstorm as I ever see, and walks out of the house without so much as a word to me; but I could see by his face that he was regularly upset. And then, about an hour or so afterwards, down came Mr. Stanmore, looking very pale, but very quiet-like. He'd packed all his things, he said, and he wanted my husband to carry them over to Winchester Station in his cart, in time for the mail-train, which he did. I was regular cut up at the young gentleman leaving me so sudden like, for never was there a better lodger, and he paid me very handsome, and was altogether the gentleman. He seemed quite broken-hearted like at going away, miss; and, lor bless me, if that don't remind me of something!"

The dame stopped suddenly, looking at Violet.

"Something about you, too, miss!"

The blood rushed into Violet's pale face.

"Did Mr. Stanmore mention me?" she asked.

"Yes, miss; indeed he did. Just as he was going out of the house he stopped all of a sudden, and said, 'If you

should see Miss Westford, tell her that I have painted the old yew-tree she was so fond of; and I want her to look once more at the tree, in order that she may remember it when she sees my picture.' Wasn't that a funny message, miss?"

"Yes," Violet answered, with pretended carelessness. "I suppose Mr. Stanmore means an old yew near the lake, which my brother and I very much admired. I sha'n't have many opportunities of looking at the tree, Mrs. Morris, for we are going to leave this neighbourhood to-morrow."

The woman expressed her regret at the departure of Violet and her mother; but, in the country, news travels fast, and she had heard some days before that the Grange was to be deserted. The change of fortune that had befallen the Westfords had been talked of and lamented by rich and poor.

Violet left the cottage with a heavy heart. George Stanmore had gone, leaving no trace behind him—not even a letter for the woman he had sworn to love and cherish for ever.

It was all a mystery, which Violet strove in vain to understand.

The moon had risen when she left the cottage, and every branch and leaf stood sharply out against the silvery light. Violet looked at the peaceful scene with inexpressible sadness.

"It may be the last time that I shall ever see it," she thought; "the last time! And I have been so happy here!"

Then she thought of George Stanmore's message about the old yew-tree.

It seemed a very absurd and meaningless message—a message which to any one not in love would have

appeared the very extreme of maudlin sentimentality. But Violet was by no means inclined to regard it in that light. She looked upon it rather as a solemn and mysterious mandate which it was her duty to obey to the very letter.

Madame Laffarge, of unpleasant notoriety, wrote to her husband entreating him to eat certain cakes made by her own fair hand, and to contemplate the moon at a certain hour, when she too would be absorbed in sentimental meditation upon that luminary. The idea was poetical, but, unfortunately for M. Laffarge, the cakes were poisoned, and he died, the victim of obedience.

Violet was in that state of mind in which she found it pleasanter to loiter in the forest than to go home, and there was a kind of consolation in the idea of doing anything that her lover had asked her to do. It seemed to bring him nearer to her for the moment. He might be thinking of that favourite spot at the very moment she stood there thinking so sadly of him. He might even see her in her loneliness and despondency by some subtle power of second-sight given to lovers. Was anything impossible to true love?

So Miss Westford turned aside from her homeward path, and vent fearlessly through the solitary avenue that led towards the lake.

That forest lake looked very lovely under the still evening sky. The broad branches of the yew made patches of black shadow on the grass; the fallen leaves made a faint rustling noise as the wind stirred them—a kind of ghostly murmur.

Around the trunk of the tree there was a rustic bench of roughly-hewn wood; and on this Violet seated herself, exhausted by her long walk, and glad to linger on a spot so associated with her lost happiness.

As she sat there, the beauty of the scene impressed her

with an almost painful sense of its splendour. For the first time throughout that sorrowful day the tears, passionate tears of regret, rushed down her pale cheeks.

She turned her head aside, and rested her forehead against the rugged bark of the yew.

As she did so, she perceived a hollow in the tree—a great hollow, in which George Stanmore had often hidden his colour-box and brushes. The remembrance of this suddenly flashed upon her. It had been her lover's habit to hide things in that old tree. What if he had hidden a letter there, and had directed her attention to the fact by means of that message left with Mrs. Morris! In the next moment Violet Westford was on her knees before the hollow, groping in it with her hands.

She found it half-filled with moss and withered leaves; but, after dragging these out, she saw something white gleaming in the moonlight.

Ah, how eagerly she picked up that scrap of white from among the scattered leaves and moss!

It was a letter. Miss Westford could just make out the words "For Violet," written on the envelope. Impatient as she was to see the contents of that precious envelope, she was fain to wait until she reached home; for brightly as the moon shone above forest and lake, that poetic radiance was not sufficient to throw light upon the mysteries of a modern gentleman's penmanship.

Never in her happiest day had Violet Westford's feet tripped more lightly along those forest pathways. She reached the Grange panting and exhausted, took a candle from the hall, and hurried to her own apartment—the bright airy room, so prettily decked to suit her girlish tastes, so soon to pass into the hands of strangers.

She seated herself close to the light, and tore open

George Stanmore's envelope. The letter it contained was brief, and had evidently been written in extreme haste.

It consisted of only these words:

"MY DEAREST GIRL,—Circumstances which I cannot explain in this letter compel me to leave England immediately. I do not know when I may be able to return; but when I do return, it will be to claim you as my wife. In the mean time, I implore you to write to me at the Post-office, Bruges, Belgium. Write to me, dearest, and tell me that you do not doubt my fidelity: tell me also that your faith will be as constant and unshaken as that of your devoted

"GEORGE."

No words can express the comfort which Violet Westford derived from this brief letter. To a woman of the world, George Stanmore's assurance of unalterable affection might have seemed of very little value; but to this girl, who did not know what it was to deceive, that assurance was all in all.

"He loves me! He is true to me!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands in a rapture of delight. "And when he comes back, it will be to seek me as his wife. But what will he do when he finds the Grange deserted, and our circumstances so cruelly changed? Will he change too?" This was the question which Violet asked herself very sadly, as she sat in the familiar room that was so soon to be hers no longer.

There was little sleep or rest for the dwellers in that pleasant country-house during the last sad night. The servants sat late in the cosy housekeeper's-room, bewailing the misfortunes of their mistress over a very comfortably-furnished supper-table—for even a funeral table must be provided with "baked meats;" and faithful

retainers, weighed down by the sadness of approaching farewell, require to be sustained by extra beer. They were unanimous in their praises of the family they had served so long, and in their dread of the unknown ills to be encountered in strange households, and from masters and mistresses whose “ways” would be new to them. But the old-fashioned type of servant, who appears so frequently in Morton’s comedies and in old novels, seems to be almost as extinct as the dodo. The Grange retainers were honestly sorry for Mrs. Westford’s misfortunes, but they had no idea of volunteering to follow the family in exile and poverty without wages, and, if need were, without food. Nor did cook or housemaid rush into the parlour to lay her savings at the feet of mistress, in the pathetic manner so familiar in the fairy world of romance. They sighed over the sorrows of the house as they ate their cold meat, and shook their heads dolefully over the old housekeeper’s famous pickles; but their boxes were all packed, and their plans all made for an early departure from the ruined house.

All through that long dreary night Mrs. Westford sat at her desk, sorting and destroying old letters and documents, the records of her happy womanhood. Of all the friendly notes, the pleasant gossiping letters, she kept none, except those written by her husband and her children.

Ah, how happy she had been in that simple country-house! What a calm life it had been!—and how brief the years seemed as she looked back to the early days in which her husband had brought her into Hampshire house-hunting, in a happy summer holiday, when their honeymoon was scarcely waned, and there was still in the minds of both the sweet strange sense that it was a new thing to be thus together!

She remembered her first year in that quiet haven. The

glorious summer time, in which every sunny day had brought the discovery of some new treasure in shrubbery or garden. She remembered the warm midsummer night, in which she had lain, faint and weak, but unspeakably happy, looking up at the stars, with the perfumed air of the June night blowing in upon her from the wide window, and her baby Lionel on her breast.

CHAPTER XI.

HOMELESS AND FRIENDLESS.

Very early in the chill spring morning Violet and her mother drove away from the Grange in a hired fly that was to convey them to Winchester.

They took nothing with them but their own personal property and the two portraits of Harley Westford. These Mrs. Westford knew she had no legal right to possess, but she stooped to infringe the letter of the law rather than leave her dead husband's likeness in the hands of his hateful rival.

Thus it was that the widow and her daughter left their happy home, with all its luxurious belongings undisturbed, to fall into the hands of strangers.

It was still early when they reached Winchester; and it was just one o'clock when the train entered the Waterloo terminus, where Lionel Westford was waiting on the platform, very pale and very grave, and altogether different from the light-hearted, careless young Oxonian who had brought life and gaiety to his home whenever he had come to it, and whose greatest trouble was the fear of being disappointed in his hope of University honours.

The young man bore his reverses nobly. He greeted his mother and sister with one of his old smiles, and then ran off to attend to their luggage, which he saw conveyed to a cab.

In this cab they speedily drove away from the station,

and went through two or three small streets in the neighbourhood of the Waterloo-road.

The cab stopped at a shabby but clean-looking house in one of the smallest of these streets.

Lionel Westford watched his mother's face with an anxious expression. He was thinking how horrible this dingy street, that shabby, poverty-stricken house must appear, when contrasted with the dear old Grange, and its lovely lawns and flower-beds, its avenue of stately elms, and spreading meadows sheltered with old oaks and beeches.

"It is very poor, very common, dear mother," said the young man; "but the landlady seems a decent sort of person, and this place was the best I could get at present. However, this time of poverty and trial shall not last long, if any effort of mine can shorten it."

He pressed his mother's hand as he spoke, and she answered him by a look of the deepest gratitude and affection.

"My treasures!" she exclaimed, looking fondly at her two children, "should I not be a wretch to repine while you are still left to me?"

Lionel had done all in his power to impart an appearance of cheerfulness to the shabby sitting-room which had been prepared for the new-comers. A fire burned in the little grate; a bunch of early spring-flowers adorned the table.

Only true and pure affection supported the banker's victims during these first days of poverty and trial.

The trial was very bitter; for poverty was new to them, and everything around seemed to send a fresh chill to their hearts.

But they were none of them people to waste time in idle complaints. Every morning, as soon as he had eaten his frugal breakfast, Lionel Westford set out upon his weary travels in the great desert of London.

What desert can be more lonely than that wealthy and crowded city to the wanderer who has neither friends nor money?

Every morning Violet and her mother also left their dingy lodgings, and went out into the world by separate ways to seek for bread. Yes, for bread! For now only a very slender hoard remained between them and absolute starvation.

Violet was no more fortunate than her brother. She was accomplished; but there were many portionless girls in London, all more or less accomplished, and all eager to earn the merest pittance. Who could hope that there would ever be enough employment for all of them?

Mrs. Westford also sought to turn her talents to some use; but she too sought for a long time most vainly. She offered herself as a morning governess, and spent what to her was a large sum in the postage of letters replying to advertisements in the morning papers. But no answers came to these letters. Education seemed to have become the most valueless drug in the London market. The Captain’s widow was troubled by none of those ultra-refined compunctions which restrain the actions of some among the ranks of the shabby-genteel. When she found her educational powers would not obtain her the merest pittance, she fell back upon her mechanical skill in all kinds of elegant fancy-work. She visited half the Berlin-wool shops and fancy repositories in London and the suburbs, and at last succeeded in finding a speculative trader, who agreed to give her a starvation price for her work.

At last, however, when a kind of heart-sickness had seized upon both mother and daughter, a faint glimmer of sunshine broke through the dense black clouds that darkened the horizon. It was only a chilly April radiance at best, but still it was the sun.

Violet was amongst the crowd of clever and accomplished women who answered an advertisement inserted in the *Times* by a lady who required a morning governess for her young daughters—two pretty-looking, half-educated girls of seventeen and nineteen.

Mrs. Montague Trevor was a frivolous woman, whose heart and intellect were alike absorbed in the delights of the fashionable world. She had been a beauty, and had flourished for her brief hour as belle of a second-rate watering-place, where she had been fortunate enough to win the affections of a popular Queen's Counsel, who fell in love with her pretty face, and was too busy ever to have leisure in which to find out how empty the head was behind it. Mr. Montague Trevor had therefore been very well content with his choice, and in due course had worked himself to death, leaving the watering-place beauty a widow with a handsome fortune. On the strength of this fortune, and her late husband's professional celebrity, Mrs. Trevor had obtained an extended circle of acquaintance, and amongst these she still played off some of the airs and graces which she had cultivated as a belle of nineteen.

She was intensely vain; and she fancied that every man who laid her a compliment was desperately in love with her. She had no disinclination to part with her freedom to a new lord and master; but she wanted a rich husband, for her habits were terribly extravagant, and, in spite of her excellent income, she was always more or less in debt.

Unfortunately, though her admirers were numerous,

they were not many of them rich, and the vain and frivolous Annabella sighed in vain for a wealthy husband, whose boundless purse should supply money for all her whims and fancies.

It was this lady whose advertisement Violet Westford saw in the *Times* newspaper, and it was in Mrs. Trevor's fashionably-furnished drawing-room in the Regent's Park that the young girl sat amongst a crowd of other applicants, waiting the nervous moment when she should be summoned before the lady who was to decide her fate.

She knew that poverty, dire and terrible, was fast approaching that miserable lodging near the Waterloo-road, and she felt a painful anxiety to be of some use to her mother, and to her brave young brother, on whose brow she already saw the impress of despair.

At last the moment arrived, and a smartly dressed maid conducted Violet to Mrs. Trevor's morning-room, or boudoir, as it was always called by elegant Annabella.

Mrs. Trevor was reclining on a sofa, dressed in an elaborately beflounced muslin morning-dress, dotted about with infantine bows of sky-blue ribbon, her hair arranged *à la vierge*, an expensive fan in her hand, and a tiny Maltese dog in her lap. On a table near her there was a scent-bottle with a gold stopper and an elegant little Dresden chocolate-service. The two Miss Trevors were lounging near the windows, and staring idly out into the Park.

As Violet entered the room, nervously anxious, Mrs. Trevor uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What a sweet face!" she cried. "My dear Theodosia, my darling Anastasia, did you ever see a sweeter face?"

Violet had no idea that this speech could possibly apply to her. She stood opposite the one lady on the sofa,

almost trembling with anxiety, for repeated failure had depressed her spirits, and she had a morbid apprehension of disappointment.

“You were so good as to send for me madam,” she faltered.

“Yes, my love; I sent for you, and I am absolutely charmed with you. I like to see everything lovely about me—my rooms, my flowers, my china; and you are lovely! Beauty is almost as necessary to me as the air I breathe, and you are beautiful! I am sure we shall suit each other delightfully. Such *objects*, such *creatures*, such absolute Gorgons as I have seen this morning, my dear!—really enough to give a sensitive person the horrors; and I am so excruciatingly sensitive. Anastasia, my love, don’t you think there is something of a likeness between Miss—Miss——”

“Westford, madam,” interposed Violet.

“Between Miss Westford and me? About the nose, Anastasia? Miss Westford has exactly that delicate style of nose which your poor papa used to call a perfect Grecian.”

Miss Anastasia Trevor did not take the trouble to answer her mother’s question. Nor was there any occasion that she should do so, as the volatile Annabella rarely gave any one time to reply to her remarks.

“I am sure you will suit me, my love!” she exclaimed. “You play and sing, of course?”

“O yes, madam.”

Mrs. Trevor waved her jewelled hand towards an open piano.

“Let me hear you, my dear.”

Violet seated herself, and after a brilliant prelude

which displayed her execution and expression as a pianiste, she sang a simple little Italian barcarole, in which her mezzo-soprano voice rang out soft and clear.

"Charming!" exclaimed Mrs. Trevor. "You draw and paint in water-colours, I suppose?"

Violet blushed as she answered this question, for she remembered how her artist-lover had admired her sketches, and how much her taste had been cultivated in his society.

She opened a little portfolio which she had brought with her, and showed Mrs. Trevor some water-colour sketches of the forest.

"Delicious!" exclaimed the fashionable widow. "There is a taste, a lightness, a warmth, an atmosphere, a *chiaro-oscuro* which is really charming. You speak French, German, and Italian, of course, as those were mentioned as requisite in the advertisement?"

Violet replied that she was familiar with all three languages.

"And your references are irreproachable, I conclude?"

"I can refer you to Mr. Morton, the clergyman of the parish in which we lived in my dear father's lifetime."

Violet's eyes filled with tears as she referred to that happy past, which contrasted so cruelly with the present.

"Nothing can be more satisfactory," said Mrs. Trevor, as Violet handed her the address of the Hampshire rector. "I shall write to this gentleman by to-day's post. I take it for granted that the answer will be favourable, therefore we may as well conclude arrangements at once. This is Wednesday. On Friday I can receive the rector's answer, and on Monday morning you can commence your duties. Good morning.—Anastasia, my love, the bell."

Violet rose; but she lingered hesitatingly.

“There is one question,” she murmured; “the salary, madam?”

“Ah, to be sure!” exclaimed Mrs. Trevor. “What a forgetful creature I am! You will want a salary, I suppose —though really, as it is your first engagement as a governess, there are many people who would object to giving you a salary. However, I am not one of those illiberal persons.—You know, Anastasia, your poor dear papa used to call me ridiculously generous.—The salary, Miss Westford, will be half-a-guinea a week.”

Violet had expected a great deal more; but poverty stared her in the face, and even this pittance would be something.

“And the hours?” she asked.

“The hours will be from nine till two, which will enable you to dine comfortably at home with your own family,” Mrs. Trevor answered, with a benevolent smile.

From nine till two—six days a week—for half-a-guinea! Four-pence an hour was the value set upon accomplishments the acquirement of which had cost a small fortune!

Violet sighed as she thought of her expensive masters, her handsomely paid governess, and the time and trouble which had been bestowed upon her education.

“Perhaps the situation will not suit you?” said the sweet Mrs. Trevor rather sharply.

“O, yes, madam; it will suit me very well.”

“And you accept the terms?”

“Yes, madam.”

“Then in that case I shall expect you on Monday. You

can then begin your duties; that is, of course, in the event of the reference proving satisfactory."

"I do not fear that, madam. Good morning."

And Violet left the richly furnished boudoir comparatively happy; for half-a-guinea a week was at least some small provision against absolute starvation.

Half-a-guinea a week for the salary of an accomplished governess! And this from Mrs. Montague Trevor, who thought nothing of paying a five-pound note for a cup and saucer of Sèvres china.

As the door closed upon Violet, the diplomatic widow turned with a look of triumph to her eldest daughter.

"Well, I think I managed that business admirably!" she exclaimed. "Half-a-guinea a week! Why, my dear Anastasia, the girl is worth a hundred guineas a year at the very least. Look at the salary that elderly Gorgon with the blue spectacles had the presumption to ask me. This girl is worth as much again as the Gorgon, whose voice was like a screech owl's."

The younger Miss Trevor, who bore no resemblance to her mother either in person or disposition, lifted her eyes reproachfully to the flighty widow's face.

"But if this young lady is worth so much, is it not very cruel, and almost dishonest, to offer her so little, mamma?" she asked gravely.

"Cruel! dishonest!" ejaculated Mrs. Trevor. "Why, child, you're a perfect idiot! You'll never make a bargain as long as you live."

CHAPTER XIL.

MATERNAL MANŒUVRES.

Five minutes before the clocks in the neighbourhood struck nine, on the appointed Monday morning Violet Westford knocked at the door of the villa in the Regent's Park. She was admitted by a maid-servant, who at once conducted her to an apartment near the top of the house —a cold, cheerless looking room, very shabbily furnished, and commanding an agreeable view of the backs of the houses in Albany-street,—altogether a very different apartment from Mrs. Montague Trevor's silken-curtained boudoir, with its somewhat stagey decoration in modern buhl and marqueterie.

Here Violet's duties began; and very tedious they promised to be; for one of her pupils was idle, frivolous, and flippant, and the other was naturally slow of apprehension.

Anastasia Trevor was a clever girl; but her natural idleness was excessive, and she could only be induced to study those accomplishments which could be paraded before the admiring of curious eyes of her acquaintance.

Theodosia was not a clever or brilliant girl; but she was something better, for she was truthful and conscientious. She exerted herself to the utmost under the direction of her new governess.

"I fear you'll find me very stupid, Miss Westford," she said; "but I hope you'll believe that I shall do my best."

“I am sure you will,” Violet answered gently.

From that moment it seemed as if a friendship arose between the governess and her pupil. Theodosia had been accustomed to find herself neglected by the masters and governesses whom her mother engaged, and who speedily discovered that the lively Anastasia was Mrs. Trevor’s favourite, and that attention bestowed upon her would be better rewarded than if given to the quiet Theodosia.

Theodosia and her mother were never very likely to agree, for the girl’s high sense of truth and honour was continually being wounded by the widow’s conduct; and as Theodosia was too candid to conceal her sentiments, perpetual disputes arose between them.

Anastasia, on the contrary, was the exact counterpart of her mother, and the two agreed admirably, except when their interests clashed, which was not a rare event.

Day after day Violet toiled in the dull schoolroom at Mrs. Trevor’s villa. Her duties were excessively fatiguing, but no murmur of complaint ever crossed her lips. When Saturday came she was able to carry home her hard-earned half-guinea, and that in itself was a recompense for all her trouble.

In the mean time affairs had brightened a little for Lionel, who had at last succeeded in getting some work as a copyist of legal documents.

It was very hard work, very poorly paid; but for the sake of his mother and sister the young man would even have swept a crossing.

For some little time matters went on tolerably smoothly in the humble lodging. Mrs. Westford bent over an embroidery frame with untiring patience; Lionel laboured for long hours at his wearisome penmanship;

and Violet attended daily at Mrs. Trevor's villa. So that, comforted by affection, which brightens even the dullest home, the widow and her orphans were comparatively happy.

But that period of peace was destined to be very brief. The storm was near at hand; and Violet, the gentle Violet, who until the last few months had never known sorrow, was the first to be stricken by the thunderbolt.

She had been teaching Mrs. Trevor's daughters for nearly six weeks, when one day the widow sent her a very condescending message inviting her to a small evening-party, which was to take place during the week.

Of course Violet accepted the invitation. Painful as it would be to her to appear once more amongst careless and happy people, she feared to offend her employer by a refusal. She knew full well that she was invited to this party in order that she might be useful in showing off her pupils; and that any refusal on her part would inevitably be resented.

Anastasia sang Rossini's and Verdi's music very brilliantly, and Violet would be required to accompany her on the piano. Theodosia had a fine contralto voice, and sang simple ballads with a great deal of expression; but it was a question if she would be allowed to sing before company. Mrs. Trevor did not care to see her younger daughter admired. She was jealous of all praise that was not bestowed upon herself or her favourite Anastasia. But Violet was determined that, if possible, Theodosia should sing one of her simple ballads in the course of the evening. She had taken a great deal of trouble with her younger pupil's voice, and was anxious that Mrs. Trevor should be made aware of Theodosia's rapid improvement. But it was no pride in her own teaching that made Violet anxious for this,—it was because she had really grown attached to her pupil.

With Anastasia it was quite different. That young lady was resolved to display her accomplishments to the uttermost, and had perfect confidence in her own powers.

The eventful evening arrived. Violet was dressed very simply; in deep mourning. But her fair face and golden hair were set off by her sombre dress, and she looked very lovely. Anastasia Trevor was by no means pleased to see the notice which the governess attracted as she made her way quietly and shyly through the crowd in the endeavour to reach her hostess. Miss Trevor was of the order of fast young ladies, and she had regarded Violet with a kind of benignant pity, as a creature utterly without “dash” or “style.”

To be dashing was the chief desire of Miss Trevor’s heart. She studied the *Court Circular* and the Parisian fashion-books; she formed herself and dressed herself after the model of the latest celebrity in the *haut monde*, and did not even blush to borrow a grace or a piquant eccentricity from some brilliant leader of the *demi monde*.

To-night she had taken more than usual pains with her costume, complaining loudly as she did so, of the extravagance and selfishness of her mother, who had ordered her own dress from a Parisian milliner in Wigmore-street, while expecting her daughters to be satisfied with the achievements of a clever young person in Somers-town.

“I hate white tarlatane!” exclaimed Miss Trevor, as she stood before her mother’s cheval glass, putting the finishing touches to her dress. “It is all very well for mamma to lay down the law about girlish elegance and simplicity when she gives twenty guineas for a moire, and wears lace worth hundreds, in order to set herself off to the best advantage.”

The young lady looked very discontentedly at the airy

puffings of her dress, which was dotted all over with dew-spangled rosebuds, and which was very becoming to the dark-haired beauty, but by no means the costume she would have chosen had she been permitted to consult Madame Forchère, of Wigmore-street. Nor was her temper at all improved when she saw the glances of admiring surprise which greeted Violet Westford as she made her way through the crowded room.

Mrs. Montague Trevor's drawing-room blazed with the light of a hundred wax candles. The elegant widow would not admit anything so vulgar and commonplace as gas into her apartments, so they were lighted entirely by wax candles, in branches of crystal and ormolu.

The rooms were crowded to suffocation when Violet arrived. When Mrs. Trevor talked of giving a small evening-party, her friends always knew very well that her rooms and staircase would be made insufferable by the crowd assembled at the villa, and that the elegant supper would be a kind of lottery in which many speculators would draw blanks.

Such a moment as this was the pride and delight of Mrs. Trevor's life. Radiant in a train of pink moire, the rustling folds of which were almost covered with flounces of point-lace, the handsome widow smiled upon her guests.

Among them she knew that there were several eligible men in a matrimonial point of view, and two of those eligible beings she had marked as her intended victims.

One of these was Rupert Godwin the banker, whom Mrs. Trevor hoped to win as a husband for herself.

She had been to a garden-party at Wilmingdon Hall, and had been agreeably impressed by the splendour of that old mansion and its surroundings, as well as by the extravagance of the arrangements.

The other was Sir Harold Ivry, the wealthy descendant of a family of ironfounders; a young man who was the possessor of a million of money, and whom the widow fancied she might secure for her favourite daughter.

Anastasia was handsome and accomplished; Sir Harold was young and independent. Why should not a match be brought about between them?

This was what Mrs. Trevor thought; and she looked with peculiar favour on the wealthy scion of the Birmingham ironmaster.

The manœuvring mother and the husband-hunting widow had a difficult part to play this evening, but the lady proved herself quite equal to the occasion. While engaged in a sentimental flirtation with the eligible banker, Mrs. Trevor contrived to keep a watchful eye upon Anastasia and the young Baronet.

Nothing could exceed her mortification when she saw that Sir Harold paid very little attention to Anastasia, and that he seemed peculiarly attracted by the beautiful but pensive-looking governess, whose mourning dress and lovely pale face were very conspicuous amid that gaily attired crowd.

Mrs. Trevor bit her lower lip with suppressed rage and mortification, even while she appeared to be smiling her sweetest smiles at Rupert Godwin.

“It is too provoking,” she thought, as she kept a furtive watch upon the admiring glances which Sir Harold Ivry bestowed upon the governess. “I quite forgot that the creature is really remarkably pretty; and that mourning dress happens to suit her insipid complexion, and is, of course, worn on purpose to attract attention. What a fool I was to allow the artful minx to make her appearance amongst us to-night! But then I only thought of the use

she would be to Anastasia, who always sings out of time when she accompanies herself."

While Mrs. Montague Trevor was enduring all these secret tortures, poor Violet Westford was quite unconscious of the Baronet's admiring glances. She had seated herself in the quietest corner of the back drawing-room, in a sheltered little nook between the grand-piano and a stand of hot-house flowers, and she was waiting patiently until her services should be required.

Sir Harold had approached her, and had made an attempt to enter into conversation with her, of course trying to break ground with some of the usual feeble truisms about the weather; but her brief and timid answers gave him little encouragement.

Violet Westford could not be at her ease in this crowded assemblage, where she felt instinctively that she was looked down upon as a poor dependant—a well-bred and accomplished drudge, whose very presence was forgotten, except at the moment when her services were required. She could not help thinking a little sadly of the last party at which she had been a guest,—a carpet-dance at the house of some old friends in Hampshire, people considerably above Mrs. Trevor in position. She remembered the attention, the kindness, the praises that had been lavished upon her; and now she sat alone amongst a crowd, in which there was not one familiar face, except those of her employer and her two pupils.

At last, the eventful moment of the evening arrived for the manœuvring mother and her favourite daughter.

Violet took her place at the piano, and Anastasia prepared to commence an Italian bravura.

Miss Trevor cast a glance of triumph round the room. She was the heroine of the moment, and she knew that

she was looking very handsome. Sir Harold was standing near the piano, and he was watching her with a thoughtful look in his candid eyes.

Anastasia fancied that thoughtful gaze could not be other than an admiring one; but she did not know very much of Sir Harold Ivry, who was a very peculiar young man, naturally reserved, and not given to displaying his real feelings.

A murmur of admiration ran through the crowded drawing-rooms as Violet finished the symphony, so crisp and brilliant was her touch, and so correct her expression; and then Anastasia began her scena. Her voice was a soprano, very brilliant in quality, and highly cultivated; but though she sang well, the charm of feeling was wanting, and her singing seemed cold and colourless.

Mrs. Trevor had been seated in the front drawing-room, talking to the banker; but she rose as Anastasia's voice rang out in the opening notes of the scena.

"You must hear my daughter sing, Mr. Godwin," she said. "I think you will acknowledge that her voice is fine, and her style perfection."

She led Rupert Godwin towards the archway between the two drawing-rooms. There were no folding-doors, and only curtains of the airiest lace divided the two apartments.

Mrs. Trevor and the banker stood in the archway between the festoons of drooping lace.

The piano was at the other end of the room, and the faces of the singer and the accompanist were turned towards the archway.

Rupert Godwin's cheek grew paler than usual as he looked at the pensive face of the young governess. He had started at the first sight of that beautiful but

melancholy countenance; but the gesture of surprise had been so slight as to escape the attention of Mrs. Trevor, who was gazing admiringly at her handsome daughter.

“Who is that young lady?” whispered the banker; “the young lady at the piano—the young lady in deep mourning?”

He asked the question with an eagerness that startled Mrs. Trevor, who was not a little offended at his inattention to her daughter’s singing.

“That young lady who absorbs your attention so entirely is my daughters’ morning governess,” answered the widow, with considerable asperity of tone.

“And her name?” demanded the banker.

“Her name is Westford—Violet Westford. She is in mourning for her father, a merchant captain, who was lost at sea.”

A slight shudder stirred Rupert Godwin’s frame, but it passed as quickly as the transient breath that ruffles the forest-leaves on a calm summer day.

Then a dark frown obscured his face.

“No child of Clara Westford’s shall succeed where I have power to hinder her success. When I bear a grudge, it is the great vendetta—war to the death against body and soul.”

This was the gist of Mr. Godwin’s thoughts as he looked with a strange, menacing gaze at the fair face of the girl at the piano.

“Westford!” he exclaimed. “And so your daughters’ governess is the daughter of Captain Westford. I am sorry for it.”

“Why so?” asked Mrs. Trevor, with a look of alarm.

“Because I am sincerely interested in the welfare and happiness of you and your daughters, my dear Mrs. Trevor; and I am sorry that the education of those charming girls should be intrusted to such a person as the daughter of Mrs. Westford.”

All this was said in the blandest tone. Mr. Godwin could appear the best and most benevolent of men when it suited his purpose to do so.

“You really terrify me out of my senses!” exclaimed Mrs. Trevor. “What can you mean? I had excellent references with Miss Westford. Pray explain yourself.”

“Not now; there are people about who may overhear what we say. To-morrow, my dear Mrs. Trevor, or to-night even, if I find an opportunity, I will explain myself more fully.”

Anastasia’s Italian scena wound up with a brilliant cadence, whereupon her mother’s guests fell into the usual ecstasies. And yet there were very few present who cared for showy Italian music except at an opera-house.

Some one asked Theodosia to sing. The girl would have refused; but before she could do so Violet whispered to her, “I know you will consent, dear, to please me;” and in the next moment the brilliant fingers flew over the keys in the sparkling symphony of an old English ballad.

Theodosia was truly attached to her new friend, and she drew near the piano, determined to do her best, however painful the task might be.

“Good gracious!” exclaimed Mrs. Trevor; “can I believe my eyes? Theodosia going to sing! She has a decent voice, poor child; but no style—no style whatever.”

Nothing could be more contemptuous than the tone in which the mother said this. She did not like that Theodosia should attract attention which might have

been bestowed upon Anastasia.

The first notes of the rich contralto voice were low and tremulous, but they swelled out presently in a burst of melody. The song was a very simple one—an old familiar ballad, “Auld Robin Gray;” but before Theodosia had finished the last verse, tears had bedewed the eyes of many listeners.

Anastasia’s brief triumph was entirely eclipsed. The praises which had been bestowed upon her had sounded cold and unreal compared to those now lavished on her sister. The vain girl could scarcely conceal her mortification, and her mother seemed almost equally annoyed.

“I should have been glad if you had asked my permission before you allowed Theodosia to sing, Miss Westford,” she said to Violet, in her sharpest tones. “I consider her too young to display her accomplishments in a crowded room; and that old-fashioned ballad is better suited for a nursery ditty than for a drawing-room.”

Sir Harold Ivry overheard this speech, and replied to it eagerly.

“Pray do not say that, my dear Mrs. Trevor!” he exclaimed. “Your youngest daughter’s singing has drawn tears from our eyes, and has made us forget what hardened worldly creatures we are!”

He glanced admiringly at Theodosia as he spoke; but the next moment his eyes wandered to the beautiful face of Violet Westford, and with a still more admiring gaze.

“I am sure that Miss Theodosia Trevor owes a great deal to her governess,” he said. And then in a lower voice he added to Violet, “Pray let us hear you sing.”

Mrs. Trevor’s brow darkened: but she could not oppose

the wishes of the Baronet, who was a privileged person in that house.

“Will you persuade her, Mrs. Trevor?” he said. “I feel that my entreaties will be useless. Pray ask Miss Westford to sing.”

The widow complied, and resumed all her accustomed sweetness of manner, as she requested Violet to grant the Baronet’s request.

Poor Violet was much too single-hearted to understand the sudden anger raging in Mrs. Trevor’s breast. She was entirely without affectation, and she consented to sing directly she was asked.

She sang one of Thomas Moore’s sweetest and most pensive ballads, “Oft in the stilly night;” and again the eyes of almost every listener were wet with tears.

Her own eyes filled, as she remembered how often she had sung that ballad in her happy home, in the pleasant summer twilight, after dinner, or in the winter dusk, when her lost father was near to listen and admire. Sir Harold Ivry saw those dark blue eyes fill with tears, and he saw that it was only with a struggle that Violet could control her emotion.

He bent over her chair to thank her at the conclusion of the song.

“But I fear the ballad has melancholy associations,” he added in a lower voice.

“It has indeed; for it recalls the dear father I have lost, and the memory of a home that is deserted.”

“It is for your father, then, you wear that mourning dress? O, forgive me, if I appear inquisitive. I am so deeply interested in all that concerns you.”

Violet looked up at the Baronet with a glance of

innocent surprise. She was entirely without vanity, and she could not imagine why Sir Harold should be interested about her.

“Yes,” she answered sadly; “I am in mourning for my father—the best father who ever made his children’s life happy.”

No more was said; for Anastasia was about to sing again, and Violet was required at the piano.

Half an hour afterwards the crowd began to grow thin, and Violet obtained permission to retire. It was already past two o’clock; for Mrs. Trevor’s little party had not begun until eleven, and the poor girl was anxious to return to the cheerless lodging where her mother was doubtless waiting up to receive her.

Violet noticed a peculiar stateliness in Mrs. Trevor’s manner as that lady wished her good-night; but she was too tired even to wonder about that altered manner. She left the room very quietly, and went down to the hall, where she had left her cloak and bonnet in the care of one of the servants. She had refused to incur even the expense of a cab to bring her to Mrs. Trevor’s house, for the luxury of that plebeian vehicle would have cost half a week’s salary. She had preferred to hide her simple evening toilette under a heavy black cloak, and to make her way to the villa on foot.

She had just put on her bonnet and cloak when a light footstep sounded on the stairs, and in the next moment Sir Harold Ivry stood before her.

“I hope you will allow me to see you safely home, Miss Westford,” he said, with profound respect in his tone and manner. “I know you are alone here, and it will give me unbounded pleasure to conduct you safely to your home.”

Violet blushed; for in the happy days that were gone

she had been accustomed to be handed to her carriage after a party or a ball.

She could not help feeling some touch of shame—false shame, if you will; but after that one instant of confusion, she answered boldly, “You are very kind, Sir Harold; but I am going to walk home, and I believe my brother will be waiting outside to take care of me.”

“Your brother!” exclaimed the Baronet, who was unable to conceal his disappointment. “Then in that case I must surrender you to one who has the best possible right to protect you. But at least you will allow me to conduct you to your brother.”

He offered Violet his arm as he spoke, and she felt that she could not refuse to take it.

Sir Harold did not escort her very far, for Lionel was waiting at the end of the terrace, and to his care the Baronet was compelled to resign his precious charge.

We often hear and read of love at first sight, and certainly Sir Harold Ivry seemed to have fallen a victim to that sudden fever.

Violet could not do less than introduce him to her brother: and for some little way they all three walked on together, Sir Harold doing his best to make himself agreeable to Lionel.

It was a bright summer night, and a full moon was shining high in the cloudless heaven. Even London, so dingy in its usual aspect, looked romantic when seen by that soft silvery light.

But as Violet looked at her brother, a pang shot through her heart as she compared his worn and shabby attire with the costume of the rich young Baronet.

Lionel Westford still retained his gentlemanly bearing,

but the awful stamp of poverty was upon him; and Violet's heart was wrung as she remembered the gay, dashing young Oxonian, to whom life had been one long summer holiday, disturbed by no harder toil than the study of an obscure passage in Euripides, or a week's training for the University boat race.

It seemed as if that moonlight walk through the streets of London was a most delightful thing to Sir Harold, for he went on, and on, until they were drawing near to Waterloo Bridge, when he stopped to say good-night, feeling that his companions might not wish him to know the humble quarter of the town in which they lived.

He had seen enough to understand that Violet and her brother had sunk from prosperity to poverty—poverty of the sharpest and bitterest kind, the poverty that must conceal itself under the mask of gentility.

He lingered, as he wished Violet good-night. It seemed as if he could scarcely tear himself away from her.

"I shall never forget your song," he said; "it is ringing in my ears still—I shall never forget it; but I hope to hear you soon again."

And then he was compelled to say good-night, for Lionel Westford's manner repelled any approach to intimacy. Poverty had made the young man proud. He, to whom pride had once been an unknown sentiment, was now almost haughty in his manner to strangers.

"How lovely she is!" thought Sir Harold, as he walked through the moonlit streets towards his chambers in the Albany. "How lovely she is! And what an air of high breeding there is in her every tone and gesture! And to think that such a woman should be poor, compelled to walk through the streets at three o'clock in the morning—compelled to put on her cloak at the bottom of a staircase, with half-a-dozen grinning flunkeys staring at

her while she does it. It's too bad—it's shameful."

Then, after a pause, the Baronet murmured, "While I am so rich; while I have thousands lying idle at my banker's, and half-a-million in the public funds! But I will call on Mrs. Trevor to-morrow, and find out Miss Westford's address. I will send her a thousand pounds anonymously. I will do something, no matter how desperate, even at the risk of being kicked as an intrusive snob by that priggish young brother of hers, who was very stand-offish just now as he bade me good-night."

CHAPTER XIII.

A DAUGHTER'S TRIAL.

Late though it was when she returned home after Mrs. Trevor's party. Violet knew that she must be punctual in her attendance on her pupils on the following morning. At eight o'clock she was walking westwards, after having taken her scanty breakfast at home. No refreshment had ever been offered to her at Mrs. Trevor's house, for the widow knew how to make the best of a good bargain; and liberal though she was in the matter of fine words and elegant compliments, she would have grudged her hard-working slave a cup of tea or a class of indifferent sherry.

Nine was striking as Violet was admitted into the hall. She was about to proceed to the back-staircase, which led to the schoolroom, when the man-of-all-work stopped her.

"My missus wants to see you in her *boodore*," he said, with the cool insolence with which a well-paid footman addresses an ill-paid governess; "which it's very important, and you wos to go upstairs immediate, and to look sharp about it."

Violet was surprised at this summons, as Mrs. Trevor rarely rose until nearly mid-day, when it was her habit to sit sipping her chocolate and reading a novel until it was time to go out upon a round of fashionable visits; but, although the governess was surprised at this unexpected summons, she was in no way apprehensive of any unpleasantness in an interview with her employer.

Never had she looked brighter or prettier than when she presented herself before Mrs. Trevor, who had not long risen from her bed, and who sat untidily dressed in a loose morning-gown, at a well furnished breakfast-table. The barrister's widow had acquired the tastes of an accomplished *gourmet* from her late husband, and was selecting the daintiest morsels out of a raised pie for her own consumption as Miss Westford entered the room.

Her favourite daughter Anastasia was sitting on the other side of the table, and a dark frown obscured that young lady's handsome face.

She had perceived the impression made by Violet Westford on Sir Harold Ivry, and she felt something nearly akin to hatred for the innocent girl whose charms had outrivalled her own.

Violet saw at a glance that something had happened to alter her position in the estimation of Mrs. and Miss Trevor; but, as her conscience was entirely free from blame, she met the changed looks of the two ladies with a frank and fearless countenance.

"Miss Westford," exclaimed Mrs. Trevor in the affected and high-flown manner which was peculiar to her, "when you first entered this room, you entered the presence of a woman who is as confiding as a child. I saw you, and I liked you. You are beautiful; and I am a sensitive creature, to whom the presence of beautiful things is almost a necessity. You sought to enter my employment; I accepted your offer with confidence; I admitted you into my household; I trusted you with the care of my innocent girls; and now—now, when I had lulled myself to rest, believing in your truth and purity, I find that I have nourished a viper."

Violet started and turned deadly pale. Never before had Captain Westford's daughter known what it was to

receive an insult.

“Madam!” she exclaimed, with a sudden pride, which contrasted strangely with her usual gentleness, “you are mistaken in the person you address in this extraordinary manner.”

“I wish I were,” answered Mrs. Trevor, shaking her head solemnly. “I wish I were indeed mistaken, and that I could awake from my delusion to find you worthy of my confidence.”

“In what way have I proved myself unworthy of that confidence, madam?” asked Violet, with the same proud and fearless manner.

“O, Miss Westford,” ejaculated the widow, raising her lace-bordered handkerchief to her eyes, with a sniff that was meant for a sob, “it is a sad case—a most painful case. It is not yourself against whom I have anything to say—except, indeed, that you have withheld the truth from me.”

“I have withheld the truth, madam?” exclaimed Violet. “What truth have I withheld from you?”

“You entered my house under false pretences; you concealed from me the character of—your—unhappy mother.”

At this point Mrs. Trevor made a pretence of being almost overcome by her emotion.

“The character of my mother!” cried Violet. “What should I tell you of her, madam, except that she is the best and dearest of mothers, and that I love her better than my life?”

“Unhappy girl! Do you pretend to be ignorant of your mother’s character prior to her marriage with your father?”

“Ignorant, madam! What should I know of my dear mother? Who is it that dares sully her name by so much as a whisper?”

“One who knows her only too well,” answered Mrs. Trevor. “Alas, poor child! I begin to think you may indeed be ignorant of the truth. And yet surely you must know the maiden name of your own mother?”

A vivid blush suddenly dyed Violet’s pale cheeks. For a moment a deadly fear—shadowy, shapeless, but terrible—took possession of her.

She had never been told the maiden name of her mother. More than this, she remembered that she had never heard that mother allude to any one circumstance of her early life. A dark veil of mystery had seemed to shroud that portion of Mrs. Westford’s existence.

But the daughter’s love was stronger than the base feeling of suspicion, that poisonous and fatal weed which at times twines itself about the purest and truest heart.

“I beg to resign my situation here this instant, Mrs. Trevor,” Violet exclaimed, indignantly. “If any one has dared to slander my mother in your hearing, I declare that person to be the falsest and basest of mankind. But, be it as it may, I will not stop an hour in a house where my mother’s name has been sullied by the breath of suspicion.”

“The person who told me your mother’s sad story—sad and shameful also, alas!” sighed Mrs. Trevor, “is a person far too high in position to become the promoter of any idle slander. He spoke of facts—facts which I thought you might have been able to disprove; but you cannot do so. You cannot even tell me your mother’s maiden name. But I can tell you that name, Miss Westford. Your mother’s name was Ponsonby, and she was turned out of doors by her father, Sir John Ponsonby, when his heart had been

almost broken by the disgrace which had fallen upon his daughter."

"What disgrace, madam?"

Mrs. Trevor was silent. Rupert Godwin had not chosen to tell her that he was the lover whose conduct had caused a cruel slander to blacken the name of Clara Ponsonby.

"What was that disgrace, madam?" repeated Violet. "I have a right to know the extent of the falsehoods that some wretch has dared to utter against the best and purest of women."

"Nay, child," answered Mrs. Trevor, with affected sympathy; "enough has been said—more than enough! I pity your misfortune, for no misfortune can be greater than that of being the daughter of a worthless woman. I pity you, Miss Westford. But I am a mother myself; I have my own daughters to consider, and I cannot possibly allow you to enter this house again."

"You cannot allow me, madam!" cried Violet, with passionate indignation. "Do you think my own feelings will allow me ever again to cross the threshold of a house in which my mothers name has been so cruelly and pitilessly slandered? No, Mrs. Trevor! I wish you good morning; and I can only trust that we may never again meet. You may have been deceived by your informant, but I cannot forgive you for being so ready to think ill of my dear mother."

Having said this, Violet left the room, calm and dignified in outward seeming, though her heart was almost bursting with the agony that tortured it.

Mrs. Trevor sat for some moments staring at the door by which the young girl had left her apartments, as if she could scarcely collect her scattered senses.

“Did you ever see such assurance, Anastasia?” she exclaimed at last. “If this penniless girl had been the Queen of England she could scarcely have answered me more proudly. However, we’ve got rid of her, that’s one comfort. It’s very lucky Rupert Godwin told me what he did, for I’m sure that designing creature would have set her cap at Sir Harold Ivry, and tried to supplant you, my pet. I had my eye upon her last night, though she little knew it, and I saw her artful manœuvres.”

Anastasia Trevor bit her lips with vexation as she remembered the events of the previous evening—the evening which was to have been one long triumph to herself, and which had only resulted in bitter disappointment and humiliation. Hypocritical though we may be in our conduct to the world, we cannot deceive ourselves; and Anastasia knew only too well that Sir Harold’s admiration had been freely and spontaneously given, and that Violet had been even unconscious of the impression she had made.

“There’s one blessing,” exclaimed the fashionable Mrs. Trevor, after some minutes of meditation, “we save half a week’s salary by this quarrel—though where we shall get such another governess for the same money, goodness only knows!”

CHAPTER XIV.

LOVE AT SIGHT.

While Violet walked slowly homewards to the cheerless lodging in that dingy street near the Waterloo-road, a mail-phaeton dashed up to Mrs. Trevor's pretty villa, and Sir Harold Ivry alighted.

It was the fashionable hour for paving and receiving visits; so the widow and her favourite daughter were seated in the drawing-room, dressed exquisitely, prepared to fascinate any eligible marrying man who might fall in their way, for which favoured being the delights of social afternoon tea were specially reserved.

Anastasia was seated close to the window, pretending to be occupied by some fashionable Berlin-wool work; but she watched the phaeton as it drew up to the door.

"Mamma!" she exclaimed, "it is Sir Harold!"

"Indeed!" cried Mrs. Trevor, in triumphant tones. "Then you see last night's party was not an unsuccessful affair after all. The Baronet must be smitten, or he would never be in such a hurry to call. I shall see you mistress of that splendid place in the North, my love, depend upon it."

"That's just like you, mamma!" exclaimed the petted Anastasia, impatiently; "you always fancy that everything is going to happen just as you want it. I'm sure Sir Harold took no more notice of me last night than if I were the plainest gawky that ever emerged from a third-rate

boarding-school. And I daresay he has only come to-day in the hope of seeing *that* Miss Westford."

"What!" shrieked Mrs. Trevor, almost hysterically. "You don't mean to tell me that Sir Harold would presume to come to my house for the purpose of paying his addresses to your governess! Nonsense, Anastasia, you are really too absurd."

No more could be said, for the Baronet was announced, and the two ladies turned to receive him with their brightest smiles.

"My dear Sir Harold, how very kind of you to call to-day!" exclaimed the widow.

"Your party was so charming, Mrs. Trevor, that I really could not delay coming to tell you how thoroughly I enjoyed myself, and to express a hope that neither you nor your daughters were fatigued by your exertions in our behalf," answered the young man. "How magnificently Miss Trevor sang!" he added, bowing to Anastasia; "and Miss Theodosia; and that other young lady, Miss Westford—what a lovely voice she has!"

Anastasia crimsoned with anger. The Baronet did not even attempt to conceal his admiration of Violet. Mrs. Trevor's indignation knew no bounds, and yet she contrived to smile sweetly at the Baronet.

Nil desperandum is the motto of every manœuvring mother; and Mrs. Trevor was by no means disposed to abandon her hopes at the first disappointment. Even though Sir Harold admired the penniless governess, a little clever management and an unlimited amount of flattery might change the current of his fancies, and bring him to the feet of Anastasia.

This is what Mrs. Trevor thought; and this hope inspired her with heroic courage.

The Baronet talked of general subjects for some little time. He discussed the operas, the picture galleries, the botanical fêtes, the delights of a Sunday afternoon at the "Zoo," the Toxophilite Society's field-days in the neighbouring park, and the movements of the Royal Family, in the most conventional strain of polite commonplace; but Mrs. Trevor could see that he talked at random, and that he was thinking of other subjects than those in which he pretended to be interested. At last he broke out suddenly, without any reference to his previous conversation:

"What a charming girl that Miss Westford is! I never saw any one I so much admired. She is so lovely, so modest, so completely unconscious of her own beauty! She is really the most bewitching creature I ever beheld; and O, my dear Mrs. Trevor, if you wish to render me your grateful and devoted slave, pray introduce me to that charming girl's family! I want so much to know them, that I may have the opportunity of seeing more of her."

"Sir Harold, I really am at a loss to——"

"O, pray do not misunderstand me, my dear Mrs. Trevor. You surely cannot think that I should feel any less respect for that sweet girl, because I find her in a dependent position—going away from a party on foot, and all that kind of thing. No, Mrs. Trevor, I am not the man to be influenced by any consideration of that sort. I am no aristocrat, as you and all the world know very well indeed. My father won his position by sheer hard work, and there's a blundering old wheelbarrow kept in a lumber room at Ivry Place, which my grandfather used to wheel when he was a navvy, and helped to make the Slopsall Canal down in our county. So, you see, it wouldn't do for me to give myself airs. I am rich, independent, and can afford to marry the woman I love,

if I am only so happy as to win her regard. Under these circumstances, Mrs. Trevor, I am sure you will believe me when I declare the honourable nature of my intentions with regard to Miss Westford; and I know you are just the kind of warm-hearted woman to be fond of that feminine amusement called match-making. You'll not refuse to introduce me to her family, will you now?"

No words can describe Mrs. Trevor's rage and mortification as she listened to this speech. Here was the wealthy Baronet, whom she had intended to win as a husband for her own daughter, utterly indifferent to Anastasia's charms, and ready to throw himself at the feet of a friendless orphan girl, whom he had only seen once in his life. The fashionable widow was past-mistress of all the hypocrisies of polished society. She contrived, therefore, to conceal her aggravation, and looked at Sir Harold with a countenance expressive only of the most profound sympathy.

"My dear Sir Harold," she exclaimed, with a long-drawn sigh, "I pity you—I do indeed pity you. Nothing could be more charming than the sentiments which you so eloquently express. I only regret that they should be wasted upon an unworthy object."

"An unworthy object, Mrs. Trevor!" cried the Baronet; "what do you mean?"

"I have only this morning dismissed Miss Westford from my employment as an unfit associate for my dear children."

Annabella Trevor gave a little shiver of horror as she spoke. The Baronet turned pale, and the widow saw that her poisoned arrow had gone home to its mark.

"You dismissed her!" exclaimed Sir Harold. "An unfit associate! But how?"

"*That* I decline to tell you," answered Mrs. Trevor, with supreme dignity. "There are secrets which no honourable woman can ever bring herself to reveal. I will not sully my lips by repeating what has passed between Miss Westford and myself. It is enough for you to know that she was dismissed from this house—and in disgrace."

"But the nature of that disgrace, Mrs. Trevor?" asked the Baronet, in an almost imploring tone.

"*That*, I must repeat, I decline to tell you; and I must beg you, as a gentleman, not to press the question," answered the lady with dignity. "Surely, Sir Harold, you cannot doubt my word?"

"Doubt you, Mrs. Trevor! O, no, no. What motive could you possibly have for blighting the fair fame of this poor girl? I *cannot* doubt you. But the blow is very bitter to me. A few days ago, I should have ridiculed the mere idea of love at first sight; and yet I believe, upon my word, that I am as deeply attached to Miss Westford as if I had known her for half a lifetime. And to discover that she is unworthy of an honest man's regard! O, Mrs. Trevor, you cannot imagine how cruelly I feel this disappointment!"

In his almost boyish candour, the Baronet made no attempt to conceal the state of his feelings. Anastasia looked at him with mingled contempt and anger. She had always envied and disliked Violet Westford for her superior beauty; but now she hated her with as fierce a hatred as ever raged in a woman's breast.

Sir Harold Ivry rose to take leave.

"I fear I have made a fool of myself, and that you must really despise me, ladies," he said, blushing crimson, as he remembered the emotion he had betrayed; "but I am a spoiled child of fortune, and I am not used to disappointment—and I am the worst possible hand at

keeping a secret. Forgive me for having bored you with my affairs. Good morning."

He shook hands with both the ladies, and was about to leave; but Mrs. Trevor was not inclined to let him escape so easily.

"You will dine with us to-morrow evening, I hope, Sir Harold, and escort us to Covent Garden, where my dear friend Lady Mordaunt has given me her box. Pray don't say you are engaged elsewhere. Anastasia knows you are an excellent musical critic, and wants to hear your opinion of the new opera."

The young man hesitated for some moments, but at last accepted the invitation.

He did not do so from any regard for Mrs. Trevor or her daughter, but because he still cherished the hope that from them he should discover the truth about Violet Westford. He left the house very much depressed and disheartened by what he had heard, and ashamed of his impetuous devotion, now that he had been told that its object was base and unworthy. He had been accustomed to find life the pleasantest, easiest kind of affair, like a royal progress by special train, with a saloon-carriage fitted by Jackson and Graham to repose in, and all the stations draped with red cloth and festooned with garlands in honour of the favoured traveller. To-day, for the first time, he discovered that there is happiness which wealth cannot purchase, and his disappointment was even keener than that of the young spendthrift, who wanted a box for the opera on one of Jenny Lind's field-nights, and offered a hundred pounds for the object of his desire, only to be told that it was impossible of attainment even at that price; whereupon he left Mr. Mitchell's shop, murmuring dolefully, "By Jove, there's something that money won't buy!"

CHAPTER XV.

VIOLET RESOLVES UPON ENTERING A NEW SPHERE.

A cloud fell upon the little household in the purlieus of the Waterloo-road. Violet sought for fresh employment, but in vain. She was incapable of uttering a falsehood, and she did not attempt to conceal the fact of her having lately quitted Mrs. Montague Trevor's employment.

In every case she was asked for a reference to her late employer, and when she refused to refer to Mrs. Trevor, people shook their heads. The case looked suspicious, and no one would have anything to say to the helpless girl, whose youth and beauty were additional obstacles to her success.

Thus Violet found herself with a blighted character, helpless and friendless, in the vast city of London.

Now for the first time the poor girl's heart failed; her courage gave way. Her enforced idleness gave her time for thought, and she sat brooding upon her fate for hours together, until a profound melancholy took possession of her.

She had lost so much—a doting father; a betrothed lover, in whom she had so fondly trusted—it was scarcely strange that she should feel her life very hopeless and desolate, even though her mother and Lionel were still left to her.

Once, and once only, she had written to George

Stanmore, at the Poste Restante, Bruges. She had written to him, telling him of her father's death, and the sad changes of fortune which had followed that calamity. In a spirit of mingled pride and generosity she had released her lover from the engagement that bound him to her.

No answer had come to that letter. Violet could only imagine that Mr. Stanmore had left Bruges, or that he accepted her release in silence. The pain of this thought was very bitter; but Violet Westford was becoming used to sorrow. Neither her mother nor Lionel suspected the existence of that hidden grief, which made a dull aching anguish in the girl's breast.

And in the meantime they were poor, very poor. Toil as she might with her skilful needle, Clara Westford could earn very little towards the support of that small household; and Lionel's earnings as a copyist of law-papers were very uncertain. It was only by the most unfailing economy that this once prosperous family were able to pay the rent of the pitiful lodging, and obtain the commonest necessaries of life.

To Violet enforced idleness was almost insupportable. She saw those she loved toiling through the long weary days—hot summer days, whose sunshine brought back the remembrance of the shadowy gardens about the Grange, the cool depths of the forest, those deep and sheltered glades in which she had spent such careless hours of happiness with George Stanmore. When she saw her mother and Lionel toiling in their close, dingy London lodging, and felt that she could do nothing to help them, despair took possession of her heart.

Every day she answered fresh advertisements in the *Times* newspaper, the hire of which from a neighbouring stationer cost her a penny a day. Every day she walked weary miles, in order to form one of the crowd of helpless girls, highly educated and tenderly reared, whom

the iron hand of poverty has thrust out upon the hard world of London.

But her perseverance was of no avail. Without a reference to her former employer, no one would venture to trust in her. Even her beauty—that gift so precious for the pampered child of a luxurious home—became an impediment to her success, and gave rise to cruel suspicions about her in the minds of the worldly-wise.

She had doubtless been dismissed from her last situation because of some imprudence—or perhaps something worse than imprudence—which rendered her unfit to be the companion and guardian of innocence.

After efforts that would have almost exhausted the patience of a martyr, Violet's hope and courage at last failed her altogether, and she gave up all thought of obtaining another situation. She was crushed and bowed to the very earth under the burden of despair.

It was on a glorious day in August that this sense of utter hopelessness took possession of her mind. She had walked to Hampstead that morning, after breakfasting on a little dry bread and a teacupful of milk. She had walked from the Waterloo-road to the breezy Heath at Hampstead, and had presented herself before noon at a pretentious villa, only to be told by its prosperous mistress that she was a great deal too young for the situation.

"There was no age stated in the advertisement, madam," poor Violet pleaded almost piteously; "and I can assure you that I possess all the accomplishments required, or I should not have applied for the situation."

"Very likely," answered the lady of the villa, who was the wife of an ironmonger at the West-end; "very likely you have a school-girl's smattering of the accomplishments I require; but I could not possibly

intrust my children's education to a person of your age, and I really consider it almost an impertinence in a girl of nineteen to apply for such a position as governess in a house of this kind."

The lady tossed her head contemptuously as she uttered this speech. Had there been one spark of womanly feeling in her breast, she might have seen that poor Violet was well-nigh exhausted from sheer fatigue, and ready to drop fainting to the floor. She might have seen the mute anguish pourtrayed in the girl's face; and she might at least have offered a glass of wine from her well-stocked cellar, and a few words of sympathy and comfort from one Christian woman to another.

"Alas for the rarity of Christian charity" in this hard world! The lady of the villa only rang the bell, and desired her servant to show the "young person" out. Poor Violet found a seat upon the Heath, where she was able to rest for some time, in order to regain strength for the long homeward walk. There was no occasion for haste; why should she hurry home, when she had no good tidings for those whom she loved? She had only the old cruel story to tell—the story of failure and disappointment.

She sat for a long time, gazing dreamily at the dark roofs and steeples of the city, which were half hidden under a cloud of smoke in the valley beneath her. Then at last she rose, and walked slowly and despondently homewards.

The walk was a very long one; and the way she went took her across Long-acre and into Bow-street, which she entered at about three o'clock in the afternoon, dusty with her long walk in the high-road, pale and exhausted with fatigue.

Bow-street was very busy at this hour of the afternoon.

A series of cheap performances were being given at the close of the Covent-Garden opera-season, and people were buying tickets and engaging boxes for the night's entertainment.

Bow-street is the centre of the theatrical world of London. In this street the dramatic agents have their offices, and to those offices flock all classes of the theatrical profession, from the provincial Macready, who is only waiting to get an innings in order to set the town in a blaze, and who enters the official chamber with a pompous tragedy stalk, to the timid amateur aspirant for dramatic fame, who has never yet set foot upon a public stage, and who announces his approach by a faint nervous cough, expressive of profound self-abasement.

The street is redolent of the footlights. Here the theatrical wigmaker exhibits the flowing *chevelure* of roistering Charles Stuart—that supreme favourite of *vaudeville* and *commedietta*—side by side with the oily locks of *Tartuffe*, or the close-cropped poll of Jack Sheppard. There the theatrical hosier displays the sacred mysteries of his art, and treacherously reveals the means by which art and cotton-wool can supply the deficiencies of nature. Close at hand the theatrical gold-lace maker sets forth his glittering wares, and allows the vulgar eye to gloat upon the diadem of a Richard, and the jewelled sword-hilt of a Romeo. Next door hang Beauty's robes, limp and dowdy of aspect when untenanted by their fair mistress. Everywhere the specialty of the street reveals itself.

Walking slowly down this street, Violet Westford glanced, in sheer absence of mind, at the big brass plate upon the door of a dramatic agent's offices.

A dramatic agent! It was only after a few moments' reflection that she understood what the term meant.

A dramatic agent, of course, must be a person whose business it is to procure situations for actors and actresses.

A sudden and desperate fancy entered Violet's brain. She knew that people earned money, sometimes a great deal of money, by acting. She had read novels in which lovely young creatures, with a taste for histrionics, had walked straight from their domestic retirement on to the stage of Drury Lane, to take the town by storm on their first appearance, and to be the delight and glory of the universe, until prevailed upon to exchange the triumphs of the drama for the social successes of fashionable life by an adoring duke, who languishes to lay his strawberry leaves and rent-roll at their feet.

Why should she not be an actress? She was rejected on every side as a governess. In her despair, she would have been almost willing to have swept a crossing, if by so doing she might have helped her mother and Lionel.

Why should she not be an actress? The thought was not quite so wild as it seemed. Violet Westford had often acted in amateur theatricals in pleasant country-houses near the Grange, and at merry Christmas gatherings in her own home. She had shown considerable talent upon these occasions, and had been much admired and applauded for that talent; and she had no idea of the width of that gulf which divides the clever young actress of the domestic charade from the hard-working artist who woos public favour.

She remembered her social successes—not with any feeling of vanity, but as one last wild hope, to which, in the depth of her despair, she was ready to cling, as the drowning sailor clings to the frailest plank that ever floated on a blustrous ocean.

Acting on the impulse of the moment, she seemed

inspired by a boldness that was strange to her. She entered the open doorway by which she had seen the brass plate, and went up an uncarpeted staircase leading to the first-floor. Here she saw the word “office” painted upon a door opposite to her. She knocked timidly, and a voice, that sounded harsh and abrupt in her unaccustomed ears, told her to enter.

She went into the room, and found herself in the presence of a man of about five-and-thirty years of age, who was sitting at a table writing, with a heap of papers, open letters, and many-coloured playbills lying about him.

The walls of the room were adorned with big rainbow-hued playbills and theatrical portraits. In one of the curtainless windows a foppishly dressed man was lounging, with his back to the interior of the room.

The agent looked up from his writing, and bowed to Violet; but he did not speak. He evidently waited for her to state her business.

The poor girl’s courage failed her all at once. Physically exhausted by her long and weary walk, she was not capable of any very heroic mental effort. She dropped into the chair to which the agent pointed. Her lips moved tremulously; but she could not speak.

Fortunately, the agent was by no means an ill-natured man. He saw Violet’s embarrassment, and came to her relief.

“You want an engagement, I suppose?” he said.

“Yes,” faltered Violet.

“Very good. You’ve brought some bills with you, I suppose?”

“Bills, sir? I——”

“Yes; bills from the theatre where you were last engaged. What’s your line of business? The juvenile lead, I suppose, or first walking-ladies, hay? Where have you been acting lately?”

Violet shook her head.

“I have never acted in any theatre,” she said. “I have only acted in private theatricals at the houses of my friends.”

“What!” cried the agent. “Do you mean to say you’ve never acted on a public stage?”

“Never.”

Mr. Henry de Lancy, the agent, who had been born a Higgins, gave a long whistle, expressive of extreme surprise.

“Then you’re a regular amateur, my dear girl,” he said, “and as ignorant as a baby. I don’t suppose the manager of any theatre in England would care to engage you—unless you were willing to go for a month or so on trial, without any salary.”

Without any salary! Violet’s heart sank in her breast. It was the salary, and the salary alone, she wanted. She did not wish to exhibit herself before a gaping crowd. She only wanted to earn money for those she loved.

“You don’t seem to like the idea,” said Mr. de Lancy. “Most young ladies like you are very glad to get the chance of acting, and would often be willing even to pay for it. Indeed, there are many of them who do pay—and pretty stiffly too.”

“Perhaps so,” Violet answered sadly; “but I am very poor, and I want to earn money. I thought that I could get a salary as an actress.”

“And so you can, my dear, when you’ve learnt how to

act; but acting is an art, like every other art, and must be learnt by experience. If you like to go to some little country theatre, and play small parts for a couple of months without any payment, in order to get a little accustomed to your business, I'll look over my books and see if I can manage the matter for you."

"A country theatre, sir!" exclaimed Violet, "and no salary! O, that is quite useless for me. I want to be in London, with my mother, and I *must* earn money."

The agent flung himself back in his chair with a half-contemptuous shrug of his shoulders.

"You want impossibilities, my dear young lady," he said. "I can't be of any use to you. Good afternoon."

He dipped his pen in the ink, and went on with his writing. Violet rose to leave the room. She began to think that the career of an actress must be attended with as many difficulties as that of a governess.

But as she stood on the threshold of the door, the man who had been lounging in the window, and who had turned round to stare at her during this brief scene, suddenly addressed her.

"Stop a bit, my dear," he said. "Just sit down five minutes, will you?—De Lancy, my boy, what a fool you are!" he added, addressing the agent.

Mr. de Lancy looked up from his writing.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Why, what a confounded fool you must be not to see that this young lady is the very person we want at the Cir!"

"The Cir" was an abbreviation of the Circenses; and this gentleman was no less an individual than Mr. Maltravers, the stage-manager of the Circenses Theatre.

“What for?” asked the agent.

“Why, for the Queen of Beauty, to be sure, in the new burlesque. Haven’t I been hunting all over London for a pretty girl, and haven’t you sent me all sorts of guys and dowdies to apply for the situation? and isn’t this young lady Venus herself in a straw bonnet?”

Violet blushed crimson. The stage-manager smiled as he perceived her confusion.

“You’ll get used to this sort of thing by-and-by, my dear,” he said. “Now, let us understand each other. You want to be engaged at a London theatre?”

“I do, sir.”

“And you’ve never been on any stage in your life?”

“Never.”

“Then all I can tell you is this: the first moment you tried to open those pretty lips of yours before a London audience you would find it almost as difficult to speak three words as if you had been born deaf and dumb. You think because you’ve read Shakespeare, and acted in a charade now and then among your friends, that you only want a chance in order to burst upon the world as a modern Siddons. But that kind of thing is not quite so easy as you imagine. No, my dear young lady, acting isn’t an accomplishment that comes natural to people, any more than playing the piano, or painting pictures, or speaking foreign languages. Acting must be learnt, my dear, and it isn’t learnt in a day.”

Violet looked despairingly at the speaker, who said all this in the airiest and pleasantest manner.

“What am I to do, then, sir?” she asked piteously. “I have no time to learn an art. I want to earn money, and at once.”

“And you shall earn some money, my dear, and very easily too,” replied the stage-manager.

“O, sir, tell me what you mean!” exclaimed Violet, who was bewildered by the stage-manager’s vivacity.

“What would you say if I were to pay you eighteen shillings a week for sitting in a golden temple for ten minutes every night, in one of the most splendid dresses that was ever made in a theatre? What would you say to appearing as the Queen of Beauty in the last scene of our burlesque? You’ll have nothing to say; you’ll have nothing to do, but sit still and allow the audience to admire you; and you will be paid the liberal sum of eighteen shillings a week. What do you say, young lady? Do you accept my offer?”

“O yes, yes; most willingly,” answered Violet.

Eighteen shillings a week—nearly double the amount of Mrs. Trevor’s miserable salary! Violet was only too eager to secure so much prosperity.

“I accept your offer, and with gratitude!” she exclaimed.

Then, suddenly, the flush of excitement faded from her face, and she grew very pale. Would her mother and Lionel—proud, high-spirited Lionel—would those two, who loved her so dearly, ever consent that she should earn money in this manner? Could the young Oxonian—so quick to feel the humiliation of those he loved—permit his sister to be stared at by an audience who paid for the privilege of criticising or admiring her?

“Surely, when we are so poor, they would scarcely object to any honest means by which I could earn money,” Violet thought.

But she dared not decide the question without her

mother's permission.

"Will you give me time to consult my friends?" she said. "I was too hasty in what I said just now. I cannot accept your offer without my mother's consent."

"Very right and proper," answered the stage-manager approvingly. "But you must get your mother's permission between this and eleven o'clock to-morrow morning, or I shall be obliged to find another young lady for the Queen of Beauty. I suppose you can come to me at the theatre by half-past ten o'clock to-morrow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, then; there's my card. You must go to the stage-door, and if you give that to the door-keeper, he'll send you to me directly. Mind you are punctual, for there are plenty of people anxious for the situation. All the ugliest ballet-girls in London fancy themselves the very thing for the Queen of Beauty."

Violet promised to be punctual. There was a fee due to Mr. de Lancy; but when that gentleman found the poor girl was penniless, he very good-naturedly volunteered to wait until she had received her first week's salary.

Violet hurried homewards after this interview, rejoiced beyond measure at having the chance of help held out to her. She told her mother and Lionel of what had happened, and implored them to lay aside all prejudice at a time when poverty in its worst bitterness had entered their household.

At first, both Mrs. Westford and Lionel were strongly averse to her proposition; but little by little the girl won their consent.

Lionel's concurrence was given unwillingly, even at the last; it stung him to the very quick to think that his sister should be obliged to earn money by exhibiting her lovely

face to a careless, perhaps insolent crowd. But when he looked at his mother's careworn countenance, the beautiful lines of which were already sharpened by the cruel hand of want, his courage gave way, and he burst into a passion of tears—those tears which seem so terrible when they flow from the eyes of a brave man.

"Do as you will, Violet!" he exclaimed, dashing those bitter drops away with a hasty passionate gesture. "How can we refuse the help of your feeble hands? I am a man; I have received an education which cost my father a small fortune; and yet, work as I may, I cannot earn enough to keep my mother and sister from penury."

Thus it was that Violet presented herself at the stage-door of the Circenses at the appointed hour on the following morning.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

To Violet Westford scarcely anything could have been more trying than the ordeal which she now had to undergo. What scene could be more strange to this delicate-minded, home-bred, carefully nurtured girl, than the busy world behind the curtain in a great London theatre?

The door-keeper of the Circenses received the card which she presented to him, and, after uttering some half-sulky, half-insolent remark, gave her into the charge of a dirty boy, who was to take her upstairs to the stage, where she would find Mr. Maltravers, the stage-manager.

Poor Violet was almost bewildered by the many dark passages along which her conductor led her. There seemed scarcely a gleam of the summer sunlight in all the great building, and the underground passages smelt like vaults or charnel-houses—charnel-houses in which there was a perpetual escape of gas, mingled with that odour of corduroy and shoe-leather which the working classes are apt to leave behind them, and which a very witty lady once spoke of as their *esprit de corps*.

At last the dirty boy led the way up a little break-neck staircase, opened a slamming wooden door, and ushered Violet into a corner, where crowds of shabbily dressed men and women were lounging amongst heaps of piled-up scenery.

These men and women were the inferiors and subordinates of the company—the banner bearers and supernumeraries who appear in grand processions, and the ill-paid girls who fill up the stage in crowded scenes.

Many of these girls were dressed neatly and plainly; others were distinguished by a tawdry shabbiness—a cheap finery of costume; but there were some girls whom Violet saw lounging together in little groups, whose attire would have scarcely seemed out of place upon women of rank and wealth—handsome girls some of them; and they looked at the stranger's shabby mourning dress with a supercilious stare.

Violet had to stand for some time amongst these different groups, waiting until it should please the stage-manager to come to her.

That gentleman was working as hard as it is possible for a man to work; running from one side of the great stage to the other; giving directions here, there, and everywhere; abusing those whose stupidity or neglect annoyed him; giving a hasty word of praise now and then; answering questions, writing letters, correcting the rough proofs of playbills, looking at scenery; stooping over the orchestra to say a few words to the *répétiteur*; and appearing to do a dozen things at once, so quickly did he pass from one task to another.

Little by little Violet became accustomed to the half-darkness of the place, which was only illumined by the glare of a row of lamps at the edge of the stage, technically known as the "float."

As she grew better able to distinguish objects around her, she felt still more keenly the strangeness of her position. The handsomely attired girls stared at her, always with the same supercilious gaze; and at last one of them, after looking at her fixedly for some time,

addressed her. She was a beautiful, dark-eyed, Jewish-looking girl, and her costume was more extravagant than that of any of her companions.

A train of mauve moire antique, bordered with a deep flounce of the richest block lace, trailed upon the dirty boards of the theatre. Over this dress the Jewess wore a lace shawl of the costliest description; and a small white-chip bonnet, adorned with mauve feathers and silver butterflies, crowned her queen-like head.

She was a magnificent looking woman—a woman who might have graced a throne; but there was something almost terrible in her beauty—something that sent a thrill of indefinable pain and terror through the heart of the thoughtful observer.

Her dark eyes had an ominous lustre; there was a hectic bloom upon her oval cheek, and that cheek, perfect though its outline still was, had a sunken look that presaged ill.

A physician would have said that the stamp of decay was upon this splendid creature, the foreshadowing of an early death.

“Pray, are you engaged here?” she asked of Violet; “because, unless you are engaged, you will not be allowed to stand in this wing. It is against the rules for strangers to hang about the theatre.”

There was an insolence in the girl’s tone which aroused Violet Westford’s innate dignity.

She replied very quietly, but with perfect self-possession.

“I am here because I have been told to come here,” she said.

“By whom?”

“By Mr. Maltravers.”

“O, indeed!” exclaimed the Jewess; “then in that case I suppose you are engaged?”

“I believe so.”

“For what?”

“To appear in the new burlesque.”

The Jewess flushed crimson, and an angry light gleamed in her splendid eyes.

“What!” she exclaimed, “then I suppose you are to be the Queen of Beauty in the grand tableau?”

“So Mr. Maltravers told me.”

The Jewess laughed—a hollow laugh, that was very painful to hear. To sit in the golden temple, as the representative of all that is lovely, the observed of all observers, had been Esther Vanberg’s ambition. She was the handsomest girl in the theatre, and she fully expected to be chosen for this distinction. So when she found a stranger was about to be engaged, she flew to Mr. Maltravers, and complained to him bitterly of an arrangement which she declared to be a deliberate insult to herself.

The stage-manager was a thorough man of the world, accustomed to deal with all the different airs and graces of the company under his rule.

He shrugged his shoulders, paid the handsome Jewess some very high-flown compliments, but told her he wanted her to fill another part of the tableau, and that he must have a new lady for the Queen of Beauty.

The truth of the matter was, that in the opinion of Mr. Maltravers the beauty of Esther Vanberg was on the wane. She was very well known to the regular audience at the Circenses, and, handsome though she was, people

might be, perhaps, just a little tired of her beauty.

Beyond this, there was something in Esther's beauty that was almost demoniac in character—something which reflected the reckless wildness of her life and the violence of her temper. Mr. Maltravers had the eye of an artist. His taste in the composition of a stage picture was scarcely inferior to that of Vestris herself, beneath whose despotic sway he had served his apprenticeship in the art of stage management. For the central figure of his tableau he wanted a woman whose beauty should possess the charm of youth and innocence. Thus it was that he had been peculiarly struck by the appearance of Violet Westford. He was a hard, worldly-minded man of business, but he was devoted to the dramatic art, and he held the interests of the theatre before every other consideration.

He came off the stage presently, and made his way to the spot where Esther and Violet were standing.

"Good morning, my dear," he said to Violet, addressing her with a fatherly familiarity that was entirely free from impertinence. "I'm very glad to see you. You've made up your mind to accept the engagement?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, then; go upstairs to the wardrobe—any one will show you the way—and ask Mrs. Clements to measure you for your new dress. You can take this," he added, scrawling a few words in pencil on the back of a card. "Mrs. C. knows all about the dress. There, run along, that's a good girl."

Before Violet could reply, Mr. Maltravers had returned to the centre of the stage, and was busy among the scene-shifters. A good-natured looking, gentle-voiced girl, very simply but yet very neatly dressed, who had been sitting in a dark corner of the side-scenes working crochet, came forward and offered to conduct Violet to the wardrobe-

room, and the two set out together.

It was a long journey—up staircases that seemed interminable to Violet; but at last they arrived at a great, bare whitewashed apartment, immediately under the roof of the theatre—an apartment which was littered from one end to the other with scraps of gorgeous-hued satin and glittering tissue, spangles, ribbons, and gold-lace. About twenty women were at work here, and to one of these Violet was conducted.

Mr. Maltravers's card produced an immediate effect. The wardrobe-mistress left her work, and proceeded to take Violet's measure for the dress. She was in raptures with the young girl's appearance, and told her she would look lovely in a robe of silver tissue, spangled with stars, and with draperies of rose-coloured crape.

"The dress will be perfection, miss, *per*fection, and will just suit your beautiful fair skin. Now don't you let any of the ballet-ladies persuade you to plaster your face with *blanc de perle*, or *blanc Rosati*, or *blanc de* something, as most of them do, until their faces have about us much expression as you'll see in a whitewashed wall. I shall take great pains with the costume, for I know Mr. Maltravers has set his heart upon the Temple of Beauty being a great success. My youngest little girl is to be one of the Cupids, and she does nothing but talk of it at home. She went on in last year's pantomime as the Singing Oyster, and did *so* well, bless her dear little heart!"

To Violet all this talk was utterly strange. Already she began to look forward with fear to her first appearance on a public stage; but for the sake of those she loved she would have dared more than the ordeal before her.

She went downstairs, and at the back of the stage met Mr. Maltravers, who told her to come at ten o'clock the

next morning for the rehearsal of the new burlesque.

“O, by the bye,” he said, “what name shall I put down in the cast? You never told me your name.”

“My name is Wes——,” Violet began; but she stopped abruptly, remembering that the subordinate position she was about to occupy in that theatre would be a kind of disgrace to her lost father’s name.

The stage-manager seemed to guess the nature of her scruples.

“You are not obliged to give me your real name, my dear,” he said kindly; “if you like to take a false name, you can do so. Most actresses and ladies of the ballet assume false names: they have generally some relations or friends who object to their appearance on the stage—straitlaced people, you know, who fancy that the stage-door is the entrance to a kind of Tophet.”

“You are very good, sir. I should not wish my position here to be known,” Violet faltered. “I honour and admire the dramatic art, and those who profess it; but as my position in the theatre will be a very humble one, I shall be glad to keep my name a secret. You can call me Watson, if you please, Mr. Maltravers.”

“Very well, my dear; so be it. You will be known here as Miss Watson. And don’t you be put out if Esther Vanberg gives herself airs because you’ve been chosen for the best place in the tableau. You just attend to your business, and if Vanberg annoys you, come to me, and I’ll take my lady down a peg or two.”

CHAPTER XVII.

CRUEL KINDNESS.

While Violet began her lowly career at the Circenses, Lionel made a new effort to earn a few pounds. His powers as an artist were of no mean order, and he made a desperate attempt to turn his talents to some account. He gathered together a little bundle of sketches, some in water-colours, some in pen-and-ink, but all of them exhibiting considerable dash and talent: sporting sketches, military sketches, graceful groups *à la* Watteau, cavaliers in the ever-picturesque costume of the Restoration, all the work of happy hours at the Grange. With this bundle under his arm, Lionel Westford sallied forth one wet afternoon in quest of some enterprising dealer in art.

Never had the streets of London looked duller or dingier than they did to-day. There were few carriages even in the best thoroughfares, and the muddy foot-passengers who trod wearily upon the sloppy pavement seemed all of them more or less at odds with fortune.

Lionel Westford crossed Waterloo Bridge and made his way by different short cuts to Regent-street.

Here, as well as in the meaner quarters of the town, the foot-passengers might suffer all the inconvenience and discomfort of muddy pavements and perpetual rain; but pampered beauty, rolling here and there in her luxurious carriage, could descend therefrom to be sheltered by the huge umbrella held by a deferential footman, and to be

escorted into a shop as elegantly and as comfortably furnished as a West-end drawing-room.

Lionel entered the shop of a fashionable printseller. It was comparatively empty, and he was able to make his way at once to the counter, where the principal was busily occupied sorting some engravings in a portfolio.

Three or four fashionable-looking men were lounging near the door, and glanced with supreme indifference at the shabbily-dressed stranger, whose threadbare coat and shining hat, dripping with rain, too palpably betrayed his poverty.

Lionel Westford approached the counter, and after a few preliminary words, opened his portfolio.

The printseller looked at the sketches readily enough. They were very clever, he said; they gave indications of great talent, but unluckily they were not wanted; there were plenty of such things to be had, done by the regular people.

Lionel Westford's cheek grew paler as he saw his last hope deserting him.

"Can you not give me some kind of employment?" he asked, with a feverish energy. "You think, perhaps, I shall want high prices for what I do. You are mistaken. I will work for starvation wages, and work untiringly—I only ask you to give me a chance."

The printseller shook his head decisively.

"Quite impossible," he said. "I have more of these kind of things in my stock than I shall be able to sell in a twelvemonth. Photography has quite superseded this kind of work. The fashion for scrap-books has gone out."

"But if I were to paint a more important picture——"

"There would be no market for it, my good young man.

You must have some kind of reputation as an artist before you can expect your pictures to sell," answered the shopkeeper impatiently.

Lionel shut his portfolio, and turned away from the counter with a feeling of heart-sickness in his breast. None, save those who have endured such disappointments, can tell their anguish.

His face was deadly pale; his lips contracted rigidly; and there was an angry look in his eyes. He was in the humour which would have sent a Frenchman on the first stage of that fatal journey which halts at the *filets de St. Cloud*, to make its dismal end in the darksome cells of the Morgue.

As he turned from the counter he found himself face to face with a woman—a woman whose beauty startled him by its splendour.

Never before had he seen a face that seemed to him so wondrous in its magical charm. It was not an English type of beauty. The large, almond-shaped eyes, darkly lustrous yet soft and dewy even in their lustre, were like the eyes of a Madonna by Correggio. The rich complexion was foreign in its clear olive tint. The hair, simply dressed under a pink crape bonnet, was of that bluish-black which a painter would choose for the massy tresses of an Assyrian queen.

This Spanish-looking divinity was dressed in the height of fashion and the perfection of taste, as it seemed to Lionel Westford, whose artistic eye took in every detail of her appearance, even in that dreary crisis of his fate. His own troubles and perplexities vanished out of his mind as he looked at this unknown beauty, and he was wholly absorbed by the painter's delight in loveliness of form and colour.

The young lady wore a dress of some silken material, in which violet and silvery grey were artfully intermingled. A priceless cashmere shawl draped her perfect figure, lending itself to those diagonal lines which are agreeable to the painter's eye. Close behind this brilliant demoiselle appeared a stout but very stately matron of the chaperone class—the kind of person created for domestic surveillance—the modern form under which the dragon of the famous garden guards the unapproachable fruit.

Lionel Westford was scarcely conscious of this latter lady's presence. It was the young beauty whose sudden appearance bewildered him, as he turned away, despairing, from the printseller's counter.

He gazed for some moments upon the unknown beauty, dazzled by her splendour, and then passed hastily on. He wanted to leave the shop—he felt eager to withdraw himself from the influence of that beauteous face. It seemed to him as if there was something almost stifling in the atmosphere. What had he to do with such a creature as this pampered and doubtless high-bred beauty?—he, a beggar, an outcast, a kind of Pariah, by reason of his poverty?

He would have passed out of the shop; but, to his utter bewilderment, the fashionable beauty followed him towards the door, after a brief whispered disputation with the elder lady, and laid her little gloved hand upon the damp sleeve of his shabby coat. The gesture was only momentary. The slim fingers touched him as lightly as a butterfly's wing; and yet a kind of thrill seemed to vibrate through his veins.

"Do not go just yet," pleaded a low earnest voice; "I should be glad to speak with you for a few minutes."

"I am quite at your service, madam."

At her service! How cold and formal the words

sounded as he uttered them! What was she to him but a stranger, whose face had shone upon him for the first time only five minutes ago? And yet he felt as if he could have surrendered his life to give her pleasure. He stood with his hat in his hand, waiting until she should address him.

If he was embarrassed, she was still more so. The rich crimson blood rushed to her cheeks—the dark fringes drooped over her eyes. And yet the impulse that stirred her heart was only one of womanly compassion; it was pity alone that had impelled her to address Lionel Westford.

She had overheard his appeal to the shopkeeper. She had perceived from his tone and manner that he was a gentleman, unaccustomed to bitter struggles for daily bread. She had seen his white face, almost ghastly in its look of despair; and, with impulsive generosity, she had determined, if possible, to help him.

“You are very much in need of employment?” she said hesitatingly.

“My dearest Julia,” exclaimed the outraged matron, “this is really such a very unprecedented kind of proceeding, I must protest against such inconsiderate conduct.”

“My dear Mrs. Melville, for once in a way don’t protest against anything: I am only going to speak to this gentleman about a matter of business,” returned the young lady, just a little impatiently.

“But, my dear Julia, your papa——”

“Papa always allows me to have my own way.”

“But, my dear love, this per—this—ahem!—gentleman is an utter stranger to you.”

All this was spoken in an undertone, but Lionel could perceive that the language of remonstrance was being addressed to the young lady by an outraged duenna, and he moved again towards the door, anxious to terminate an embarrassing situation.

The young lady's generous impulses were not to be subjugated by matronly caution.

She stopped Lionel once more as he was about to leave the shop.

"Pray do not hesitate to answer me," she said. "I heard you say just now that you needed employment."

"I only said the truth, madam. I need it very much."

"And would you be particular as to the nature of the employment, so long as it were tolerably remunerative?"

"Particular, madam!" exclaimed Lionel. "I would sweep a crossing in the muddy street yonder, or hold horses at the doors of the clubs. I would do anything that an honest man may do, in order to get bread for those I love."

"For those you love!" repeated the lady. "You have a young wife, perhaps—or even children—whom you find it difficult to support?"

"O no, madam! I have no wife to reproach me for my poverty. The dear ones of whom I spoke are my mother and sister."

"I think I could offer you remunerative employment," said the Spanish beauty, still in the same hesitating manner, "if the nature of it would not be unpleasant to you."

"Unpleasant to me, madam!" exclaimed Lionel. "Believe me, there is no fear of that. Pray speak—command me, in any way you please."

"I have an only brother," answered the lady, "who possesses the same talent as yourself. He is abroad now; and indeed we have been separated for some time; but we are truly attached to each other, and everything relating to him is sacred in my eyes. When he went away from home he left behind him a great quantity of sketches—things to which he attached no value, but which are very precious to me. I am anxious to get these drawings mounted by some one with artistic taste. I should be very glad if you would undertake the task. Our house in the country is a very large one; and I have no doubt papa would give you rooms in it while you were engaged in carrying out my wishes. I will ask him to write to you on the subject, if you like. In the mean time, here is my card."

She opened an exquisitely carved ivory case, and handed Lionel a card, while the outraged matron looked on in silence, with an air of wounded dignity that approached the tragic.

Her tone and manner throughout, even when she was most hesitating, seemed those of one accustomed to command. There was an imperious grandeur in her beauty, which contrasted strongly with her maidenly shyness in addressing a stranger.

The name which Lionel Westford read upon the card was

MISS GODWIN,
Wilmingdon Hall, Herts.

Miss Godwin of Wilmingdon Hall! Lionel Westford started, and recoiled a little from his lovely companion.

"I dare say you know my father's name," she said; "almost everybody knows Mr. Godwin the banker."

"I don't know what people would say if they knew Mr.

Godwin's daughter went about the world picking up strange young men in shops," thought the matron.

Lionel faltered some few words in reply to Miss Godwin, but those words were not intelligible.

Rupert Godwin's daughter! This girl, who was anxious to be his patroness, his benefactress, was no other than the daughter of Rupert Godwin, his mother's worst enemy!

Could he accept any favour from that man's race? And, on the other hand, how could he now refuse this girl's help, so generously offered, so eagerly accepted, a few moments before?

He was silent. He stood with the card in his hand, staring absently at the name inscribed upon it, while a sharp mental struggle went on within his breast.

What was he to do? Was he, who so needed help, to reject this most unexpected succour, this friendly rope flung out to him at the moment when he was buffeting with waves that threatened his annihilation? Was he to refuse the help offered in this crisis of his life, in deference to a feeling which was, perhaps, after all, only a foolish prejudice?

He thought of his mother's broken home. He believed that Rupert Godwin had only acted as any other hard-headed, callous-hearted man of business might have done. But the memory of that desolate home was very vivid in his mind, and he had long ago learned to look upon the banker as a bitter enemy.

Yet he *could not* reject Julia Godwin's offer of assistance. The images of his mother and sister seemed to fade from his mind. He stood before Julia Godwin bewildered by conflicting emotions, helpless as some creature under the influence of a spell.

“Shall I ask Papa to write to you about terms and other arrangements? Will you consent to mount my brother’s sketches?” asked the soft voice, while the chaperone still looked on with the stony stare of amazement.

“Yes, I am at your service. I will do what you please,” answered Lionel.

“You are very good. And to what address shall papa write?”

The young man paused for a moment, and then named a post-office in a street near his lodging.

Julia Godwin wrote the address on the back of one of her cards with the jewelled pencil dangling amongst the costly toys at her watch-chain.

“And the name?” she asked.

“Lewis Wilton,” Lionel answered, after another brief pause.

He could only enter Rupert Godwin’s house under a false name. Henceforward his independence would be gone, for there would be falsehood and dishonour in his life.

He felt this; and a sense of shame mingled with his delight in the thought that he and Julia Godwin would meet again.

“And now I am quite at your service, dear Mrs. Melville,” she said to her duenna, placidly ignoring the tempest of indignation with which the matron’s breast had been swelling. “Yet stay, I had almost forgotten to make my purchases.”

She went to the counter, and bought some trifling articles, while Lionel waited to escort the two ladies to their carriage.

It was a very magnificent equipage; and the young man thought, as Julia Godwin bowed to him from the window, that she looked like some foreign princess, dazzling alike by her beauty and by the splendour of her surroundings.

He little knew that the infamous theft of his father's hardly-earned fortune had alone preserved that splendid equipage from the hands of infuriated creditors. He little knew that all his own sufferings were occasioned by the diabolical fraud which had enabled Rupert Godwin to stem the tide in his affairs, and float into new enterprises that had brought him the command of money.

Yes; the twenty thousand pounds had saved the banker's commercial position, and had enabled him to enter upon new speculations, which had been singularly, almost miraculously, fortunate.

Lucifer sometimes favours his children. Harley Westford's money had been very *lucky* to Rupert Godwin.

And yet, hard and resolute as the banker's nature was, there were times when he would have gladly sacrificed all his position in the commercial world if he could have recalled the day upon which he first saw the captain of the *Lily Queen*.

Lionel stood on the muddy pavement, lingering until Godwin's carriage was quite out of sight.

Then he turned slowly away, and walked homeward; heedless of the fast-falling rain—almost unconscious of the way by which he went; entirely absorbed in thoughts of the lovely face that had so lately beamed upon him—the low musical voice which seemed still to sound in his ear.

But, think as he would of the beautiful Julia, he could not quite banish from his mind the memory of his

mother's trials. What would she think of her only son, could she but know that he was about to accept service with the man who had rendered her home desolate, the man of whom she never spoke without a shudder of aversion?

"There is something horribly base in this business," thought the young man. "False to Rupert Godwin, since I enter his house as a concealed enemy; false to my mother, whose natural hatred of this man I must outrage by any dealings with him or his race. False every way! What can I do but despise myself for my meanness and folly? No!—come what may, I will not be so utterly weak and degraded. I will not enter the house of Rupert Godwin!"

But there is a Nemesis who guides the footsteps of the avenger. It was destined that Lionel Westford should enter Rupert Godwin's house under a false name.

The hand of fatality pointed to Wilmingdon Hall. Harley Westford's son was to go thither.

Chance seemed to have brought about that which was to be the first step in a long train of circumstances leading, slowly but surely, towards discovery and retribution.

Two days after his interview with Julia Godwin, Lionel called at the post-office, and received a letter from the banker.

It was brief, but not uncourteous:

"SIR,—In accordance with my daughter's request and recommendation, I am prepared to employ you for some weeks in the cleaning and mounting of my son's sketches.

The salary I can offer you is five guineas a week; and you can be accommodated with rooms at my house.

"I shall naturally expect a reference to some person of position who can testify to the respectability of your character and antecedents.

"Yours obediently,
"RUPERT GODWIN.

"*Wilmingdon Hall, Herts*."

CHAPTER XVIII.

WILMINGDON HALL.

Lionel Westford yielded to the influence of the bright face which had looked at him so compassionately in the moment of his despair. He gave way to the temptation against which he had struggled resolutely and manfully, only to break down in the end; and he wrote to Rupert Godwin, accepting the engagement offered him.

Before writing this letter the young man called upon an old college companion, a shallow-minded but kind-hearted young idler, from whom he had kept aloof since his reverse of fortune. It was very much against the grain that he went to ask a favour at the hands of this gentleman, but he had no alternative. Mr. Godwin required some testimony as to the respectability of the stranger whom he was to admit into his household, and Frederick Dudley, his once familiar chum, was the only person to whom Lionel could apply.

Mr. Dudley willingly consented to testify to his old friend's merits. He knew very little of the changes that had befallen the Westfords, and he jumped at once to the conclusion that Lionel's assumption of a false name was only a part of some romantic scheme.

"I see it all, Westford," exclaimed the young man, "though you are so confoundedly close with a fellow. It's a love affair, that's what it is; you've fallen head over heels in love with this old fogy's handsome daughter—I've met Julia Godwin in society, and a remarkably fine

girl she is, though not *my* style—and you want to get into the house disguised as a poor artist. Quite a romantic dodge, upon my word, and I envy you the spirits for the adventure! I'm so deucedly used-up myself that I should never have thought of such a thing. Come now, confess that I've hit it;—eh, old boy?"

"I can confess nothing," answered Lionel; "but I must not allow you to entertain any false ideas with regard to Miss Godwin. I have only seen that young lady once in my life, and then only for a few minutes."

"Very likely, my dear boy; and for all that you may be awfully in love with her. There's such a thing as love at first sight, you know, if we're to believe those prosy old poets. I don't understand the thing myself; but then I'm so deucedly used-up. I have not experienced the tender passion since I was spoony on a pretty little pastrycook at Eton," added the young simpleton, whose moustache had only lately begun to sprout.

"At any rate, I may rely upon your kind offices, Dudley?" asked Lionel, as he prepared to leave his friend's chambers.

"You shall have them with all my heart, dear boy. But you'll stop to luncheon, won't you? I can give you a grilled chicken, and a dry sherry that you'll not match every day in the week. I shall so enjoy a smoke and a chat with you. It will recall the old times, you know, when we were young and fresh. What have you been doing with yourself lately, old fellow? I haven't seen you for the last six months."

"No, my dear Dudley," answered Lionel; "and very few of my friends have seen me during that time."

"Why not?"

"Because your world is no longer my world. Since my

poor father was lost at sea, a great change has taken place in my fortunes. Such lucky young scapegraces as you can no longer be my companions, for I have entered the ranks of the breadwinners."

"But, my dear Lionel," exclaimed the young man, "surely your friends could be of some service to you! I haven't a very large balance at my banker's, for the relieving officer has all the parochial hardness of heart, but so far as it goes it is entirely at your disposal."

Lionel wrung his friend's hand with a grateful pressure.

"My dear Fred, I know what a good fellow you are, and I thank you most heartily; but I am now certain of employment which will be tolerably remunerative. Good-bye, old friend!"

"And you don't like me well enough to borrow a few tenners just to carry on the war with?"

"No, thanks, Dudley; I can do without the tenners, if I get the five pounds a week Mr. Godwin is willing to give me for some very easy work."

"Do you want an introduction to my tailor? I keep the fellow an unconscionable time waiting for his money, but I make a point of recommending him to my friends. What a pity a fellow's friends have such a knack of going through the Bankruptcy Court, by the way! It takes so much off the value of one's introductions. Shall I give you a line to my snip?"

"No, dear boy, I'll not victimise him, this time. I have the remnant of my University extravagances in that way, and can make a decent appearance at Wilmingdon Hall."

"You will come and see me again, dear boy?"

"Yes, when my position has improved; until then, good-bye."

Three days after this interview, Lionel Westford left King's Cross on his way to Hertfordshire. For the first time in his life the young man had told his mother a falsehood. He had told her that artistic work had been offered him in the town of Hertford, and that he was about to occupy himself for a few weeks in that place.

Clara Westford was grieved at the thought of even a brief separation from her son; but she had seen his spirit drooping, and a dark cloud upon his brow, so she was glad to think that he would have employment and change of scene. Lionel's conscience upbraided him cruelly as he left that devoted mother; and yet he tried to reason with himself against his scruples. Was not Rupert Godwin's money as good as that of any other man? and would it not purchase comfort for that dear patient sufferer? and was he, Lionel Westford the pauper, to fling away the chance of fortune because it was offered by the banker's hand?

Thus it was that he went to Wilmingdon Hall. Rupert Godwin had only yielded to a caprice of his daughter's when he consented to engage the young artist. Julia's influence over her father was almost unbounded. The cold heart for her grew warm and human; the remorseless nature became softened. Rupert Godwin hated his son; for he knew that the young man had read the secrete of his inner nature, and despised him. He hated his son; but he loved his beautiful daughter with a morbid and exaggerated affection, and there were few requests of hers which he cared to refuse.

At any other time Mr. Godwin might certainly have been inclined to question the prudence of his daughter's views with regard to the stranger whose desperate condition had excited her compassion. He was by no means given to the Quixotic impulses which were common to Julia's nature; and whatever benefits he had

bestowed upon his fellow creatures had been given in obedience to the prejudices of society rather than to the impulses of his own heart. At another time he would have sided with the outraged guardian of his daughter's youth, and would have protested against Julia's philanthropic schemes as absurd and impracticable. Julia had been prepared to encounter such opposition, and had been just a little inclined to repent her somewhat precipitate offer of employment in the interval which elapsed between her meeting with Lionel Westford and her father's next flying visit to Hertfordshire.

To her surprise, however, the young lady met with only the faintest possible opposition. Of late Rupert Godwin's mind had been entirely occupied by one all-absorbing care, and he had grown strangely indifferent to the details of his daily life.

He made one or two peevish objections to Julia's proposition, and then gave way to her wish, but not with the good grace with which he had once been accustomed to grant a favour asked by that fondly loved daughter.

"You want me to write to this young man," he said half absently, as if it were almost too much trouble for him to concentrate his thoughts for even a few moments on the subject in question. "Very well, Julia—very well; I will write. Don't worry me any further about the business. I think the whole affair very absurd, but you must have your wish. What does it matter?"

"What does it matter?" That was a phrase which Rupert Godwin had used very frequently of late when called upon to discuss the trifles that make up the sum of existence. These things had become of such complete indifference to him, and it seemed to him that people made such fuss and noise about the petty details that appeared so contemptible in his eyes;—in his eyes, before which for ever loomed one dark awful shape, the shadow

whereof shut out all other things from his sight.

Lionel Westford arrived at the Hall in the afternoon of a brilliant August day. Not a leaf stirred in the verdant depths of the park, not a blade of grass was ruffled by a passing breeze. The lake, lying in a green hollow overshadowed by spreading chestnuts and beeches, was smooth as the face of a mirror, and reflected the rich blue of the cloudless summer sky.

Lionel had been for many months a prisoner in the dreary desert of London;—London, which is a delightful city for the denizens of Mayfair or Belgravia, who, if called upon to make a map of the British capital, would place its centre at Apsley House, and its eastern boundary on the further side of Regent-street; but a dismal abode for those needy wayfarers who contemplate it from the purlieus of the New-cut. For months he had looked only on shabby houses, close streets whose blackened walls shut out the light of day; and the pleasantest sound which had announced to him the advent of summer had been the shrill cry of the costermonger vending his “Cauliflowvers!” to the small householders of the neighbourhood. So it was that, entering the banker’s grand old domain, a kind of intoxication stole over his senses. He looked about him, and drew a deep inspiration—a long breath of rapture. His chest heaved, his head was lifted to the summer sky, his step grew elastic as he trod the crisp springy turf.

“It is a paradise!” he exclaimed—“a paradise, and she is its queen!”

The distance from the lodge-gates to the house was a long one. Lionel had left his portmanteau at the lodge, and had there obtained instructions as to the nearest road

to the Hall. The lodge-keeper had directed him to go by a narrow pathway winding through a thick shrubbery, and leading past the grotto and fernery.

In the depths of this leafy arcade a solemn gloom prevailed, even on this brilliant summer day; and as Lionel Westford advanced further into that forest darkness, the sombre twilight of the place, together with its perfect stillness, produced a strange effect upon his mind.

He was no longer elated, he was no longer carried away by a sense of rapture. On the contrary, he felt all at once strangely depressed; a mysterious burden seemed to weigh down his heart. It was almost as if there had been something stifling in the very atmosphere of that luxuriant shrubbery. And under this strange influence even the image of Julia Godwin faded out of the young man's mind. All other feelings seemed absorbed by that mysterious sensation, the nature of which he could not define.

He quickened his pace. The solitude of the scene was distasteful to him. He hurried on, eager to reach the Hall, eager to behold human faces, to hear cheerful voices.

After walking a considerable distance, he came at last to a spot which he recognized as the grotto and fernery.

The spot was darker, wilder, and more solitary than any other part of Wilmingdon Park.

Great craggy masses of limestone and granite were mingled with the ruins of some classic temple; and amongst the broken pillars and the rugged rockwork the ferns grew high in rank luxuriance.

A small cascade trickled noiselessly amongst the moss-grown stones, and dropped into a smooth pool of water—a pool that looked as if beneath its quiet surface there

lurked a treacherous depth.

“It looks like a spot that has been blighted by the influence of some evil deed,” thought Lionel, as he paused for a few moments to contemplate the scene. “It looks like a place upon which the red hand of murder had set its stamp. I could fancy some Eugene Aram lying in wait for his victim behind one of those Doric columns, prepared to shoot him through the head, and then drop him quietly to the bottom of that pool. It’s the sort of place a Highlander would call ‘uncanny.’”

While this thought was still in his mind he was startled by long melancholy moan, which sounded near him.

Lionel Westford inherited his father’s courage, and yet his heart sank within him as he heard that strange unearthly utterance.

The hardiest nature succumbs, for a moment at least, beneath the influence of the supernatural.

But that sudden thrill of fear passed with the moment.

“Pshaw!” exclaimed the young man; “the sound was human enough, I daresay, though it was awfully like the wail of a departed soul. I have only to discover its cause. It seemed to come from behind this rockery.”

As he said this, Lionel Westford walked round the irregular pile of stonework, and speedily discovered whence that mysterious moaning had proceeded.

An old man, dressed in a suit of well-worn corduroy, was sitting on a block of moss-grown stone, with his elbows resting on his bony knees, and his face hidden in his tanned and withered hands.

He seemed very old, for long thin locks of snowy whiteness fell over his spare shoulders. He was evidently employed about the grounds, for gardening implements

lay on the grass near him.

As Lionel stood looking at this strange figure, the dismal moan was repeated.

Then the old man spoke.

“O Lord, O Lord!” he cried, “it’s dreadful to bear; it’s dreadful, dreadful, dreadful!”

This time Lionel Westford’s only feeling was one of compassion.

He laid his hand lightly upon the gardener’s shoulder. The old man started to his feet as if under the influence of a galvanic shock. The face he turned towards Lionel was blanched with fear, and his whole frame was shaken by a convulsive trembling.

“Who are you?” he gasped. “Who are you, and where did come from?”

“I am a perfect stranger here,” answered Lionel. “I heard you moaning just now, and naturally felt anxious to discover the cause of your distress.”

“A stranger!” repeated the old man in a hoarse whisper, wiping the sweat-drops from his forehead as he spoke. “A stranger! Are you sure of that?—eh?”

He peered earnestly into Lionel’s frank face, as if he would fain have read the truth there.

“Yes, yes,” he muttered; “I see you don’t deceive me. You *are* a stranger to this dreadful place. But just now I was talking, wasn’t I? I talk sometimes without knowing it. I’m an old man, and my brain’s getting muddled. Did I say much—did I say anything—anything queer—anything that made your blood run cold and your hair stand on end?—eh?”

Lionel Westford looked compassionately at the old

gardener.

What could this be but madness, or at least the cloudy twilight of a fading mind, through which there flitted the dark and hideous shadows of delirium?

“My good man, there is no occasion for this distress,” Lionel said gently. “You said nothing, except that something or other was dreadful. Pray calm yourself. It was only the sound of your moaning that attracted me here.”

“And I said nothing? Ah! but I say queer things sometimes—very queer things! But there’s no meaning in ’em—no meaning; no more meaning than there is in the screeching of them old ravens as you’ll hear sometimes in this here shrubbery. They’re as old as I am and older, them ravens, and they screeches awful sometimes after dark. *That* sounds dreadful; but there’s nothing in it. I’m a very old man. I’ve served the Godwins, man and boy, for seventy years. I remember this Mr. Godwin—Rupert Godwin—a baby; and I remember his father a boy—a bright-faced, free-hearted boy; not dark and silent, like this one, but bright and open; the right sort he was—yes, the right sort. I’ve served ’em long, and faithful; and they’ve been good masters to me. It isn’t likely that I should turn against ’em and betray ’em, now I’m an old man. Is it?”

“Of course not,” answered Lionel. “What should you have to betray?”

“No, no,” muttered the old gardener, speaking to himself rather than to Lionel, “it isn’t likely. I’ve eaten their bread for seventy years, and it isn’t likely I should speak agen ’em, though I feel now sometimes as if that bread would choke me. But I musn’t be talking, sir; I musn’t stand talking here to you, for I say queer things sometimes, only there’s no meaning in ’em; mind that—

there's never any meaning in 'em."

The old man shouldered his spade and walked off, leaving Lionel very much bewildered by his manner.

"Mad!" thought the young man. "Mad! Poor old fellow; I wonder the banker doesn't pension off such an old servant. I should scarcely like to have such a melancholy object about my place, if I were Mr. Godwin. *Frère, il faut mourir!* The man must be a perpetual reminder of the horrors of old age."

Lionel Westford walked on a few paces further, and presently emerged from the shrubberies on to a smooth lawn, across which he saw the grand old mansion that had sheltered so many noble inhabitants.

In a moment the recollection of the mad old gardener was blotted out of his mind. He thought only of that radiant vision which had so bewitched and enchanted him a week before in the printseller's shop. He could only think of the wondrous dark eyes of Julia Godwin.

He arrived at the house, and was received by a stately butler, who ushered him immediately up the broad staircase and along a corridor, out of which a great many doors opened. One of these doors was thrown open by the aristocratic butler, and Lionel found himself in a comfortably furnished sitting-room, out of which there opened a bedroom and dressing-room.

These were the apartments which the housekeeper had caused to be prepared for the artist. Lionel could but compare their simple though luxurious furniture with the dingy curtains and meagre-looking weak-legged chairs and tables of the shabby lodging in which he had left his mother and sister.

He seated himself before a table near the window, on which a large portfolio had been placed ready for him,

and began to consider his work without further delay. But his mind was oppressed by the thought that he was acting a treacherous part towards both his mother and Rupert Godwin; and the image of the half-imbecile old gardener mingled itself strangely with the radiant vision of Julia in all her proud young beauty.

CHAPTER XIX.

A RECOGNITION AND A DISAPPOINTMENT.

Violet attended the rehearsals at the Circenses with unfailing regularity, and won the warm praises of Mr. Maltravers, the stage-manager, both for her punctual habits and her quiet manners, which were in strong contrast with the noisy chatter and clamorous laughter of some of the giddy careless girls employed in the theatre. The interior of the theatre was like a strange world to this girl, who had been reared in the refined atmosphere of home. Esther Vanberg and her companions treated the newcomer as an intruder. They would have been very kind to her, perhaps, had she been an ordinary-looking girl, the homely muddy-complexioned sort of young person whom other girls speak of as “a dear;” but she was something very different. Her undeniable beauty inspired all manner of malice, envy, and uncharitableness; and these young ladies did their uttermost to render the theatre uncomfortable to her.

They did their uttermost, but they failed most completely; for Violet’s thoughts were so far removed from theirs that she scarcely felt any annoyance from their sneers or their insolence. Strange as this unknown world behind the curtain seemed to her, she was supported by the knowledge that she was earning money that would at least secure her mother from actual privation; and she was comparatively happy.

At last the eventful night arrived on which the new burlesque was to be performed. Violet was by this time

perfectly familiar with the easy task she had to perform. Her dress was ready for her, and no expense had been spared to render the costume magnificent.

Even Violet Westford, unconscious though she ordinarily was of her own attractions, could scarcely fail to recognize the perfection of the face and figure she saw reflected in the glass when the finishing touch had been put to her dress, and a starry circlet placed upon her sunny hair, which was allowed to fall in wavy masses that reached below her waist.

She went downstairs to the stage, and was warmly complimented by Mr. Maltravers on her appearance.

He saw her seated in a fairy temple which formed the central feature of the gorgeous scene that was to conclude the extravaganza, and then left her. In a few minutes the front scene would be drawn aside, and Violet Westford would find herself face to face with a London audience.

Her heart beat quickly; for though she had nothing more to do than to sit in statuesque repose upon a gilded throne and look beautiful, she could not help being a little alarmed at the prospect of finding herself the focus of all the eyes in the crowded house. On one side of the temple Esther Vanberg was placed amongst a group of girls ranged on gilded pedestals, for the scene was one of those displays of pretty young women and gorgeous stage decoration which Mr. Ruskin condemns on aesthetic principles. The Jewess was talking loudly while waiting for the scene to be unclosed.

“Pretty!” she exclaimed scornfully; “if Mr. Maltravers calls that piece of fair-haired insipidity a beauty, I don’t think much of his taste. She’s about as fit to be the Queen of Beauty as the snuffy old woman who cleans out the theatre.”

Violet knew that this elegant speech referred to her;

but she knew also the envious feeling which dictated it, and she was not disturbed by her rival's malignity.

But as Esther Vanberg spoke Violet turned almost involuntarily to look at her. The Jewess was splendidly dressed, and looked very handsome; but the hollowness of her cheeks and the feverish brightness of her eyes were visible, in spite of the rouge and other cosmetiques which she used to enhance her beauty.

As Violet looked at those dark eyes, some memory, which she was powerless to put into any distinct shape, arose in her mind. Where and when had she seen such eyes as those?

She could not answer the question; but she knew that she had at some time or other encountered a gaze which was now recalled to her by that of Esther Vanberg.

Miss Westford had no time to ponder upon this question, for the scene was unclosed, and she saw before her the crowded theatre, with its myriad faces and dazzling lights.

A tremendous burst of applause followed the unclosing of the scene, for the final tableau of the new burlesque was a miracle of the scene-painter's art.

For some moments Violet could only see a confused mass of faces and glittering lamps; then little by little the scene grew clearer to her eyes, and she could distinguish single faces from among the crowd.

She saw beautiful women—aristocratic-looking men. She saw hundreds of opera-glasses, which all seemed to be levelled at herself. She saw humbler sight-seers gazing with enraptured countenances upon the scene from the Olympus of the eighteen-penny gallery, and little children applauding vehemently, with their chubby hands.

Then, as the scene was a long one, and as she had

nothing to do during its progress, her gaze wandered idly about the house, now resting here, now lingering there, attracted by the novelty of the scene.

Suddenly she started, and trembled from head to foot.

In the dress-circle—in a corner nearest the stage—she had recognized a man sitting alone, with his arms folded on the velvet cushion, his eyes fixed dreamily on the scene before him, as if in utter absence of mind.

This man was George Stanmore the painter!

The recognition had set Violet's heart beating violently. But she remembered where she was, and the myriad eyes that were upon her. By a powerful effort of self-control she restrained all outward token of emotion.

George Stanmore's dark eyes were still fixed upon vacancy, rather than on the dazzling scene at which all the rest of the audience were looking; and as Violet watched those dark eyes, a sudden fancy startled her, almost as much as she had been startled by her first recognition of the artist.

She perceived a singular resemblance between the eyes of George Stanmore and those of the Jewess, Esther Vanberg. This was the likeness which had so puzzled her only a few moments before the unclosing of the scene. It was strange; and Violet was grieved at finding a likeness between the man she loved and the *figurante*, whose short youth had been one career of folly and extravagance.

It was strange; but these accidental resemblances are of frequent occurrence, so Violet did not long puzzle herself about the subject. She was too much absorbed by the knowledge that the plighted lover from whom she had been so long separated was now before her. Surely he must speedily recognize her, as she had recognized him.

She did not consider that she saw George Stanmore in

his everyday habiliments; while he beheld her in the complete disguise of a brilliant stage costume, and moreover in a position which he could not have supposed she would occupy. Presently, however, she saw him rouse himself from his reverie and look at the stage. He had no opera-glass; but he started, and looked at Violet with a prolonged and eager scrutiny.

"Yes," she thought, "he recognizes me; I knew that he would do so. And now, how will he act? Will my appearance in this place disgust and annoy him? Will the change in our circumstances produce an alteration in his feelings? Will he despise the woman who has sunk from affluence to poverty, or will he respect my endeavour to earn a livelihood by any means in my power?"

Violet asked herself these questions, but in her heart she never doubted the fidelity of the man she loved. He had recognized her, and he would doubtless leave the box immediately, and hasten to the stage-door, whence he could send her a message or a letter.

But to her surprise he did not hasten to quit his seat. He sat quite still, gazing fixedly at her until the curtain fell and shut him from her sight.

Then Violet fancied that he had only waited for the fall of the curtain, preferring to wait rather than to disturb the people about him by rising in the middle of a scene.

She left the stage, where the confusion caused by the shifting of the scenery was something beyond description. She left the tumultuous chaos of noisy carpenters and ponderous machinery, and hurried to the room in which she dressed, in company with Esther Vanberg and about half-a-dozen other girls. Her heart throbbed with a new sense of happiness, her cheeks were flushed with expectation, her hands trembled as she removed her fantastic dress, and plaited her long hair. She had no ears

for the loud talk of her excited companions, who were noisily discussing the success of the scene they had been engaged in, and the relative merits of their several costumes, or speculating and disputing as to who was or who was not in “front,”—the front in question being that portion of the theatre which has been more elegantly described as the *auditorium*.

Every moment Violet expected to hear her name pronounced outside the door of the dressing-room; every moment she expected to be summoned, in order that a letter or message might be given to her.

But no letter, no message came. Half an hour, and then the greater part of an hour, passed. Violet had dressed herself very slowly, lingering over the operation in expectation of a summons; but she had now put on her bonnet and shawl; she was ready to go home; and her mother, the careful anxious mother, to whom this ordeal of her daughter’s was unspeakably painful, would be waiting in the hall by the stage-entrance, ready to escort the *débutante* home.

Clara Westford had insisted upon coming to fetch Violet from the theatre. Lionel was away, and the girl had now no male protector. How could the devoted mother rest within doors, with the knowledge that her daughter was exposed to all the perils of insult and annoyance in the half-deserted London streets?

Poor Violet could not linger any longer in the dressing-room with the knowledge that her mother was waiting for her below. No words can tell the bitterness of her disappointment. Only those who have known a life as joyless and hopeless as hers had been of late, can imagine the anguish which she felt as she saw her brightest and most cherished dream fade away from her.

Throughout her sorrows her heart had been sustained

by a belief in George Stanmore's constancy, a deep and heartfelt confidence in his affection, which circumstances might shake but could not destroy.

Now that fondly treasured hope was crushed all at once.

He had seen her after a long separation, which should have made her a hundredfold more dear to him; he had seen her, he had recognized her, and yet had made no effort to approach her.

"He despises me in my altered fortune," she thought bitterly; "he has been to the neighbourhood of the Grange perhaps, and has heard of our losses; and now that he sees me struggling to earn a living as best I may, he despises me. It was all very well for him to talk so nobly about the worshippers of Mammon while he thought me the daughter of a rich man, but he is not disinterested enough to forgive the sin of poverty in the woman he pretended to love."

CHAPTER XX.

THE MARQUIS OF ROXLEYDALE.

From the night of that first performance of the burlesque at the Circenses, Violet Westford's life was one long conquest over self—one long act of womanly heroism.

The noble-hearted girl was determined that her mother should be kept in perfect ignorance of her grief. Had not that dear mother already suffered enough? Did she not still suffer unceasingly for the loss of the best and truest of husbands?

Violet had not told her mother the secret of her love when its object had appeared thoroughly worthy of her affection. She could not now reveal it, when to do so would have been to stamp her lover as a traitor. She had been ashamed of her clandestine engagement from the first; she was doubly ashamed of it now, when the falsehood of her lover seemed to be a punishment for the secrecy that had attended her attachment to him.

"If I know that he is heartless and mercenary, I can at least hide the knowledge from others," she thought. "If I cannot myself respect him, I can at any rate shield him from the contempt of strangers."

Alas for poor Violet! All this suffering, which was so much harder to bear than the worst stings of poverty, might have been saved her. All this pain arose from a very natural misconception. She had herself recognized George Stanmore, and she had imagined it impossible

that he could fail to recognize her.

She had seen his gesture of surprise, his scrutinizing gaze, so fixed in its earnestness, which had lasted until the falling of the curtain; and she fancied that gesture and gaze could only arise from Mr. Stanmore's recognition of her.

But it was not so. The artist had not recognized in the fair face of the Queen of Beauty the innocent countenance of the girl he had wooed and won in the New Forest.

George Stanmore had been only attracted by the *likeness* which he fancied the ballet-girl at the Circenses bore to the daughter of Captain Westford. He never for a moment imagined that Violet and the Queen of Beauty were one and the same person.

The young man had been wandering in Flanders, from village to city, and from city to village, studying the old Flemish masters, and exploring every nook and corner in which an old picture was to be found. He had only crossed from Ostend to London within a few days of his visit to the Circenses. He had no idea of the changes that had taken place at the Grange. How, then, should he believe that Violet Westford, the only daughter of a prosperous gentleman, the highly educated but country-bred girl, could appear before him on the stage of a London theatre?

Almost involuntarily he had consulted his playbill. No such name as Westford appeared there. The Queen of Beauty was distinguished by the very commonplace cognomen of Watson.

But even if he had seen Violet's real name in the list of characters, George Stanmore would have been more inclined to doubt the evidence of his own eyes than to believe that it was indeed his simple woodland nymph

whom he beheld amidst the glare and glitter of that brilliantly lighted stage.

No. He gazed to the last moment at the beautiful girl in the roseate draperies and crown of stars; but it was only because he loved to look upon a face that closely resembled the one so dear to him.

He had no opera-glass, and could not bring the face nearer. If Violet had been more experienced in theatrical matters, she would have known how few amongst an audience in a large theatre can afford to dispense with an opera-glass; and she would have also known how much difference is made in every actor or actress's appearance by an entirely strange costume.

Unhappily, she knew nothing of this. She fancied that her lover must have inevitably recognized her as easily as she recognized him.

Nearly a week passed. Every evening Violet Westford's lovely face beamed radiantly on the spectators of the burlesque. Already she had learned one lesson belonging to the life of the stage: she had learned that she must smile always, whatever secret canker might be eating silently into her own heart. The public, who pay to be amused, will of course tolerate no doleful faces, no sad or thoughtful looks, in the paid favourites of the hour. The queen of tragedy alone can indulge in sorrow; and her sorrow must be as unreal as the gladness of the ballet-girl, who may smile upon the aristocratic loungers in the stalls while her heart is breaking with sorrow for a father, a mother, or a favourite sister, lying on a deathbed at home. Let those who would be lured away from peaceful and comfortable homes by the false glitter of the stage, look well at the dark side of the picture, ere they take the

first step in a career which is successful only for the few.

Violet Westford needed all her fortitude in that London theatre. The stage-manager was very kind to her, in his rough-and-ready semi-paternal manner. The actresses of superior rank saw that she was no vulgar or disreputable person, and often noticed her by a friendly word or smile; but, in spite of this, Violet was cruelly persecuted in the quiet performance of her duty.

This persecution was inspired by the foul fiend called Envy. Violet's beauty had been much noticed, and had been commented upon in the papers which criticised the new burlesque. Although she had not so much as one line to speak, her position in the grand scene of the *spectacle* was a very prominent one, and drew upon her the notice of every spectator.

Her beauty did the rest. That beauty was so striking; in its youthful freshness, and formed such a contrast with the faded splendour of those around her, that the waning belles of the theatre resented her appearance amongst them as a personal injury.

Esther Vanberg was the leader of a little band who made it their business to sneer at Violet, and nothing but the girl's quiet spirit of endurance enabled her to bear the insolence of their innuendoes.

But she did bear it, and without shrinking. It seemed so small a trouble to endure when compared with the thought that George Stanmore was false and cold-hearted. "The heart once broken by the loved is strong to meet the foeman."

She had been little more than a week in the theatre when one of the largest private boxes was occupied by three gentlemen well known to the world of London.

One was a handsome Spanish-looking man of middle

age; the second was an insignificant individual, with a round fat face, small gray eyes, sandy hair, and long, carefully trained whiskers, which were evidently the pride of his heart; the third was a very young man, with a pale auburn moustache, faultless evening-dress, and languid manner, as of a sufferer bowed down by the burden of existence.

The first of these three men was Rupert Godwin the banker; the second was Mr. Sempronius Sykemore, a renowned tuft-hunter and toady, who was always to be found following close upon the heels of some wealthy and weak-witted young nobleman, and whose presence was an unfailing sign of approaching ruin for the nobleman in question; the third was the Marquis of Roxleydale, a young gentleman who had inherited one of the oldest titles in England, an estate worth sixty thousand a year, and whom nature had not gifted with a very large amount of brains or a very noble heart.

It had lately pleased Rupert Godwin to be extremely civil to the shallow-headed young Marquis. But he did not put himself to this trouble without an eye to his own interests. He hoped to secure Lord Roxleydale as a husband for his idolized Julia.

With this end in view, he invited the Marquis to Wilmingdon Hall, whenever that young nobleman could be prevailed upon to withdraw himself from the delights of London life—a life of the vilest and most degraded order; a life passed in the haunts of vice, in which horrible dens the Marquis was always attended by Mr. Sempronius Sykemore, who conducted him through the seven circles of this earthly Inferno as faithfully as Virgil conducted Dante, and who was eminently calculated to play the part of Mentor, as he was old enough to be the young man’s father.

Lord Roxleydale very much admired Julia Godwin’s

beauty; but he had no wish to fetter himself with the chains of matrimony; and he found Wilmingdon Hall a very dull place after the brilliant assemblies in which his evenings were generally spent.

Rupert Godwin perceived this, and for a while he allowed the active working of his schemes to be suspended. But he only waited his time. He watched the young Marquis as a cat watches a mouse. He affected to admire his high spirit—he even joined in his vicious amusements; but there was a deep and rooted purpose under all he did—a purpose that was fraught with danger to the shallow-brained scion of the Roxleydales.

To-night the banker had entertained Lord Roxleydale and his toady Mr. Sykemore at a sumptuous dinner given at a West-end club. He was too much of a diplomatist not to know that in order to succeed with the Marquis he must first secure that gentleman's guide, philosopher, and friend, Mr. Sykemore, and he had purchased Mr. Sykemore's good graces at rather a high figure.

After dinner, when a great deal of wine had been drunk by the Marquis and by the worthy Sempronius, it had been proposed that the party should adjourn to the Circenses, where the new extravaganza had acquired considerable popularity.

Rupert Godwin had been the only one of the party who had refrained from drinking. He had excused himself from tasting the choice moselles and sparkling hocks which he ordered for his guests, and had limited his potations to a few glasses of the driest and palest sherry obtainable for money.

Sempronius Sykemore had perceived this; and he suspected some design on his friend and patron the Marquis.

He determined to keep a close watch over the banker;

but his intellect was of a very low order as compared with that of Rupert Godwin. All he wanted was to sponge upon the fortune of the weak young nobleman, so long as that fortune held out against the ruinous habits which Lord Roxleydale had acquired by the evil teaching of false friends.

It was past ten o'clock when the three gentlemen entered the theatre. They had not long taken their seats when the scene opened, revealing the final tableau in which the Queen of Beauty appeared seated in her golden temple.

The Marquis lifted his opera-glass and surveyed the stage. He was at once attracted by Violet Westford's lovely face, which amongst all the faces on that crowded stage was the only one that was new to him.

"By all that's beautiful," he exclaimed, "she's a houri—an angel!"

"Who is an angel, my dear Marquis?" asked the banker, laughing.

"She is—that girl in the temple yonder! She's a new girl. I never saw her face before. I wonder where the deuce Maltravers picked her up. Look at her, Godwin," added the young man, handing his opera-glass to the banker as he spoke.

Rupert Godwin shrugged his shoulders with a careless gesture, and then looked at the stage.

But presently he started violently, and the glass almost fell from his hand.

Again the ghost! Again the vision of the past! Again the face that recalled to him Clara Ponsonby in all her youthful beauty, as he had first seen her riding by her father's side!

"Come," exclaimed the Marquis, "I see you're as much struck with her as I was."

"Yes," answered Rupert Godwin slowly, "she is very lovely." As he spoke his brows contracted over his dark, unfathomable eyes, his lips grew rigid,—a diabolical scheme was forming itself in that satanic mind.

He had sworn to revenge himself upon the woman who had done him the supreme wrong of preferring a happier rival, and who had inflicted a wound which had rankled and festered in his envenomed soul. How better could he assail this woman than through her daughter's temptation and peril?

This weak young Marquis could be made the instrument of his plot.

Yes; the vile deed shaped itself before him, distinct and palpable as the scene now acting on the stage.

"I will pay Clara Westford a visit to-morrow," thought Rupert Godwin. "I have already brought her to the very dust. She defied me when we last met; but at that time she was still the mistress of a luxurious home, secure, as she believed, from the trials and degradations of poverty. I will see her again now, when she has tasted the bitterest waters of life's chalice. Surely she will have grown too wise to defy me now. If not—if the indomitable spirit of Clara Ponsonby still reigns in the breast of Clara Westford,—I will find a way to bring her to my feet, and that way shall be through the peril of yonder golden-haired girl."

These were the thoughts which filled the plotting brain of Rupert Godwin as he sat, with the glass in his hand, looking fixedly at the stage.

Presently his gaze wandered from the face of Violet Westford, and he took a sweeping survey of the groups of

showily dressed girls arranged in graceful attitudes, which were the result of careful study on the part of ballet-master and stage-manager.

Once more the banker's hand faltered, and he started violently; but this time his eyes were fixed upon the Jewish beauty, Esther Vanberg.

"Who is that girl?" he gasped, in a tone that revealed unwanted excitement—a degree of emotion extraordinary in this man of iron. "Who is she?"

"My dear Godwin," exclaimed Mr. Sempronius Sykemore, laughing at the banker's vehemence, "I thought just now you were going to fall in love with the fair girl! and now you seem suddenly smitten with the dark beauty. That young lady is Miss Vanberg, celebrated for her handsome face and her demoniac temper. She boasts that she has the blood of Spanish Jews in her veins —the old Jews of Andalusia—the aristocrats of the fallen race. She is an extraordinary woman—as proud as Lucifer, as changeable as the wind. They say that the Duke of Harlingford worships the ground she walks upon, and would have made her his Duchess long before this, in spite of his exasperated relations, if her violent temper had not always caused some desperate quarrel between them just as the marriage was about to take place. Most women of Esther's class would be too prudent to quarrel with a Duke and a millionnaire—but Miss Vanberg's temper and pride are utterly ungovernable. In the meantime she occupies a house in Mayfair, drives a pair of chestnuts worth five hundred guineas, dresses as extravagantly as the Princess Metternich, and gives herself the airs of a Russian Empress."

"Strange!" muttered the banker; "the blood of Spanish Jews in her veins! And then so like—"

These words were uttered in an undertone, which did

not reach the ears of the Marquis or his toady. As for Lord Roxleydale, that young nobleman was entirely absorbed in admiration of Violet. He sat with his eyes fixed upon her, in a gaze as profound as if his senses had been enthralled by some supernal vision. So might Faust have looked on the phantasm of fair young Gretchen; so might have gazed the son of Priam and Hecuba when he first looked on her whose fatal beauty was predoomed to be the destruction of Troy.

He gazed thus fixedly until the curtain fell, and then sank back into his chair with a profound sigh.

“I’m done for, Semper!” he said—he always called his toady Semper; “that girl, that adorable angel, has imprinted her image on my inmost heart. Egad! I never knew that I had a heart before. I must see her to-night—immediately. I’ll make Maltravers give me an introduction; I’ll—”

“Stay, Roxleydale!” exclaimed the banker, laying his hand upon the arm of the Marquis, as the young man rose from his seat: “not to-night. I know the girl—and know all about her. To-morrow night I will introduce you to her.”

“You, Godwin?”

“Yes; I tell you, I know the girl. If you try to get an introduction to her through Maltravers, she will give herself prudish airs, and refuse to see you. Trust all to me. I can exercise indirect influence that you can never guess at. Wait till to-morrow night. I don’t ask you to wait long.”

The Marquis sighed.

“You may not think it long,” he answered; “but to me it will be an age—an eternity. I never saw such a lovely creature as that girl. Egad, I should like to lay my coronet

at her feet, and make her Marchioness of Roxleydale."

"Bah!" exclaimed the banker, contemptuously. "It is only a fool or a madman who lays his coronet at the feet of a ballet-girl. Marchionesses are not picked up out of the gutter. I thought you were a man of the world, my dear Roxleydale."

"A man of the world!" Yes. It had been ever thus. From his earliest boyhood the Marquis had been surrounded by flatterers, sycophants, and scoundrels, who prided themselves upon being "men of the world." Every generous impulse, every noble emotion that had arisen in the young man's breast, had been stifled by the influence of such companions as these; while, on the other hand, every vicious inclination had been fostered, every bad quality had been encouraged; for it was out of the rich nobleman's vices that his flatterers hoped to make their market.

The Marquis had a mother who adored him, and whom he in his boyhood had dearly loved. But his vicious companions had contrived to lure him away from the society and influence of that devoted mother, and the Dowager Marchioness lived lonely and neglected at one of the country seats belonging to her son.

The house she had chosen was situated upon a small estate in Yorkshire. There, secluded from the world, the Marchioness spent her quiet life, the greater part of which was devoted to works of charity and benevolence.

She wrote very often to her son; long letters—earnest supplications that he would lead a life worthy of a Christian gentleman, an Englishman of high position.

But these letters were never answered. To the young man, living in so impure an atmosphere, those tender letters seemed to convey only reproaches; his guilty conscience imparted a sting even to his mother's

affectionate advice.

And then the tempters were always by his side; always ready to whisper evil suggestions into his too willing ear; always ready to pooh-pooh the earnest remonstrances of that one good adviser, with some insolent modern slang about “the maternal,” or “the dozy old party in the North.”

The three men supped together after leaving the theatre, and this time Rupert Godwin drank deeply.

He drank deeply, and there was a wild joviality about his manner that had something fiend-like in its reckless mirth. He drank deeply; and once, when the talk was wildest, he lifted his glass above his head, and cried:

“I drink this to Clara, and to the fulfilment of an old vow!”

He drained the glass, and then flung it against the wall opposite to him. The crystal shivered into a hundred fragments.

“So will I break your proud spirit, my haughty Clara!” he exclaimed.

The Marquis and Sempronius were both too tipsy to take much notice of the banker’s wild talk; or, if they heard it, they little dreamed how deep a meaning lurked beneath those threatening words.

CHAPTER XXI.

BENT BUT NOT BROKEN.

The day that succeeded the night on which the Marquis of Roxleydale and his two friends had visited the Circenses happened to be Saturday, and Violet Westford had to attend at the theatre in order to receive her salary for the week. This business was a long one, for the salaries were not paid until after the rehearsal of a new piece that was about to be produced, and Violet had to wait until all the principal actors and actresses had received their money. Thus it happened that Clara Westford was alone all that Saturday morning; alone and very sad; for when her children were away from her she made no effort to control her sadness. She gave free course to melancholy and regretful thoughts; mournful and bitter memories crowded upon her mind, and the unheeded tears rolled slowly down her wan cheeks, as she bent over the needlework, which took such time and labour to accomplish, and was so poorly paid for when done.

She was seated at the little table near the window, when a man’s footstep sounded on the stair without, and in the next instant the door was suddenly opened.

Clara Westford started to her feet, her heart beating quickly. To whom could that unexpected footstep belong except Lionel, her bright, brave son, in whose presence there was always comfort?

Her disappointment was very keen when, on turning

towards the door, she found herself face to face with her bitterest foe, the man whom of all others she hated and feared.

But the proud spirit of Sir John Ponsonby's daughter was not yet quenched. The widow drew herself to her full height, and turned to meet her persecutor, very pale, but self-possessed as her visitor himself.

"You here, Mr. Godwin!" she said. "I thought that in this place at least I should be secure from such an intrusion."

"Love, Clara, respects no place in its pursuit of the beloved object."

Mrs. Westford shuddered, and turned from the banker with a look of scorn and disgust.

"Love!" she exclaimed. "Pray do not profane that sentiment by the poison of your lips! Why are you here, Mr. Godwin? By what right do you enter this room? This poor lodging is at least my own, and I request you to leave it immediately. When you came to me in my happy country home you came as the harbinger of sorrow and desolation. By your machinations I and my children have been banished from that home. Here we have taken shelter. This place is our own, supported by our own labour, and here our poverty should preserve us from your hateful presence."

"Fine words, Clara Westford—grand words!" exclaimed the banker, with a sneer. "You would banish me from your presence; you would order me out of your lodgings; and yet I come to you as a friend."

"A friend!" cried the widow, with a bitter laugh.

"Ay, a friend, Clara, as well as a lover. Let me first be the lover; let me first tell you that my heart is still

unchanged. After all these years of separation, after all your unconcealed hatred, your bitter scorn and defiance, I love you still. Yes, Clara, even now in your poverty, even now in your fallen pride."

"My pride has not fallen," answered Clara Westford. "It is the pride of a woman whose love has been given to a noble and generous-minded husband, and who holds that husband's memory after death even more sacred than his honour in life."

"Clara!" cried Rupert Godwin passionately, "Clara, have pity upon me! Remember, how deeply, how devotedly I loved you."

His hands were clasped entreatingly; his head sank upon his breast; a vivid light burned in his dark eyes. It seemed as if in that moment the feelings of youth returned to him; and for a while at least it was love, and not vengeance, that animated his breast.

"Clara," he murmured tenderly, "at the sight of your face the past all comes back to me, and I forget your cruelty, I forget your preference of another, I forget all except my love. I cannot bear to see you thus—poor, degraded; for poverty is in itself degradation. Leave this place, Clara. Your old home shall again be yours; beautified and enriched by the lavish outlay of wealth which I prize very little except for your sake. Return to the Grange, Clara, as its mistress—and the mistress of my fate."

Clara Westford looked at the banker aghast with horror.

"Return thither!" she cried. "Return to that house as your dependant; your—no, I will not utter the odious word. Return to that house which is sacred to me by the memory of my husband's affection! You must know me very little, Rupert Godwin, when you can come to me

with such a request as this."

The banker's face grew black as thunder.

"Enough, Clara!" he exclaimed. "I was a fool to show you the weakness of my heart. I came to you as a friend; but you refuse to accept my friendship. So be it. Henceforth I am your foe. You have chosen to set your pride against mine. You have elected to defy me. Good, madam! I accept the challenge. It is a duel to the death. I am what is called a good hater, Mrs. Westford, as you may live to discover."

For some moments Clara Westford made no reply. She stood before the banker, calm, impassable; very beautiful in her quiet dignity, in her threadbare mourning robes, her simple widow's cap. The delicate colour had faded from her cheeks, the perfect oval of her face was hollowed by care and deprivation, but the classic outline of feature and the subtle loveliness of expression remained, and Clara Westford was still beautiful.

After a few moments of silence, during which the banker's breath came thick and fast between his set teeth, Clara Westford seated herself in the chair by the table, and resumed her work.

"I must remind you that this room belongs to me, Mr. Godwin," she said, very quietly, "and that your presence is unpleasant to me. Allow me to wish you good morning."

"Not yet, Mrs. Westford; I did not come here entirely on a fool's errand. You have despised my friendship; you have defied my enmity. Perhaps, however, you will not refuse to accept my advice. Have a care of your daughter!"

Clara Westford started; and her face, always pale, grew ghastly white. She tried to speak, but her trembling lips

refused to shape the words she would have spoken.

"Have a care of your daughter!" repeated Rupert Godwin. "She is very young. She is inexperienced. It is only a few months since she first came to London, and already strange things have happened. She has left one situation—under suspicious circumstances. She is now in a sphere where there is constant danger for one so young and beautiful as she is. Once again, I say, beware, Clara Westford! and if ever disgrace or ruin come upon your only daughter, remember that I have warned you. In that hour you will perhaps come to me. In that hour you will perhaps condescend to accept my friendship."

What words could have been better adapted to strike terror to the heart of a mother? The sickness of despair blanched the cheek of Clara Westford. Everywhere, on every side, there seemed danger and misery. And she was so utterly alone in the world, so completely helpless, hedged round by calamities, face to face with a man who openly avowed himself her deadly enemy! Yet, even in this supreme hour of trial, her fortitude did not entirely abandon her.

"My daughter is able to protect her good name in any position, Mr. Godwin," she said proudly, "however degraded that position may appear in your eyes. If I am destined to eat the bread of dependence, I would rather be indebted to the precarious labours of my daughter than owe sixpence to your—*friendship*."

"You carry matters with a high hand, Mrs. Westford," replied the banker, irritated beyond measure by the undisturbed calmness of his victim's manner; "but I can afford to wait. What is it Tennyson says about that? 'My faith is strong in Time!' You defy me to-day, but before long I may find you in a more reasonable temper. *En attendant*, I can only advise you to keep a sharp eye upon Miss Violet. The Circenses ballet is not quite the highest

school of morality; and Hogarth has taught us what happens to rustic simplicity when she comes to seek her fortune in London. Good morning."

CHAPTER XXII.

JULIA'S PROTÉGÉ.

The life at Wilmingdon Hall was a new and pleasant one for Lionel Westford.

Here every luxury and comfort were provided for him. He was earning money which he knew would ensure considerable comfort for his mother and sister in their humble lodging, or even a change to better quarters, if they would consent to make that change. He was living in a house in which objects of art and beauty met his eye on every side; and this, to the man endowed with artistic tastes, is no small privilege. Without, a fair sylvan landscape spread itself before his eyes—those weary eyes that had grown so tired of the smoky streets and high black chimneys of London. His work was light—absurdly light, as it seemed to him, after his dreary unprofitable toil as a copyist of law papers. He was his own master, free at any time to ramble where he pleased in the pleasant country, or in the verdant solitude of the park; and if he chose to ride, one of the banker's horses was at his disposal.

Beyond all this—infinitely more precious a privilege—he was near Julia Godwin, the woman whose compassionate glances had seemed to him like the looks of an angel; the woman with whom he, the penniless adventurer, had fallen over head and ears in love.

He was near her. He heard her low contralto voice as she sang in the rooms below, accompanying herself

sometimes on her piano, sometimes with the bewitchingly romantic sound of a few careless chords on her guitar. He saw her—accidentally, of course—not once only, but several times in the day. He met her in the park or gardens, and loitered talking with her for an hour at a time; or he was summoned to discuss the mounting of some picture, and spent an agreeable half-hour or so in the morning-room, where Miss Godwin sat with the stately widow whom the banker had appointed as companion, chaperone, and protectress of the *convenances*, at a very handsome salary.

Somehow or other, the young people were always happening to meet.

And Lionel Westford would have been supremely happy in this dependent position, but for the stings of conscience. Unhappily, the stings of conscience were very sharp. Argue with himself as he might, he could not shut his eyes to the fact that there was guilt and dishonour in his intercourse with the Godwin family.

There was secrecy, nay, deception,—and deception must always involve meanness. Lionel Westford felt that he had no right to live at ease in the house of the man whom his mother counted as her foe.

He tried to argue with himself that women are always unreasoning in their dislikes. He tried to persuade himself that Rupert Godwin was not the enemy of his household; that the banker had only acted as any other business man might have acted in the same circumstances.

The young man’s sense of his false position was not to be lulled to rest. He knew that he was acting dishonourably. He knew that there was a kind of treachery in the fact of his presence at Wilmingdon Hall, and he could not be entirely at peace, even in the enchanting society of the woman he loved.

A heavy burden seemed to weigh upon his spirits. It was only while he was in Julia's society that he could put aside that weight of care.

He had been more than a week at Wilmingdon Hall, and he had not again encountered the half-witted old gardener.

But the recollection of the old man's strange words had often flashed upon him. Sometimes, against his own will, those words haunted his memory, and puzzled and tormented his brain, when he would fain have thought of other things.

One day, when the August weather was brightest and balmiest, Lionel left his apartment after a long morning's work at the drawings intrusted to him. He strolled out into the grounds, where a few minutes before he had seen Julia Godwin's muslin dress glancing amongst the laurel groves.

Nothing could be more beautiful than the smooth lawns, the flowery parterres, the sloping banks, and glistening laurel hedges that surrounded Wilmingdon Hall. Nothing could be more beautiful than those exquisitely cultivated gardens, as Lionel Westford saw them to-day, under the golden light of an August sun.

In the distance there sounded the low murmur of a waterfall, which seemed the complaining voice of some spirit of the woodland, rather than any earthly sound. There had been a time when the gardens of Wilmingdon Hall were the pride of Rupert Godwin's heart. Many a fashionable assembly had met on that broad lawn; many an agreeable flirtation had commenced in those winding shrubbery walks, in which the spreading foliage of the evergreens made a solemn darkness all day long. Many a fair young country damsel had winged her ruthless arrows home to the hearts of her admirers under the

patriarchal beeches of the avenue. Fancy-fairs, garden-parties, toxophilite meetings, and flower-shows had been wont to enliven those spacious gardens. It was only within the last year that a shadow seemed to have fallen on the life of Rupert Godwin, the reputed millionnaire; and the county people marvelled at the change in the man who had once aspired to hold a high place amongst them.

It was known that the banker had quarrelled with his son, though the cause of that quarrel had never transpired.

Rumour had made herself busy with the interior of Mr. Godwin's mansion, and strange things had been said of the disagreement between father and son. People said that it was his son's misconduct which had led to Mr. Godwin's desertion of his country seat; and the county gentlemen spoke of the young man's behaviour in terms of unmitigated disapprobation.

He had turned his back upon the paternal mansion for ever, it was said, and had gone abroad to wander on the face of the earth, a reprobate and an outcast.

The feminine portion of the community were honestly sorry for this erring wanderer. Edward Godwin was young and handsome, and there are young ladies who would pity Cain, and be ready to forgive that unlucky blow with the club, if they were informed on good authority that the first murderer was darkly splendid of aspect.

Julia was devoted to her brother, and she pleaded his cause everywhere; but she was very little wiser than the county gentry with regard to the unhappy misunderstanding which had separated father and son.

She could only tell people that "poor Edward and papa couldn't get on together," or that "they didn't understand

each other." She could only speak in tender deprecation of her brother's "wild notions on some subjects," and conclude with the hope that the prodigal would return and be forgiven.

Lionel had watched Julia from his window, and he knew in what direction she had walked. Nothing, therefore, was more natural than that he should meet her —accidentally.

He entered one of the long shadowy alleys, which seemed to narrow to a vanishing point, and his heart beat faster than its wont, as he saw the graceful figure of Julia Godwin seated in an old-fashioned bower, midway between him and the end of the walk.

She was reading, but she looked up smiling and blushing as Lionel drew near.

He began to talk to her about her book, the last popular volume of travels in the centre of Africa, and from that subject they wandered on to other topics. Julia was very bright and animated. She had spent a weary morning in the society of her companion, Mrs. Melville, whose conversation was the very essence of dulness; and she had fled to the gardens for a refuge from that monotonous drip, drip, drip of meaningless babble. It is scarcely strange, therefore, if she was more or less interested in Lionel's conversation, when it is considered that he talked his best, as if inspired by that enthusiastic listener.

It was easy for a clever woman to discover that the young man had received the highest class of education which modern civilization can afford.

Julia perceived this; she saw that Lionel was a

gentleman both by birth and breeding; and she could not but wonder at the strange position in which she had found him.

All that was most generous in her nature was aroused in sympathy with the stranger's misfortunes. She would fain have known his history. She had hoped to win his confidence; but she found this was no easy task. The young man spoke freely of every subject—except of himself and his antecedents. On these points he preserved a guarded silence.

They sat talking together for nearly an hour—an hour whose sands ran out as the sands only run when "Love takes up the glass of Time, and turns it in his glowing hands."

At last Julia took a tiny watch from her belt, and glanced at the dial. She blushed as she perceived the hour, for conscience told her there must be some special reason for her forgetfulness of the flight of time. What would her father have said to her, had he known that she could waste an hour in conversation with a penniless young artist, whose history was utterly unknown to her—whose only claim upon her had been his destitution?

"But whatever papa could say of him, he is a gentleman," thought Julia, "as highly educated as the best and brightest of papa's aristocratic friends."

She closed her book, and rose to leave the quaint old arbour of clipped laurels.

"Two o'clock!" she exclaimed. "How quickly the time slips away! I had no idea that I had been out so long. I must wish you good morning, Mr. Wilton."

A faint flush tinged Lionel's face as he heard his false name pronounced by those lovely lips. He could not stifle the feeling of shame which the consciousness of his

deception awoke in his mind.

"You will allow me to accompany you to the house?" he said.

"O, certainly," Julia answered, "if you have nothing better to do."

Some complimentary speech rose to the young man's lips, but he repressed it.

How could he dare to betray his admiration, his love, for Julia Godwin? Even if she had not been the daughter of his mother's enemy, his own poverty would have been an insurmountable barrier, separating him from her entirely.

No; his love was hopeless. This girl, luxuriously nurtured, heiress to an ample fortune, would, no doubt, have laughed to scorn the devotion of a man whom she had rescued from a state of beggary, that had been near akin to starvation. The story of King Cophetua and the beggar maiden is the prettiest of poetic legends; but reverse the positions of the lovers, and the poetry is gone. The king may lead the beggar maiden up the steps of his throne, amid the acclamations of an approving people; but the queen must not stoop from her high estate to smile on low-born merit. This, at any rate, was Lionel Westford's reading of the old legend, and he felt that there was something almost contemptible in his position in relation to Miss Godwin.

"Let my pride protect me," he said to himself. "Let me remember how we met, and let me hold my tongue, whatever effort it may cost me to set a watch upon my lips. I can endure anything rather than her contempt."

The two young people walked for some little time in silence. Then Lionel spoke; but there was something of constraint in his tone.

"You will, perhaps, like to hear an account of my morning's work, Miss Godwin," he said. "I have been mounting the Snow piece and the Alpine Sunset. They are both very good. Your brother has real genius, wonderful freedom and vigour in his pencil, and a splendid eye for colour. I only know one amateur artist at all equal to him."

"Indeed!—and who is he?"

"A young man whom I met in Hampshire. Perhaps I ought not to call him an amateur, for I believe he intended to make painting his profession. Your brother's style very much reminds me of his, though he may have been, perhaps, a little further advanced in his art."

"And his name?"

"His name was Stanmore—George Stanmore."

"And you met him in Hampshire?"

"Yes."

"Long ago?"

"Not very long. It is about a twelvemonth since I last saw him."

Julia was silent. A cloud seemed to spread itself over her bright face. She was near the house now; and before the great stone porch Lionel bowed, and left her.

He had worked hard that day, and had risen early in the summer morning in order to make rapid progress with the work which was for him a labour of love, since it was to please *her* he took so much trouble in the mounting and touching-up of the drawings. What was he but a salaried servant in that house, and how could he maintain the smallest sense of independence except by hard work?

He was in no humour to return to his solitary

apartments. Julia Godwin's image filled his mind. He strolled back to the laurel grove in which he had spent such pleasant hours. For a long time he paced up and down the long alley between the clipped laurel edges, thinking of the beautiful girl with whom he had been so besotted as to fall in love. Then, scarcely knowing where he went, he wandered away from the laurel alley, through an old-fashioned garden, in which there were big, straggling yew-trees, which had once been the pride of a gardener's heart, in the shape of peacocks and lions, and stiff little flower-beds of geometrical form, where the kitchen gardeners grew savoury herbs, to give flavour and piquancy to the flesh-pots of Wilmingdon Hall.

After exploring this garden, Lionel went through an opening in a close-cut hedge of yew, and found himself suddenly under the dark walls of the northern wing. Those ancient walls seemed to cast a cold and dismal shadow across the garden—a shadow that darkened the glory of the summer day.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE THRESHOLD.

Lionel Westford looked up at the building before him with an involuntary shudder; and yet there was nothing either strange or terrible in its aspect. It was only old, worn, and grey. Long rows of narrow Gothic windows extended from one end to the other of the massive pile. Every one of these windows was closely shuttered within; moss grew on the old grey walls, save where the ivy crept, darksome and thick, to the very roof.

“A dreary-looking building!” muttered Lionel, after one brief glance at those dark shuttered windows, that damp-stained, moss-grown wall—“a dismal, uncomfortable sort of place! I wonder the banker doesn’t pull it down, and build something better upon its site. I suppose he is something of an antiquarian, and respects this relic of the days of the Plantagenets. Yet, in that case, one would think he’d spend a little money on restoring the old building.”

He was about to turn away and leave the neighbourhood of the northern wing for some more cheerful part of the grounds, when he was startled by the sound of a voice—the weak quavering voice of an old man.

“Through the crack in the shutter,” said the voice, “I saw, I saw!—through the crack in the shutter!”

Lionel Westford turned in the direction whence the

voice proceeded, and saw the half-witted gardener, whose strange talk he had overheard upon his first arrival at Wilmingdon Hall. The old man was crouching close against one of the lower windows, and seemed as if peering earnestly through a crack in the heavy oak shutter.

There was something so strange in the action that it could scarcely fail to inspire a sentiment of curiosity, even in the least suspicious mind.

Lionel lingered to listen to what more the old man might have to say.

The weak-witted, white-haired pensioner, was strangely excited. He clung to the stone ledge of the window; he pressed his face close against the dingy glass, behind which the thick oak shutter looked dark and impenetrable as the wall of a dungeon.

For some moments he remained in the same attitude, still as death. Then a change came over him, and he began to tremble violently, with the manner of a man who watches some appalling scene.

“Don’t, master! don’t!” he cried, in a half-stifled shriek. “Don’t do it, master! For the love of heaven, don’t do it! O, the knife, the dreadful knife! It’s murder—cruel, deadly, treacherous bloody murder! Don’t, master! Don’t, don’t!”

The old man recoiled from the window, exhausted by his own emotion, and turned as if to rush from the place. As he turned he met the gaze of Lionel Westford, who stood pale and breathless before him.

With one savage bound the gardener flew at the young man’s throat.

“Ha!” he shrieked; “it’s you, is it? You’ve been listening! you’ve been spying again! I know you! You’re

on the watch. You want to find out the secret—the wicked secret, the bloody secret; but you sha'n't, you sha'n't! I'm an old man, and I'm weak and foolish sometimes; but I sha'n't live long, and, come what may, I'll keep that secret till I die, for the sake of the master I've served so long. Did I say much? Tell me, young man! Did I say much? Speak, or I'll throttle you."

The old gardener's withered fingers grasped Lionel's cravat. The young man gently freed himself from that feeble grasp.

"What did I say?" repeated the gardener; "whatever it was, it meant nothing. My poor old wits wander sometimes, you see, and I fancy I see things—such things! —knives, daggers—and murder—cruel, treacherous murder; a man standing on the top of a flight of dark steps, and another man stabbing him in the back, and throwing him down into some black dreadful place underground. It's only a dream, you know, a horrid dream; but I dream it so often—O, so often!"

No words can describe the look of horror upon the old man's face as he said this. He clung convulsively to Lionel's arm, trembling from head to foot, and with his eyes almost starting from their sockets.

A death-like chill crept through the young man's veins; a death-like horror took possession of his breast.

Something told him that in this old gardener's wild talk there was more than the raving of a disordered intellect. Something told him that lurking in these hideous words there was the clue to some dark and horrible secret—a secret in which Rupert Godwin was concerned.

He struggled against the hideous conviction, the horrible dread that filled his breast. Rupert Godwin had been the enemy of his own family; but, then, was he not also Julia's father? It would have gone hard with young

Romeo Montague, if he had found himself obliged to think ill of the paternal Capulet. To think ill of the master of Wilmingdon Hall was torture to Lionel Westford. And yet the young man could not help feeling that he was on the threshold of some dreadful mystery.

Providence had, perhaps, sent him to that spot as the appointed discoverer and avenger of some dark crime; some deed buried from the light of day; some foul secret, the clue to which was hidden in the bewildered brain of an imbecile old man. Come what might, Lionel felt that it was his solemn duty to endeavour to fathom the mystery. It was possible that the secret might not concern the present owner of the Hall. This old man's clouded brain might be haunted by the memory of some deed done by a former master, in days when men held each other's and their own lives more cheaply than they hold them now; in the days when duels were as common as dinner parties are to-day, and when many a gentlemanly affray ended in horror and bloodshed. Or it might even be that the tragic scene which tormented the old gardener's brain had no more substantial origin than some ghastly legend of the old mansion told by the Christmas fire in the servants' hall, and fatally impressed upon the imbecile mind of age.

Let its origin be what it might, however, Lionel felt that he ought to make himself master of its real nature; and, in order to do this, prudence and some dissimulation would be necessary. He could only hope to succeed by lulling the old man's fears to rest, and thus winning his confidence.

"Come," he said gently, slipping his arm through that of the gardener with a protecting gesture,—"come, my friend, calm yourself, I beg. You are an old man, and these dreams and fancies wear you out. Let us talk of something else. Let us leave this dismal-looking place."

"Yes, yes," answered the gardener eagerly; "let us go away. I've no business here; I don't want to come here—but there's something draws me to the spot; there's some devil, I think, that drags me here. I don't see him, but I feel his touch—I feel his burning fingers dragging me, and then I come here in spite of myself, and I look through the crack of the shutter, and I see it all again, as I saw it that night."

The old man turned and pointed to the window as he spoke. Following his skinny finger, Lionel fixed his eyes on that one particular window, and then noted its position in the range of shattered casements.

It was the seventh window from the western angle of the wall.

The young man took special note of this circumstance, and then led his companion very slowly away.

The gardener was very old—very feeble. At any time he might die, and, if there were indeed a secret hidden beneath his wild talk, that dark secret would perhaps die with him.

"You are an old servant in this household?" Lionel said.

"Yes, a very old servant, a faithful servant. I've served here, man and boy, for the best part of a century. Is it likely I would turn again them that has fed and clothed me? Is it likely I would turn again one of my master's race—my old master's race? This one is dark and cold and proud, and there's something in his eyes that makes me shudder when he looks at me. But the Godwin blood runs in his veins, and old Caleb Wildred will never turned against him. It ain't likely, you see, after serving 'em, man and boy, for nigh upon a hundred years—it ain't likely."

For some time Lionel walked side by side with the old

gardener. Caleb Wildred talked a great deal; but his talk was all of the same rambling order, and he always came round again to the same point.

There was a secret—a secret which he would die sooner than betray.

Lionel Westford lay down to rest that night with a terrible burden upon his mind. All through the night he was alternately tossing wakefully upon his pillow, or tormented by hideous dreams in which Julia Godwin came to him, pale and tearful, imploring him to keep the secret of her father's crime.

That hidden shapeless crime—which was as yet only a hideous shadow, a frightful suspicion in the young man's mind.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MISS VANBERG IS MALICIOUS.

Rupert Godwin left Clara Westford with rage and vengeance burning in his breast. “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” says the poet; but the mind of a bad man who finds himself despised by the woman he loves is the habitation of that devil whose name is legion. There was no vengeance too base, too cruel, for the banker. He determined to heap the bitterest of all earthly sufferings upon the woman who had defied him.

He laughed aloud as he thought of the widow’s weakness. Poverty-stricken, friendless—what could she do in the strife with him, who had wealth and power on his side?

Rupert Godwin had been an infidel from his very boyhood. His philosophy was of the Garden, and not of the Porch. In his creed a man had but one duty, and that was allegiance to himself. For himself and for his own pleasure he had lived, and now that the passions of youth had been sated by the pleasures of youth, a darker and more stormy passion held the mastery of his mind. That passion was revenge. His offended pride, his baffled love, his outraged self-esteem, alike demanded the humiliation of Clara Westford.

From the Waterloo-road he went straight to a West-end club, where he had promised to meet the young Marquis.

He had pledged himself to introduce Lord Roxleydale to Violet Westford. But he had only done this in order

that he might gain time to mature his schemes. If Clara had yielded to the temptation of his wealth, or the fear of his power, he would then have protected Violet from the Marquis.

But Clara had defied him, and he was now determined on a course which must result in unspeakable misery for her.

He found Lord Roxleydale waiting for him in the smoking-room of the club. The apartment was almost deserted at this hour, and the young Marquis had no better amusement than to lounge in one of the windows, puffing laboriously at a gigantic regalia, with the air of a man who has sworn to smoke himself into a galloping consumption within a given period.

For once in a way he had contrived to escape from the society of his hanger-on and flatterer, Mr. Sempronius Sykemore; but he had only done this at the cost of a fifty-pound note, which he had lent to the needy Sempronius, who was always tormented by a kind of demon avenger in the shape of a "little bill," which required to be taken up with money borrowed from Mr. Sykemore's wealthy friends. "I should paste a bit of calico behind that 'little' bill of yours, if I were you, Sykemore," remarked one of his victims. "It has been taken up so many times that I am sure it can't hold together much longer."

"Well, Godwin!" exclaimed Lord Roxleydale, turning eagerly to meet the banker; "have you managed that business? Have you seen her, and have you arranged matters for my introduction to her?"

"Unluckily, no, my dear boy," Mr. Godwin answered coolly. "I have not forgotten you, but I find that I have made a slight mistake. I have been making inquiries at the theatre this morning, and I have discovered that Miss Watson, the girl who plays the Queen of Beauty, is not

the person I fancied."

"Then you can't introduce me to her?"

"Unhappily, my dear boy, I have not that privilege. But I am a man of the world, and I think I can give you a few useful hints as to the best way of getting an introduction."

Lord Roxleydale shrugged his shoulders with an impatient gesture.

"Sempronius could do as much as that," he said.

"Sempronius is a cad," answered the banker, "who ought not to be trusted with any business requiring the smallest amount of tact. He's a very good sort of person to send on a message to your tailor, or to get you long odds from the bookmen when you want to back anything. He may be useful to us by-and-by; but for the present we are better off without him. Do you know that girl—that handsome Jewish-looking girl? Miss Vanberg, I think you called her."

"Yes, I know her."

"She is the person to be of use to us. She will be able to tell us all about this Miss Watson. Suppose you were to call upon her, taking me with you?"

"It seems rather a roundabout way of doing business," the Marquis said contemptuously; "but I'm agreeable. My phaeton is waiting. I can drive you to Miss Vanberg's at once, if you like."

"I am ready," answered the banker. "I want to see this Miss Vanberg."

He spoke carelessly, but in his face there was a lurking expression in which a physiognomist might have perceived an almost feverish anxiety.

But the Marquis was by no means skilled in reading

either the faces or the minds of men. He had gone through the usual curriculum at Eton and Oxford, and had done the usual Continental tour with a tutor whose life he endangered at every available opportunity by upsetting him on the highways and byways of Europe out of divers vehicles, and had evinced altogether an exceptional capacity for remaining in a state of primitive ignorance. His career at the University had awakened him to the comprehension of the fact that those Latin fellows who wrote stupid histories about each other's wars and that kind of thing were a confounded bore, and the Greek fellows a still more confounded bore; that getting up early in the morning was humbug; and that wine-parties were slow, because fellows had got so doosid sober and so doosid intellectual, that they were always chopping damm' logic and talking damm' crack-jaw stuff about Homer and Æschylus and that kind of thing, instead of enjoying themselves like gentlemen.

This was Hector Augustus Front d'Airain, Baron of Hursley in Staffordshire, Marquis of Roxleydale in Scotland,—a fair-haired, yellow-whiskered, baby-faced young gentleman, with the morals of a Rochester and the intellect of a Master Slender. He was the very last of men whom Rupert Godwin would have chosen for a companion from any but mercenary motives.

The two men drove straight to Miss Vanberg's house, which was a *bijou* mansion in Bolton-row. It was between four and five o'clock in the afternoon by this time, and the young lady was at home.

A man-servant ushered the two gentlemen up the richly-decorated staircase, where nymphs and satyrs in Florentine bronze smirked and capered in the recesses of the pale grey wall, relieved by mouldings and medallions in unburnished gold. Everything in the elegantly-appointed house betokened the presence of wealth. The

Duke of Harlingford's purse had to pay very largely for the caprices of the lovely Jewess, who honoured him by spending his money.

The afternoon's sun was shining between the leaves of the tropical flowers that shaded the open window of Miss Vanberg's drawing-room. Near this window the Jewess was half-seated, half-reclining on a low luxurious sofa covered with amber satin.

Esther Vanberg wore a clear white muslin dress, high to the throat, and fastened round her waist by a broad crimson sash tied in a loose knot. A crimson ribbon secured the rich masses of her purple-black hair.

Her slender figure was half-buried in the amber satin pillows of the sofa, whose brilliant hue contrasted marvellously with her dark hair and flashing black eyes.

Seated thus, Esther Vanberg might have been a worthy study for any living painter.

But in the broad summer sunlight the havoc which her reckless life and evil temper had wrought in her constitution was only too plainly visible.

Rupert Godwin saw the feverish light in her eyes, the hectic flush upon her cheek; and he knew that the beautiful Jewess was doomed to make a speedy finish to her reckless career.

She half rose as the two gentlemen entered the room.

"Pray don't disturb yourself, Miss Vanberg," said the Marquis; "I've only dropped in for a few minutes' chat, with my friend here, Mr. Godwin, the great banker. You must have heard of Godwin's bank, eh? That's quite in your style, you know. You've got quite a genius for getting rid of money, you know, and that kind of thing. You're not looking very well this afternoon. You're tired,

I daresay. Long rehearsal, and so on. Fatiguing life, I should think, the drama, eh?"

"Very fatiguing," answered the Jewess, shrugging her shoulders contemptuously, "especially when one's ambition is blighted by the senseless stupidity of one's employers. I want to be an actress, not a ballet-girl; but Mr. Maltravers will not allow me to open my lips; and yet he has picked up some girl in the streets whom he has chosen to place in the most conspicuous position in the great scene of our new burlesque."

"You mean Miss Watson," exclaimed the Marquis. "Well, I don't wonder Maltravers was knocked over when he saw her: she's the loveliest creature I ever beheld."

Esther Vanberg looked at the young nobleman with a frown which was almost too much for the young man's nerves. Rupert Godwin gave him a warning glance at the same moment; and, dull as Lord Roxleydale was, he saw that he had been imprudent in the undisguised utterance of his admiration.

"If you call that insipid flaxen-haired doll a beauty, you must be as stupid as Maltravers himself," said the Jewess unceremoniously.

Mr. Godwin took this opportunity of striking in.

"Well, for my part, I think she's a pretty girl, in a very insipid style, as you say, Miss Vanberg, and by no means my style of beauty. I like something flashing, queen-like, Oriental—the Cleopatra type of loveliness."

He looked at the Jewess as he spoke, and it was evident that her offended vanity was somewhat appeased by the compliment implied in his words.

"However," continued the banker, "insipid as the young lady is, a friend of ours, a certain Mr. Sempronius Sykemore, a tuft-hunter and vulgarian, has chosen to fall

desperately in love with her. He is pining for an introduction, and is ready to carry her off and make her Mrs. Sempronius Sykemore at the shortest notice, if she will accept him for a husband."

"He is rich, I suppose?" inquired Esther.

"Not he. The fellow is a low-born adventurer, without a sixpence in the world, beyond what he contrives to borrow from some obliging friend."

"He is young, handsome, perhaps?" suggested Esther.

"Neither. He is five-and-forty at the least, wears the most obvious of wigs, and is strongly suspected of being guilty of false teeth."

Esther Vanberg's face lighted up with a gracious smile.

"And he wants to marry Miss Watson, the stage-manager's favourite, the Queen of Beauty?"

"He does."

"And if she refuses to marry him?"

"Well, my dear Miss Vanberg," answered the banker, "that's the very thing the Marquis and I have been thinking of; and we want to concoct a little plot—a pleasant little practical joke, you know, by which we may have some innocent fun ourselves, and secure our dear Sempronius a pretty wife. Now, unfortunately, Sykemore is so confoundedly vulgar and ugly, and fat and conceited, that if he were to ask Miss Watson to marry him she'd be sure to say No. So in this case we want to plan an elopement. We shall try and arrange some little *ruse*, by which Miss Watson will be lured into a travelling carriage; post-horses will be ready on the road, and our friend Sykemore shall carry the young lady off to a lonely place in Essex, belonging to our friend Lord Roxleydale. Once there, the Queen of Beauty, who is a very prudish,

stuck-up young person, as I understand, will feel that her reputation is compromised. Sempronius will be ready with a special licence and a parson, the knot will be tied, and Miss Watson will disappear into domestic life as Mrs. Sykemore, and will thus leave the stage of the Circenses clear for one infinitely more calculated to charm the public than her most insipid self."

The Marquis of Roxleydale sat open-mouthed, listening to this speech. He felt that some subtle plot was being concocted, but he was just clever enough to know that he was stupid, and he trusted himself entirely in the hands of his friend and adviser—the man of the world.

To Esther Vanberg there was a terrible temptation in the proposition made by the banker.

She hated Violet Westford; hated her alike for her superior beauty, the favour that had been shown her by Mr. Maltravers, and the admiration that had been lavished on her by the press and the public.

It had been whispered in the theatre that Violet would be permitted to play some small part in a new piece that was about to be produced, in order that the audience might see more of her fresh young beauty.

This was a terrible mortification to the haughty girl, who so earnestly aspired to be an actress, and who had never been allowed to open her lips on the stage of the Circenses.

For these reasons Esther Vanberg hated Violet. She hated her also because of the girl's quiet dignity, that calm and placid demeanour which resisted insult more completely than any violence of temper could have done.

Thus it was that Esther Vanberg was tempted to join in a plot which might remove Violet from her path, and the success of which would humiliate her unconscious rival

by uniting her to an unworthy husband.

The temptation was a powerful one, and Esther had never been accustomed to withstand temptation.

“What do you want me to do in order to assist your scheme?” she asked, after an interval of thought.

“We only want you to introduce us to Miss Watson in such a manner as to throw her off her guard. The Marquis can get admittance to the green-room of the theatre for himself and any of his friends.”

“Miss Watson is an ill-bred insolent creature,” exclaimed Esther impatiently, “and she and I are scarcely on speaking terms. However, if you will wait till Monday night I’ll try and arrange matters in the mean time. I must be on tolerably friendly terms with this girl before I can introduce you to her.”

“To be sure,” answered the banker. “Monday night will do very well indeed.”

The Marquis of Roxleydale looked crestfallen. His weak mind was entirely filled with the image of Violet, and he could not bear the thought of delay. He was eager to see her, to give utterance to his admiration—his worship. Left to himself, his love might have been a generous affection: as it was, that love would speedily degenerate into the base passion of a profligate, for he was under the influence of a man of the world.

“I should have liked to see—I mean, I should have liked Sempronius to see her to-night,” he said; “Monday seems such a doosid long time to wait.”

Esther Vanberg shrugged her shoulders with the disdainful gesture that was peculiar to her.

“It can’t possibly be managed before Monday,” she said; “and as it is, it will give me a great deal of trouble.”

“For which you shall be recompensed, my dear Miss Vanberg,” answered the Marquis eagerly; “if the handsomest diamond bracelet to be bought at Harry Emanuel’s will content you.”

Esther smiled. Revenge was sweet, but precious gems were also very dear to the heart of the ballet-girl. Rupert Godwin watched her keenly, and with a strange shadow of melancholy overspreading his countenance.

There was something very horrible in the idea of this girl, with the doom of death stamped upon her face, but with her mind entirely absorbed by schemes of vengeance and greed of gain.

“Who is she, and whence does she come?” thought the banker. “There is a strange coincidence in the likeness she bears to the dead. And then that talk of the ancient Jews of Andalusia. Strange!—strange!”

Rupert Godwin roused himself by an effort from the reverie into which he had fallen, and rose to take his leave of Miss Vanberg.

After some further discussion, a meeting in the green-room of the Circenses was arranged for the following Monday evening. Lord Roxleydale was hand-and-glove with the manager of the theatre, and his influence was sufficiently powerful to procure the admission of his friend.

The two gentlemen left Miss Vanberg’s elegant little domicile and drove back to the club, where the banker was to dine *tête-à-tête* with the Marquis. Of late Rupert Godwin had occupied a *pied-à-terre* in St. James’s, preferring to live anywhere rather than at Wilmingdon Hall, though Julia complained bitterly of his desertion.

“Now, Godwin,” exclaimed the Marquis, when the two men were seated opposite to each other at the glittering

little dinner-table in the club-room, “tell me why you introduced Sempronius into this business.”

“As a tool, my dear Marquis; and a very convenient one,” answered the banker. “Couldn’t you see through that girl Vanberg’s jealousy? She is envious of the other girl’s superior beauty. If she knew that you admired Miss Watson, she would do all in her power to baulk your schemes; for she would be afraid of helping her rival to become a Marchioness. But, on the other hand, she will cordially assist in a plot that will unite the girl she hates to a vulgar penniless husband.”

“I see. You’re a clever fellow, upon my word, Godwin. So far, so good. And how about the rest of your plot?”

“Nothing can be more simple. You have a place in Essex, called the Moat?”

“I have.”

“What sort of a place is it?”

“Well, I think It’s about the loneliest and dreariest old dungeon in the civilized world.”

“Have you many servants there?”

“No; only two poor old creatures, who wither away among the cobwebs and mildew of the place. They are a superannuated coachman and his wife, who served my father, and were pensioned by him. They are both of them as deaf as posts, and as blind as beetles.”

“Nothing could be better—unless, indeed, they had been dumb into the bargain,” answered Rupert Godwin, with a grim smile. “The very people of all people; the very place of all places. I have my little schemes all prepared, and before midnight on Monday, Vio—Miss Watson, the Queen of Beauty, will be in a travelling carriage behind four horses on her road to the Moat.”

“With Sempronius Sykemore?”

“No, my dear Roxleydale; with you.”

CHAPTER XXV.

FALCON AND DOVE.

The Saturday evening which succeeded the interview in Miss Vanberg's drawing-room was almost a happy one for Violet Westford: for on this evening Mr. Maltravers announced to her that he was so much pleased with her graceful deportment in the burlesque that he had decided upon intrusting her with a small speaking part in a new piece, which was to be read aloud in the green-room on the following Monday morning.

This alone would have very little affected Violet, for she was too unhappy in the thought of George Stanmore's supposed desertion to be ambitious of success upon the stage; but Mr. Maltravers also told her that he meant to increase her salary to a guinea and a half a week, and this sum seemed almost unheard-of wealth to the girl who had toiled so laboriously in order to earn Mrs. Trevor's pitiful stipend of half-a-guinea.

She thought of the increased comforts she could procure for her mother; she remembered that now Lionel was earning money, and her own salary was to be increased, the dear mother need no longer slave at that tiresome Berlin-wool work, which was so poorly paid.

She thought that now they could leave their close lodging in the dark street near the Victoria Theatre; that they might find some better home farther away, towards Camberwell or Kennington, where there were trees and gardens and flowers.

Such innocent thoughts as these filled Violet Westford's mind as Mr. Maltravers quitted her, after announcing her good fortune.

No vain triumph, no feeling of gratified pride, swelled her breast. She thought only of her mother, and the simple home comforts which might be provided by her increased salary.

She little knew the feelings of rage and envy that the stage-manager's announcement had kindled in the breast of her bitter enemy, Esther Vanberg.

That ambitious young aspirant for dramatic honours had happened to be standing close at hand when Mr. Maltravers spoke to Violet. There had been nothing of a private nature in his communication, and he spoke quite openly. Miss Vanberg, therefore, had overheard every syllable—his praises, his promises of advancement.

If Esther Vanberg had wavered in her purpose, if she had hesitated as to her share in Rupert Godwin's foul plot against the unconscious girl, this circumstance would have decided her.

"What do I care what trouble or disgrace comes upon her, so long as I can remove her from my pathway?" thought the ballet-girl bitterly; for she felt as if Violet had done her an absolute injury, by usurping the place which she herself had desired to fill.

Under better circumstances, and in a purer atmosphere, the nature of Esther Vanberg might not have been ignoble. She was impulsive, passionate, and revengeful, and she had never learnt to school her evil impulses, or to bridle her impetuous nature. She was a creature of the moment, lavishly generous to her friends, savagely vindictive in all dealings with her enemies. She was like some denizen of the jungle—graceful, beautiful, and dangerous. There was something of the Bohemian in her

nature, and she had all the gipsy quickness of perception, and the gipsy cunning, as well as the gipsy love of gauds and gems, bright colours and fantastic raiment. She had shown no special capacity for acting on the boards of the Circenses, but in the dealings of every-day life she was a consummate actress.

So it was on this occasion, though she felt almost stifled by the envious rage that devoured her, she was yet able to suppress all outward evidence of her emotion, and to appear utterly indifferent to the conversation she had just overheard.

She stood for a few moments at the side scene, watching the piece that was being acted; and then, approaching Violet with a soft and gliding footstep that was peculiar to her, laid her hand lightly and with an almost caressing gesture upon the girl's shoulder.

Violet turned, startled from her reverie by that light touch, and found herself face to face with Esther Vanberg. But to her surprise the ballet-girl was smiling upon her. Instead of the insolent and defiant frown which had always darkened her face when she had addressed her rival, Esther's countenance now wore its most bewitching smile.

That brilliant countenance had the power to assume any expression at will. There were some people who fancied they knew Esther Vanberg; but there were very few who had ever fathomed the depths of her nature.

"Come, Miss Watson," she said softly, almost pleadingly, "let us be friends. I daresay I have been very foolish, very childish, to feel as I have done about such a trifling disappointment. I wanted to fill your position in the burlesque; and when Mr. Maltravers refused my request, and chose you for the best place in the tableau, I was absurdly angry with you as well as with him. But to-

night I am in a better humour, I suppose, and I feel quite ashamed of myself when I remember how silly I have been. Can you forgive me?"

She stretched out her little hand—a little brown hand which Murillo might have loved to paint. This pretty little brown hand was glittering with diamonds.

The young lady's quarrels with her ducal admirer were of frequent occurrence, but the return of the Duke's presents was no part of the programme. Miss Vanberg looked upon these costly offerings as a kind of spoil taken from the enemy, rather than as those rich gifts which "wax poor when givers prove unkind."

"I am sure you are not a revengeful person, Miss Watson," she said smiling. "Say that you forgive me."

"Most willingly," answered Violet, with a confiding smile; "I do not think I have much to forgive. I know you have spoken unkindly about me; but we were strangers, and I had no right to expect your friendship."

"Henceforward it is yours," returned the Jewess. "And those who know me best know what Esther Vanberg's friendship or her hatred is worth. But it is nearly time for us to dress. Are you going upstairs?"

The two girls ascended the stairs together. The dressing-room of a theatre is by no means an unpleasant place, when its atmosphere is free from the poison of envy and malice. Half-a-dozen merry light-hearted girls attiring themselves in their picturesque costumes, and chatting gaily as they dress, form a very pleasant party.

Miss Vanberg was the queen of the dressing-room allotted to her and half-a-dozen other girls of the same rank. Her beauty, her diabolical temper, her lavish outlay of money, and the Duke of Harlington's notorious infatuation, which might at any time raise this girl to the

highest rank in the peerage, all combined to render her paramount amongst the more ignorant and weak-minded of the young women with whom she associated.

Everyone took her tone from the Jewess; and now that Esther was pleased to be civil to Violet Westford, her companions followed her example, and had only the sweetest words to bestow upon the Queen of Beauty.

But this change had very little effect upon Violet. She was so different a being from the girls amongst whom chance had thrown her, that it was quite impossible she could have any sympathy with them. Her gentle nature asserted itself alike in her dignified indifference to insolence, and in her calm acceptance of affected friendliness. Her heart was far away from that noisy chamber, and the talk and laughter of her companions fell on unheeding ears.

The Sunday which followed this evening was a pleasant one for Violet. She spent that day alone with her mother, accompanying her to the nearest church in the morning, and sitting all through the long afternoon and evening talking with that beloved friend and confidante of the happy days that were past—the pleasant hours that had been buried with the dead.

She told her mother of the good fortune which Mr. Maltravers had announced to her on the previous evening. On that same evening a letter had arrived from Lionel, containing a five-pound note, so the mother and daughter felt themselves actually rich.

“And Lionel is happy in his new employment, mamma?” asked Violet.

“I imagine so, dear, from the tone of his letter, though he makes no allusion to his employer, or his present mode of life. But he speaks with rapture of the delights of country air and country scenery, after this dingy quarter

of London; and he begs me to find some comfortable lodging in the suburbs, where we too may enjoy fresh air and the sight of green trees and blooming gardens."

"Dear Lionel, how thoughtful he is!" murmured Violet.

"He is, dear. But now, I want you to answer me a question, and candidly, my darling, for it is a vital question for me. You have now been some little time in the theatre—quite long enough to form a judgment of your new life. Tell me, dear, have you found the green-room of a theatre such a scene of danger as it has sometimes been asserted that it is? Your youth and attractions might render you the victim of many annoyances—I will not insult you by talking about temptations. Trust me then, Violet, and trust me as fully as a mother should be trusted. Tell me, what is your experience of the side-scenes of a theatre?"

"Very simple, dear mother. I have been almost as much at home at the Circenses as in these lodgings, and I can assure you that the popular idea of a green-room is quite a delusion. The people behind the scenes of the Circenses seem as much occupied by the business they have to do as if the theatre were a factory. Of course I was a little nervous at appearing before a London audience, but no one behind the scenes has in any way annoyed me; except, indeed—"

"Except whom, dear girl?"

"One of the girls employed in the burlesque—a Miss Vanberg—was at first rather disagreeable in her manner towards me, but last night she apologised for her rudeness, and we shall no doubt be very comfortable in future. Mr. Maltravers is extremely kind; and, for the rest, I go very quietly about my business—do what I have to do, and no one interferes with me."

It was impossible to doubt Violet's statement. Her

manner was frankness itself.

The mother breathed a sigh of intense relief.

“My darling, how completely you have relieved my mind!” she exclaimed with delight. “I have heard so much about the dangers of a theatre; but now I shall have no further fear. I ought not to have feared. I ought to have remembered the story of Una and the Lion.”

A thrill of triumph stirred Clara Westford’s heart as she spoke. In spite of her defiance of him, the banker’s sinister threats had not been without their effect upon her mind. She had trembled at the thought of dangers that might assail her child—alone, inexperienced, in an entirely new world, beautiful, helpless, innocent as an infant, and utterly unprotected.

But the mother’s fears were entirely set at rest by Violet’s candid assurances. Clara Westford was now ready to smile at what she believed to be the empty threats of her unscrupulous persecutor.

A quiet peace, that was almost akin to happiness, reigned in the breasts of both mother and daughter on that Sabbath-day. Not for a moment could Violet Westford forget that secret grief which had arisen out of her belief in George Stanmore’s falsehood. Not for a moment could the fond and trusting girl forget that the dearest dream of her life was broken. But there was no taint of selfishness in Violet’s character, and no sorrow of her own could entirely absorb her mind, or render her indifferent to the feelings of those she loved.

To-day she had seen a smile, a bright and peaceful smile, light up her mother’s face for the first time since that never-to-be-forgotten day when the tidings of the sailor’s death had fallen like a thunderbolt on the quiet country home. To-day, for the first time since that hour of

despair, Clara Westford seemed almost happy; and this in itself was happiness for her devoted daughter.

Early the next morning Violet went to the Circenses to attend the reading of the new piece in which she was to make her *début* as an actress. Esther Vanberg was at the theatre—"dressed to death," as her "intimate enemies" remarked to each other in confidence, after having congratulated the young lady upon the perfection of her costume with effusion. Miss Vanberg had no special business in the green-room this morning; but she was very anxious to know whether the part allotted to Violet in the new piece was only a few lines of young lady-like inanity, or one of those lively little sketches of character which might win applause for the young *débutante*.

Miss Vanberg appeared to be in an unusually gracious humour upon this particular morning, and she greeted Violet with the same warm friendliness of manner which she had displayed upon the Saturday night.

Violet, unsuspecting as a child, accepted that spurious friendship for the pure gold it represented. She had no reason to suspect hypocrisy. What motive could the Jewess have for wishing to deceive her?

In consequence, therefore, of Esther Vanberg's artful manœuvres the two girls were on excellent terms on Monday night, and all was prepared for the vile plot concocted by the banker.

As for the Marquis, he was only a passive instrument in the hands of his tempter. Rupert Godwin had planned everything; and Lord Roxleydale was told that he had nothing to do except to act in accordance with the directions of his friend. His friend! Alas for ill-trained youth! these are the friends who lure their helpless dupes into the uttermost depths of vice and folly. And when the ruin is accomplished, when the poor weak-minded fool

has parted alike with the last sixpence of his fortune, the last impulse of truth and honour that ever thrilled through his breast, then the so-called friend laughs his deluded victim to scorn, and goes away to seek a new dupe.

Violet was dressed for her part in the burlesque. She was looking her loveliest in her fantastic robe of silvery gauze, her draperies of rose-coloured crape, her crown of stars and flowers. Her long rippling golden hair fell upon her shoulders, long and thick as the tresses of a modern Godiva.

Under some artful pretence Esther Vanberg had lured her new friend into the green-room, and the two girls were sitting side by side upon a low ottoman, beneath the full light of a chandelier.

The green-room was deserted at this time of the evening, for all the actors were busy on the stage, or in their dressing-rooms. The two girls were sitting alone; and seen thus they might have served as a model for some artist's rendering of a fallen angel and a spirit of light.

Esther Vanberg's blue-black hair was drawn away from her low brow, and confined with a narrow circlet of diamonds, one of the Duke of Harlingford's latest gifts, given at a time when he had intended to make her his Duchess, in spite of every opposing influence.

They had quarrelled since then; and Esther, with the pride of some despotic Eastern queen, rather than a *figurante* in a theatre, had forbidden the young Duke to approach her, and had ordered her servants to deny him admission to her house.

Unluckily for the Duke's prospects in life, such wild freaks as these only rendered the shallow-brained young nobleman still more infatuated, still more inclined to

sacrifice the wishes of all his best friends by uniting his fate to that of a woman whose only charm was her almost demoniac beauty.

The hour at which the Marquis and his two friends were to present themselves in the green-room had been planned by Esther; and now, while talking gaily to the unconscious Violet she glanced across the girl's shoulder and saw the three men upon the threshold of the door.

Lord Roxleydale was really in love, after his own fashion; and he was almost as nervous as some school-girl who enters a ball-room for the first time.

Not so the banker. He was perfectly self-possessed, quite able to play out the base game that he had planned.

He took care to address himself at first entirely to Esther Vanberg, and scarcely appeared to be aware of Violet's presence, though at the same time he was surprised by the dazzling beauty of the girl whom he had only seen in her simple mourning dress at Mrs. Trevor's party.

Presently, however, the introductions were made, and Miss Vanberg presented Mr. Sempronius Sykemore to her dearest friend, Miss Watson.

Violet, fully accustomed to society, was in no manner disturbed or confused by this introduction, nor by the introduction of the Marquis which immediately followed.

But Lord Roxleydale hung sheepishly in the background, sheltering himself behind his friend the banker, quite incapable of saying a word for himself, so deeply was he smitten by Violet's loveliness. And beyond this, the young nobleman had been told to hold his tongue, and to leave the management of the plot entirely to his wiser friends.

He was silent therefore, and could only gaze in mute

admiration upon Violet, while Mr. Sempronius Sykemore paid all manner of extravagant compliments to the two girls. Esther Vanberg was completely hoodwinked by the story which Rupert Godwin had told her, and which Mr. Sykemore's manner seemed to confirm. With her face averted from Violet, she smiled at the banker, a smile full of malicious meaning.

Violet had no recollection of having seen Rupert Godwin before; for he had quite escaped her notice amongst the crowd of guests at Mrs. Trevor's party.

And yet there was something in his face, something in the vivid light of his dark eyes, which seemed strangely familiar to her.

Surely it must be the same look which had so puzzled her in Esther Vanberg, the expression which bore a resemblance to that of George Stanmore, her false and fickle lover.

She could not help wondering about this, even while the two strange gentlemen and Esther were chattering round her. She was abstracted in the midst of their talk, and gave random answers to any observations that were addressed to her.

But presently the call-boy announced the last scene of the burlesque, and the two girls rose to leave the green-room.

Violet bowed to the gentlemen with an air of quiet dignity as she quitted the apartment. From first to last she behaved to them as she would have done had she met them in the drawing-room of an acquaintance; and she had no idea that they could think badly of her, simply because they found her earning her living in a theatre.

"Well, my dear Roxleydale!" exclaimed the banker, as the three friends were left alone in the green-room, "what

do you think of your golden-haired goddess now? Are you still bewitched?"

"I'm completely annihilated," answered the Marquis; "she's an angel, divinity, a—a nice girl, and that kind of thing."

"And are you prepared to go through fire and water to win her?"

"Through an ocean—across a blazing prairie, and that kind of thing," exclaimed the young lord, who could venture to be poetical now that the object of his adoration was safely out of hearing.

"It is only fair to remind you that the enterprise of to-night will be one of some danger," said Rupert Godwin, looking earnestly at the young man.

"Danger!" cried Lord Roxleydale; "my people learned to laugh at danger before the Normans conquered England."

"Yes, that's all very grand," answered the banker coolly; "but nowadays there are legal penalties sometimes attaching to these matters. Whatever happens, Marquis, you will stand the consequences of this act yourself—you will not betray my share in the business?"

"I am a gentleman, and a Roxleydale," returned the young man, with some touch of dignity; "and I only associate with those who can trust me."

"Enough, Lord Roxleydale," replied Rupert Godwin; "I will trust you freely. As soon as Vio—as soon as the girl they call Miss Watson returns to her dressing-room she will receive a message to the effect that her mother has been seized with sudden illness, and that a neighbouring doctor has sent his carriage for her. She will be conducted in all haste and confusion to the carriage, which will be standing in readiness in a quiet street

between the Strand and Covent-garden. I need scarcely tell you that the carriage in question will be the vehicle provided to convey the yellow-haired goddess to your place in Essex."

The Marquis did not look altogether delighted with this scheme.

"Isn't it rather too bad," he said, "that dodge about her mother?"

"My dear Roxleydale, need I remind you that all stratagems are fair in love as well as in war?"

The Marquis was too weak to resist his black-hearted tempter. The three men returned to the private box, which Lord Roxleydale had rented for the entire season.

Rupert Godwin did not remain long in the box. He quitted the theatre as the curtain fell upon the close of the burlesque, taking the Marquis with him.

All had been arranged with unfailing precision. The banker and Lord Roxleydale walked together to the quiet street, where the carriage was waiting, and paced slowly up and down the pavement, smoking their cigars, and watching for the moment when the foul plot would be set in action.

Such men as Rupert Godwin select their servants to suit their own purposes, and generally contrive to find willing tools in those they employ. The banker's confidential servant was a man whose principles were about on a level with those of his master, and Mr. Godwin had no fear of rebellion or discontent when he wanted help in some villanous business.

Violet had nearly finished dressing, when she was summoned to the door of the apartment, where she found one of the men belonging to the theatre waiting for her with a letter in his hand.

The letter consisted of only a few words, written in pencil:

“Miss Westford is requested to follow the bearer of this to Dr. Maldon’s carriage. Dr. Maldon is now in attendance upon Mrs. Westford, who has been taken seriously ill. Her daughter will do well to lose no time in following the messenger.”

Violet almost fainted under the terrible shock caused by these few lines. Her mother ill—seriously ill; a physician in attendance, a carriage sent for her, and an urgent request that no time should be lost! The case must indeed be serious.

The excited girl snatched her bonnet from the peg where it hung, flung her shawl around her, and hurried back to the passage where she had left the messenger.

“Take me to him!” she cried impetuously, “the man who brought this letter—where is he?”

“In the hall, Miss. He begged me to say as you was to be very quick.”

“Yes, yes,” gasped Violet, “not a minute is to be lost—not a moment!”

She rushed past the astonished messenger, and ran down the stairs, scarcely conscious of the ground upon which she trod. She forgot everything, except that her mother was ill; and her heart throbbed loud and fast with a terror that was almost too painful to bear.

No thought of falsehood or imposture ever flashed across her mind. How should it do so? How could this innocent girl imagine that there lived a wretch so base as to betray his victim by practising on the sacred love of a daughter for her mother?

James Spence, the banker’s valet, was the person who

had been intrusted with the pretended physician's note. He was just the sort of man to assist in such a scheme. Silent, soft of foot and of voice, false in every word and look, he was fully qualified to carry out the plans his master confided to him; and he served the banker well, for he knew that with few other masters could he have had so profitable a place. No class of employers pay so liberally as the wicked. For them fidelity is priceless. There must have been good times for the servants in the house of Lucrezia Borgia, Princess of Ferrara!

The banker's valet assumed an expression of profound sympathy as Violet approached him. He was a very respectable-looking man—grave, middle-aged, dressed with a scrupulous neatness that was almost Quaker-like; and he looked exactly the sort of man a physician's servant might be supposed to be.

"O, pray let us lose no time!" Violet exclaimed. "You are the person who brought this letter, are you not?"

"I am, Miss."

"Then I am ready to come with you at once."

No more was said until they had left the theatre; then James Spence addressed Violet in his most respectful tone.

"If you would allow me to suggest that you should take my arm, Miss, I think we should reach the carriage sooner," he said, "for we may have to pass through a crowd."

"Yes; you are very good; I will take your arm," answered the excited girl. "O, pray let us hurry to the carriage."

The valet lost no time in obeying this behest. He led Violet through the busy streets at a rapid pace, and they reached the quiet thoroughfare where the carriage was

waiting, before the agonized and trembling girl had been able to collect her thoughts, or recover from the first effects of the shock she had so lately received.

Had she been a little calmer, she must have wondered at the style of carriage waiting to receive her, which bore little resemblance to the kind of vehicle usually employed by a medical man. Had she been calmer, she might have remarked the presence of a man enveloped in a loose overcoat, who sat in the rumble of the carriage smoking a cigar.

But as it was, Violet observed nothing. The carriage-door was opened for her, she sprang into the vehicle, and sank half-fainting on the seat.

“Pray beg the coachman to drive quickly!” she cried in an imploring voice as James Spence closed the door.

“O yes, Miss, we’ll drive fast enough,” the valet answered, with a sinister grin, as he stepped back upon the pavement, while the horses hurried off in the direction of the Strand.

The man wrapped in an overcoat, and seated in the rumble, was the Marquis of Roxleydale. Another man, lounging at the corner of the street, watched the departing vehicle.

“So, Clara Westford,” he muttered between his set teeth, “I think at last I am fairly revenged upon you for your insolence. You have chosen to defy me. Be it my task to show you what a helpless creature you are.”

Helpless! Yes, Rupert Godwin; but the helpless are beneath the special care of Providence—that Power which is strong enough to triumph over even such schemers as you!

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE LABYRINTH.

A strange conflict went on in Lionel Westford's mind after that scene outside the northern wing of Wilmingdon Hall. At one moment the young man's brain was occupied by thoughts of Julia Godwin—her beauty, the noble nature which was evinced in every word she uttered, the amiable and yet impulsive temper, and all those charms and graces of manner which made the banker's daughter irresistible. But in the next instant the remembrance of the old gardener's dark hints would flash upon Lionel Westford's mind, and he would find it impossible to enjoy a moment's peace in a house that was haunted by a hideous yet shapeless shadow.

Yes, Wilmingdon Hall had become a haunted house in the imagination of Lionel Westford. Do what he would, he could not banish from his recollection the strange and terrible words that had been uttered by the old gardener.

Those words were for ever taking a more palpable form in Lionel's mind. They shaped themselves into the story of a murder—a foul and deadly crime, which had been witnessed by the half-witted old man through a chink in the shutter of the seventh window in that long range of darkened casements belonging to the deserted wing of Wilmingdon Hall.

But who was the murderer? That was a fearful point. Lionel Westford scarcely dared to whisper to himself the name of the man to whom his suspicion pointed.

That man was the same of whom his widowed mother had spoken with unusual and apparently unreasonable bitterness; the man through whose agency a family had been cast penniless upon the world.

But the same man was also the father of Julia Godwin, and Lionel Westford's heart sank within him as he contemplated the possibility of the banker's guilt.

What was he to do? To remain in that haunted house without taking some active step in the matter was impossible. The very atmosphere of the place seemed to oppress him. The cry of a dying creature seemed perpetually ringing in his ears.

His dreams were made hideous by shapeless visions. His brain grew dazed and bewildered, and a fitful fever took possession of him. His tremulous hands refused to do their work; and he found himself sometimes sitting for an hour together, staring vacantly at the drawing before him, while his mind dwelt upon that scene in the deserted old garden before the northern wing.

He felt that only action—prompt and decided action—could save him from a serious illness.

"My brain is beginning to be affected," he thought; "at any moment I may be seized with brain-fever. In my ravings I may reveal the suspicion that fills my mind—reveal it, perhaps, to the ears of guilt; and then—"

He scarcely dared to follow out the thought, which was a very horrible one.

If in the delirium attendant upon brain-fever he revealed the secret preying so fearfully upon his mind, and revealed it to the ears of a murderer, what more likely than that some means would be taken to prevent his ever leaving that house alive? A helpless and unconscious creature, stricken by fever, could be very

easily disposed of, and no one would be likely to suspect any but a natural cause for his death.

“I must act in this matter, and act promptly,” the young man thought. “It is not because I have fallen desperately in love with Julia Godwin that I can refrain from using my utmost endeavours to fathom this mystery. Duty demands that I should investigate the old man’s story. Heaven grant it may be only the delusion of a demented brain!”

Having once resolved upon the course he should take, Lionel’s mind grew much clearer. He worked quietly and calmly all that afternoon, keeping to his own apartments; for he was determined henceforward to avoid the dangerous fascination of Julia Godwin’s society.

He saw Miss Godwin stroll out upon the lawn; and never had she seemed lovelier to him than this afternoon, when stern duty kept him away from her. He saw her walk slowly across the grass, book in hand, and take the direction of that laurel avenue where they had so often met—where they had passed so many happy hours.

His heart beat quicker as his eyes followed that tall white-robed figure, in which girlish elegance was mingled with a queen-like grace. Lionel Westford was no coxcomb, and yet within the last week of his residence at Wilmingdon Hall, vague but delicious hopes and fancies had mingled themselves with the tortures that oppressed his mind.

He had been a great deal in Julia’s society within the last week, and something—some subtle shade of tone and manner—told him that his love was not altogether hopeless. In spite of the apparent difference between their social positions, Julia’s manner innocently and unconsciously revealed a tender interest in the man whom she had been so anxious to save from destitution.

And Lionel had to exclude this exquisite hope from his mind; and, knowing that he was beloved, he yet felt himself called upon to devote all the force of his intellect to the carrying out of an investigation which might result in branding with a fearful crime the father of the girl who loved him. The task was very terrible; but Lionel Westford was inflexible in a matter in which he felt that duty and honour alike called upon his firmness.

“At the cost of my own happiness, at the sacrifice even of Julia’s peace, I must fathom this horrible secret,” he thought, as he turned away from the open window looking out upon the lawn.

That evening he began his work.

It was his habit to dine alone in his own apartment at seven o’clock, the hour at which Miss Godwin and her stately companion, Mrs. Melville, took their ceremonious meal.

All the arrangements of the grand old mansion were perfect in their style, and Lionel’s solitary dinner-table was served as carefully as if he had been a distinguished guest.

He had rarely spoken much to the man-servant who waited upon him; but this evening he talked to the man with a purpose, for he felt that he could do nothing in the task he had set himself until he had obtained all the information which the members of Mr. Godwin’s household could afford him.

“I have been very much interested lately in an old man whom I often see about the grounds,” Lionel began with assumed carelessness,—“Caleb Wildred, I think you call him. Poor fellow, his mind seems quite gone. How long has he been in his present state?”

“Well, sir,” answered the servant, who was very glad of

an opportunity of talking, “Old Caleb has been queerish in his head, off and on, for the last five or six years. But he had a bad illness about a twelvemonth ago, and ever since he’s been a great deal worse than he used to be—regular mad, as you must have seen, sir, talking about blood being shed—and treachery—and daggers—and murder—and all sorts of horrid things, till really it makes a man’s flesh creep to hear him.”

“Poor fellow! And this has come about since his illness! What sort of an illness was it?”

“Brain-fever, sir, and desperately bad he had it, poor chap! His life was give over; but Mrs. Beckson, the housekeeper, she’s a very old woman, she is, but not so old as Caleb, and as sharp as a needle, and she and Caleb are cousins, you see, sir; so she nursed him all the time, without troubling Mr. Godwin about the poor old chap’s illness, and he was kept up in a garret at the top of the house, where nobody could be disturbed by his raving and going on when the fever was at its worst. But lor, sir, it was awful to hear the things that poor weak-witted old fellow said.”

“What kind of things did he say?”

“Well, it was always the same story, sir, over and over and over again. Murder and treachery, and a chink in a shutter, and goodness knows what, but always the same; till it seemed to make your brain go queer to hear him. That illness of his lasted for nigh upon two months; and ever since that he’s been just as you see him now—able to do his little bit of work well enough, and quiet and harmless, but always going over the same ground, and yet somehow sensible and rational in some things, for after raving out about the murder, and the treachery, and so on, he’ll turn round the next minute and tell you it all means nothing, it’s all nonsense, and you’re not to listen

to it. So, you see, the poor old fellow knows that he's queer in his head, sir; and that's more than most of your lunatics do."

"Has Mr. Godwin ever heard of his wild talk?"

"Never, sir, so far as I'm aware. Indeed, I may venture to say for certain that he hasn't, for that's another strange part of the business. Ever since that illness of his, old Caleb has seemed afraid of his master; never will he go anywhere near Mr. Godwin; the very sound of master's voice will set him of a tremble from head to foot, and he'll turn as white as a ghost sometimes at the mere mention of his name. But, lor bless me, sir, when once a man's brain's turned, there's no accounting for the fancies that get into it. I had a cousin, sir, which he was barman at a tavern in Hertford, and took to taking more liquor than was good for him, and had delirious tremblings, I think the doctor called it; and, lor bless your heart, sir, that poor fellow was always fancying things, and making grabs at nothing, sir, thinking as how he was catching flies, mostly blue-bottles; and if once a man gets a tile off, as the saying is, it's uncommon difficult to get the tile on again."

Lionel assented to this truism. He was not particularly interested in the delirious fancies of the footman's drunken cousin, but he was deeply interested in the account he gave of old Caleb. Everything the man said helped to strengthen the hideous suspicions that oppressed him. Why should the superannuated gardener exhibit this unreasonable terror of his master?—why, unless the shock which had dethroned his reason had been caused by some act of that master's?

Lionel asked presently:

"But how was poor old Wildred seized with this brain-fever? What brought on the attack?"

"Well, sir, that's the queerest part of the story. You must know that most of the servants in this house, the women servants especially, will have it, foolish like, that the northern wing of the Hall is haunted. It was built in the time of the Planpagennys, you see, sir, and from all accounts it appears the Planpagennys were a queer lot. There's not one of the women servants will go near the place after dark; and they all put down poor old Caleb's fever to his having seen some kind of a ghost."

"But why so?"

"Because, you see, sir, this is how he was took. One night in July,—or, let me see," said the footman, checking himself abruptly, with an air of intense conscientiousness, "don't let me tell a story—was it the beginning of July, as Caleb was took, or was it the end of June? Well, I think it was the end of June, as it might be somewheres between the twentieth and the thirtieth. Howsomdever, as we was all a-sitting down to supper, the housekeeper she misses Caleb; and being a relation, and attached to him for old times' sake, she was regular uneasy about him, and couldn't go on with her supper till she'd had him looked for. So she sends the under-gardener, and he was gone above an hour, searching here and there about the grounds. And it was nigh upon twelve o'clock at night when he found poor old Caleb—where do you suppose, sir?"

"I really can't imagine."

"Lying in a swound, under one of the windows in the northern wing; and our people will have it as he'd been peeping through the shutter, and had seen a ghost."

"Strange!" exclaimed Lionel thoughtfully.

He had lingered over his dinner, scarcely eating half-a-dozen mouthfuls, so deeply interested was he in what the man had to tell him. But he could not venture to prolong

the meal any further, or to ask any more questions, lest by so doing he should excite suspicion in the mind of the servant.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DARK JOURNEY.

The carriage in which Violet was seated drove at a rapid pace along the Strand; but, to the girl's surprise and terror, it did not turn aside to cross Waterloo Bridge.

She was in an agony of excitement, thinking that the coachman, through mere ignorance or stupidity, had taken the wrong road, and that time, the precious time, would be lost.

She pulled the check-string violently; but the driver took no notice—he seemed to drive faster every minute. Already the carriage had passed under Temple Bar, and was making its way along Fleet-street at a rapid rate, for at this hour there were few vehicles in the City.

Violet strove to open the window, and with some difficulty succeeded in doing so. She called to the coachman, but he paid no attention to her cry. It might be that her voice was drowned by the noise of the wheels.

Rendered desperate by the thought of her mother's illness, Violet would have tried to spring from the carriage, even at the risk of her life; but when she endeavoured to open the door, she found that it was locked.

She then beat violently with her hands against the front windows of the carriage. This time the coachman must have heard her, but he did not even turn his head; he

took no notice whatever of her frantic summons.

By this time the carriage was crossing Smithfield. A few minutes more and it was in Bishopsgate-street. Violet strained her eyes, endeavouring to discover where she was; but the neighbourhood was entirely strange to her.

Then a feeling of utter despair came over her. The carriage dashed on; the houses and street-lamps swam before her eyes; the tramp of the horses' hoofs seemed like the throbbing of her own brain.

Presently the houses grew thinner; there were trees and a country road—a road which seemed to go on for ever to the distracted girl, who watched it from the open window of the carriage.

She felt that she was the victim of some horrible conspiracy; but she did not for a moment doubt the story of her mother's illness. Her brain was too much bewildered to enable her to think reasonably of the night's work. She fancied that her mother was really ill, and that some wretches, out of fiendish cruelty, were carrying her away from that beloved mother.

So she sat, watching the long dark road, and praying for help from Heaven in this hour of bewilderment and despair.

After about two hours' rapid travelling, the carriage stopped before an old-fashioned-looking inn.

It seemed as if the travellers were expected, for though it was long past midnight, a man came out of the stables directly the vehicle stopped. The doors and windows of the inn were all dark, and the household had evidently retired to rest; but the stable-yard was open, and a light was burning in one of the numerous buildings within. There was no time lost in waiting, and while the ostler removed the jaded and steaming animals from the

carriage, a second man came out of the stable-yard leading a pair of fresh horses.

This only added to poor Violet's bewilderment. All the occurrences of the night seemed rather the incidents of a troubled dream than those of reality.

She put her head out of the carriage-window, and saw a tall, slenderly-built man standing a little way from the carriage.

"O, for pity's sake!" she cried, "whoever you are, tell me the meaning of this mystery! Why have I been brought here? Is there any one in the world who can be so cruel as to wish to separate a daughter from her dying mother?"

The stranger approached the carriage-window. His face was shaded by the brim of his hat, which he wore low on his forehead, and by a cashmere shawl which enveloped his chin. The night was dark, though fine, and Violet could not recognize the Marquis of Roxleydale, whom she had only seen for the first time that evening, and of whom she had taken very little notice.

"Whoever you are, I implore you to have pity upon me!" she cried. "If you have one touch of human feeling, have mercy upon me, and take me back to London—take me to my mother!"

"My dear young lady," answered the Marquis, "pray don't give way to grief. I can make your mind quite easy as regards your mother. Her illness was only a fiction. All stratagems, you know, are fair in love and war, and that kind of thing. So far as I know, the maternal par——your mother, is as well as ever she was."

"She is not ill! O, thank Heaven—thank Heaven for that! And that letter—the doctor's letter!"

“The doctor’s letter was only part of an innocent little ruse, which I am sure you will forgive when you know its motive. It mightn’t be exactly the thing, you know, but it isn’t more ungentlemanly than the conduct of that fellow who pretended he wasn’t going away, you know, and got his ships ready on the quiet, and made a bolt of it. Dido and Æneas, and that kind of thing, you know.”

The fresh horses were harnessed by this time, and the driver was in his seat. Before Violet could ask another question, the Marquis bowed and retired. He returned to his seat in the rumble, the ostler gave the horses their heads, and in the next moment they had started at a gallant pace along the dark road.

At first there was only one feeling in Violet’s breast, and that was a profound sense of gratitude to Heaven.

Her mother was not ill; her beloved mother was not in danger.

The burden of anguish had been suddenly lifted from her breast; and the relief was so intense that it was some time before she could even attempt to contemplate her own position. But when she did at length grow calm enough to consider the events of the night, her brain seemed to give way beneath a sense of utter bewilderment.

Think of it as she would, she could not imagine any possible motive for this mysterious business.

Had she been persecuted by the addresses of any dishonourable lover, she might perhaps have realized at once the motive of this midnight abduction; but she imagined herself entirely unknown and unnoticed.

Who, then, could be interested in carrying her away from her home, from the mother she idolized, the mother who would suffer unutterable fear and suspense during

her absence?

She tried in vain to find an answer to this question, but her bewilderment only increased as she tormented her brain by useless speculations. And at last she sank back in a corner of the carriage, completely worn out by the mental struggle she had undergone—weary, too, of watching the long dark, road along which she was being carried to her mysterious destination.

At last, at about three o'clock in the morning, the carriage stopped before high gates, with massive stone pillars, surmounted by escutcheons festooned with ivy.

A bell was rung,—a loud clanging bell, that gave out a strange shrill peal in the stillness of the night.

There was a pause, during which Violet had ample time to contemplate the tall stone pillars, the massive iron gates, which had a weird and ghostly look in the dim light; and then the bell was rung for the second time. This time the summons was heard; for a man came out of the lodge, carrying a lantern and a big bunch of keys.

He unlocked the gates, which fell back upon their hinges with a grating and scrooping noise, as if they were very rarely opened. The carriage passed through into a long dark avenue—an avenue in which the low gusty breath of the chill morning wind sounded almost like the wailing of a ghost.

At the end of the avenue, which seemed more than a mile long, the carriage crossed a bridge, below which Violet saw a black stream of water lying at the bottom of a wide stone moat. The carriage passed under an archway after crossing this bridge, and then drew up before a dreary-looking building with a castellated roof and circular towers at each angle of the wall.

Nothing could be more dispiriting than the appearance

of this house, even when shrouded by the darkness. In the past, it might have been a feudal castle; in the present, it looked only like a madhouse, a union, or a gaol.

The Marquis of Roxleydale came to the carriage-door, unlocked it, and assisted Violet to alight.

The poor girl was utterly worn out in mind and body by the events of the night. She dismounted from the vehicle with a tottering step, and would have fallen on the slippery moss-grown stone if Lord Roxleydale had not supported her.

“Where am I?” she gasped; “and why am I brought here?”

“Only be patient, dearest and loveliest of women,” answered the Marquis in a tender whisper. “Rest quietly to-night, and ask no questions. To-morrow morning you shall know all.”

A stifled shriek escaped from Violet’s lips. There was something in the speaker’s tone which chilled her to the heart. It was the tone of a profligate who believed that his victim was in his power.

Innocent, inexperienced in life’s perils as Violet was, her instinct seemed to reveal to her the danger and misery of her position. But gentle though she was, she had the spirit of a true woman—the spirit which asserts itself in the hour of danger and difficulty.

“Why am I brought here?” she demanded, drawing herself away from Lord Roxleydale’s supporting arm; “and who are you who have been base enough to carry out this vile plot against a helpless girl? To any honourable man my friendlessness would have rendered me sacred.”

“Dear Miss Watson,” pleaded the Marquis, who really was inclined to feel very much ashamed of himself, but

who was always trying to act according to the base sentiments instilled into his weak mind by those false friends who called themselves men of the world,—"dear Miss Watson, if you knew the devoted admiration, the all-absorbing love, and that kind of thing, which prompted this scheme, you would pardon all. Believe this, and let me defer all explanations until to-morrow. This lonely house shall be as safe a shelter for you as the roof beneath which you slept last night."

This time there was an accent of truth in the young man's words. Violet was almost fainting, and was far too weak to make any further struggle to extricate herself from the power of her persecutor. She sank upon a carved oaken bench, in the great stone entrance-hall, which was dimly lighted by one lamp, and the atmosphere of which seemed cold and damp as that of a charnel-house.

No wealthy young nobleman, possessor of numerous country seats in pleasant neighbourhoods, would have cared to spend much of his life at this dreary habitation amongst the flat swamps upon the Essex coast. The Marquis of Roxleydale was the very last man in the world to tolerate a dull abode; and the Moat had been almost deserted ever since the death of his grandfather—an eccentric old misanthrope, who had chosen to inhabit the dreariest house of all his possessions.

An old woman had admitted the Marquis and his companion into the hall. Lord Roxleydale committed Violet to her charge.

"You received my letter?" he asked.

He spoke in a very loud voice, but he had to repeat the question.

"Yes, my lord. Yes, yes; I received the letter," muttered the old woman at last; "and all's ready for the lady—the young lady. Yes, and it's a pretty face too, and a fair face,

and a good face—eh, my lord?" she said, looking at Violet, "but it's paler than it should be for a bride; it's much too pale for a bride, I've seen a bonny bride brought home to this house long ago—very long ago; but the place seems to have gone to ruin since then."

"She's a little weak in her head, I think, Miss Watson," the Marquis said apologetically; "but you won't mind her, will you?"

Violet shook her head, and stretched out her hand with a friendly gesture towards the old woman. She was too ill to speak; her dry lips refused to utter a sound.

The old housekeeper led her charge towards the great oaken staircase; the broad staircase up and down which gay-hearted people had trodden lightly in the days that were gone.

The Marquis had removed his hat on entering the hall; but even yet Violet had not recognized him. She was too completely prostrated to observe the face of her abductor. Only one thought held a place amid the misty shadows that clouded her brain. That one thought related to her desire to escape, to return to her mother, whose heart would be wrung by all the torments of suspense and anxiety.

She followed the housekeeper. There was something honest and friendly in the old woman's countenance; and Violet felt that with her she was at least safe.

The woman led her up the staircase and along a corridor, until they came to a spacious room, where a pair of tall wax candles were burning in antique silver candlesticks. A wood fire blazed upon the broad stone hearth, within the great chimney; and, summer time though it was, there was unspeakable comfort in the aspect of the red logs.

The room was large and gloomy, and, like everything else in the old house, seemed to belong to an age long gone by. The wainscoting was of black oak; the ceiling was of the same sombre hue and massive material, crossed by huge beams, with quaintly-carved pendants, which threw weird shadows upon the walls, and looked like grinning faces leering down at the inmates of the room.

An immense four-post bedstead, surmounted by funereal-looking plumes, stood at one end of the apartment. Near the fireplace there were two old-fashioned easy-chairs, covered with faded tapestry, and a table upon which the silver candlesticks were placed.

Violet had scarcely strength to totter to the nearest chair. She sank into it fainting and helpless.

“Don’t leave me!” she gasped, clinging to the old woman’s withered hands. “Pray don’t leave me!”

The housekeeper seemed to understand the meaning of the helpless girl’s look and gesture, though she could not possibly have understood her words.

“Ay, ay,” she muttered. “I’ll take care of you, my pretty —you needn’t, be afraid. Old Nancy will take care of you.”

Violet felt reassured by these words. Her eyelids sank over her wearied eyes; her head fell back upon the cushion of the chair. Presently she felt the housekeeper’s feeble hands tenderly removing her outer garments, and then the old woman half carried, half led her to the bed, on which she sank, completely overcome by fatigue and excitement.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HOUSEKEEPER'S STORY.

After his conversation with Mr. Godwin's servant, Lionel Westford felt more than ever that duty and honour alike urged him to an immediate and most vigorous investigation of the mystery connected with the deserted wing of Wilmingdon Hall.

Had there been no such person as Julia Godwin in existence, had the banker and the banker's kindred been alike indifferent to him, the young man would not for a moment have thought of acting on his own responsibility.

He would have gone at once to Scotland-yard, and would have placed the whole matter in the hands of the detective police—laying before them a full statement of the case, and relying on their skill in the unravelment of such dark enigmas as that which cast its black shadow on Wilmingdon Hall. Mr. Pollaky of Paddington-green, or some other gentleman of Mr. Pollaky's profession, would have been provided with one of those mysterious cases which seem designed for the development of detective genius, and all the complicated machinery of detection would have been set in motion.

But for Julia's sake Lionel Westford refrained from doing this; for her sake he determined not to make any communication to the police until his dark suspicions became certainty, and duty compelled him to denounce the father of the girl he loved.

In the mean time he felt that his task of investigation

would be very difficult, and would demand all the subtlety of his intellect, all the strength of his will.

On thinking over what the servant had told him, he came to the conclusion that old Caleb had indeed witnessed some appalling scene in one of the rooms in the northern wing.

But, granting this, what was the nature of that scene?

The old gardener described a murder—a foul and treacherous murder. Yet how could a murder have been committed in that deserted wing without suspicion having been sooner or later aroused?

The victim could scarcely have entered the building without the fact of his presence there being known; and in that case, how had Rupert Godwin been able to account for his disappearance?

At present it was all a dark mystery, the clue to which Lionel Westford could only hope to obtain by long and patient toiling in the obscurity. It was a tangled skein, which could only be unravelled inch by inch.

He pondered much upon what the man-servant had told him, and came to the conclusion that the person most likely to assist his search—unconsciously, of course—was the old housekeeper, of whom the man had spoken.

This woman was a cousin of Caleb Wildred's, and from her girlhood had lived in the service of the Godwins, rising through all the gradations of service, from under scullery-maid to housekeeper.

Many secrets of the banker's history were, in all probability, known to this woman; and, if carefully sounded, she could scarcely fail to give some clue to any mystery that might lurk behind the commonplace story of

his life.

Lionel determined to seek the earliest opportunity of placing himself in confidential relations with the housekeeper. Old servants are generally garrulous and communicative, unless they have some special motive for reserve. Lionel therefore hoped much from an interview with Mrs. Beckson.

A very little consideration suggested a means of approaching her.

There were a great number of old pictures at Wilmingdon Hall—old portraits of dead-and-gone grandees who had flourished there when the original lords of the soil still held their own, before the days when rich mercantile men had come to occupy the dwellings of the noble. The hall and staircase, the billiard-room and music room, were decorated with portraits of the departed Wilmingdons, painted by Sir Peter Lely and Sir Godfrey Kneller, and let into the richly-carved panelling of the rooms. These portraits formed, therefore, a part of the walls they enriched, and had passed to the banker's father with the house itself. But these the elder Mr. Godwin had looked on as so much furniture; and being a connoisseur of no mean powers, he had amassed a large collection of old and modern pictures, to which his son had added, bringing home many treasures from his continental ramblings.

Pictures of considerable value adorned almost every wall in the house; and Lionel remembered having heard Julia say that there were some very fine old Dutch paintings in the housekeeper's room.

"Papa is a believer in the modern school," she had said; "and the Jan Steens and Ostades have been banished from the dining-room, to make way for Frith and Elmore, Leighton and Millais, whose pictures please *me* a great

deal better than those perpetual brown Dutchmen, who are always lighting their tiresome pipes in their dingy tavern-parlours, or those wooden-faced Dutchwomen, who seem to pass their existence between the brown little kitchen where they peel vegetables, and the brown little parlour where they play upon a queer-shaped organ."

What could better serve Lionel as an excuse for approaching the housekeeper than his very natural wish to see these valuable old pictures?

He sent Mrs. Beckson a message by the servant who waited upon him, requesting that he might be allowed to see the Dutch pictures in her apartment, and received a prompt and most gracious reply, to the effect that Mrs. Beckson would be delighted to see Mr. Wilton at any time; but she would feel herself especially honoured if he would condescend so far as to drink tea with her at five o'clock that afternoon.

Nothing could suit Lionel's purpose better than this. He was, of course, only on a level with the housekeeper in that establishment, where he gave his services for a weekly stipend, and was content to sink his status as a gentleman in order to earn a livelihood for those he loved.

He sent the servant back to Mrs. Beckson to say that he would be most happy to avail himself of her kind invitation.

"But you don't dine till seven o'clock, sir. Mrs. Beckson has such old-fashioned notions," the man remonstrated.

"I will go without my dinner to-day for the sake of a leisurely inspection of Mrs. Beckson's Dutch pictures," Lionel answered. "Tell her I accept her invitation with thanks."

The servant departed, wondering at what he called "the

rum ways of that artist chap, who'd sacrifice a good dinner for the sake of looking at a lot of dingy old pictures, that seem every one of 'em as if they'd been hung up a smoky chimney."

At five o'clock precisely Lionel Westford presented himself in the housekeeper's room. Mrs. Beckson had made quite a little festival of the occasion, and had adorned her table with preserves and cakes, an old-fashioned silver tea-and-coffee equipage, covered dishes of buttered toast, and a stand of new-laid eggs, as if she had expected a party.

Lionel could scarcely refrain from a smile as he looked at the worthy housekeeper's preparations, and thought how utterly her dainties were wasted on a guest whose mind was completely absorbed by one dark and terrible subject.

The old dame had dressed herself in her stateliest attire, her most formidable head-gear and brownest and crispest wig. She received Lionel with a sweeping curtsey that might have done honour to an old-fashioned court in the days when the minuet was danced by powdered beaux and belles.

One by one she pointed out the old pictures which adorned her room, telling all she knew of their history, and the value that had been set upon them by connoisseurs whom Mr. Godwin had brought to look at them.

Lionel had no occasion to pretend an interest in these pictures. His artistic taste was aroused at once by their merits, and he lingered long before them, delighted and enthusiastic; so long indeed, that he sorely tried the patience of the old housekeeper, who was anxious to see him seated at her well-furnished tea-table, and was afflicted by the fear that the toast would become leathery

and the eggs hard, while her visitor was dwelling on the details of a Jan Steen.

At last, however, the inspection was finished, and he seated himself opposite her, taking care to place himself with his back to the window, so that the varying expressions of his own face would not be seen, while, on the other hand, he would be able to perceive any change in the countenance of his companion.

The tea was poured out. Of course, there was a little preliminary conversation as to its merits; and then Lionel set to work, very cautiously and slowly. He began to speak of Mr. Godwin, and found the housekeeper nothing loth to talk of her master.

It was scarcely strange that the banker should form one of the chief subjects of his servants' discourse; for as they rarely passed beyond the park-gates, they had little else to talk of besides the habits and affairs of their master. People who cry out against the gossiping propensities of servants should at least remember that in many cases servants are kept close prisoners, very rarely seeing or hearing anything of the outer world. Is it strange that, under such circumstances, they should attach an undue importance to what they do see and hear?

"The present Mr. Godwin is a good master," said Mrs. Beckson, after some little discussion of general subjects; "he's a liberal paymaster, and his servants have nothing to complain of. But he's not like his father. He's got a silent and gloomy way with him that's apt to set people against him—not strangers, for his manners to strangers are generally considered very pleasing; but in his own house he gives himself up to thought like, and doesn't seem to take either rest or pleasure. I never did see such a gentleman to think. He's always thinking, always brooding; and this last year, judging by the little we've seen of him, I do believe he's been worse than ever—

brooding, brooding, brooding, as if he'd got all the troubles in this world upon his own mind. And if *that's* all the good riches bring a body, give me poverty, say I."

"And you have not seen much of him lately?"

"Very little indeed. I don't know why it is, I suppose it's business—or it may be pleasure, for they do say Mr. Godwin leads a very wild life in London; but somehow or other, ever since last summer, counting from about the time my poor cousin Caleb was taken ill with brain-fever, our master has kept away from this place, almost as if it was haunted."

Lionel could not repress a slight start as Mrs. Beckson said this. Every word that he heard seemed to point to the same conclusion, every little circumstance so casually revealed led up to one terrible fact—the crime that had been committed by Rupert Godwin in the summer of the preceding year.

"Your cousin Caleb and I have become very good friends, Mrs. Beckson," Lionel said, after a brief pause in which he reflected upon what the housekeeper had told him; "we meet often in the garden, and he always talks to me a little wildly at first, but he gets quite rational afterwards."

"Yes, yes, to be sure; Caleb's apt to be very wild, very wild indeed, sir. It isn't everybody that would have patience with him. But I'm his own cousin, you see, sir, his own flesh and blood, and we were boy and girl together. So I bear with all his vagaries. I think there's not many beside me could have nursed him through that dreadful brain-fever."

"And that fever was the result of a sudden fright, I have heard?" said Lionel.

"Yes, sir; they do say poor Caleb was frightened; but,

sir, there's no knowing; it might have been some delusion of his poor weak brain. The women servants will have it that he saw a ghost in the northern wing; but I don't believe in any such nonsense, though I have heard stories about those deserted old rooms that would make your blood run cold, and it certainly isn't every gentleman that would have as much courage as our master."

"How so?"

"Why, I mean that he's not a bit afraid of being for hours and hours, sometimes in the dead of the night, shut up alone in those dreary rooms. He's got an office in the northern wing, bless you, sir, and they say he keeps all his most valuable documents and securities and such-like locked in iron safes there, and up to last June twelvemonth he used to work there once in a way, looking over his papers, and such-like, I've heard Miss Godwin say."

"Up to last June twelvemonth? But not since that time?" asked Lionel.

"Why, don't I tell you, sir, that since last midsummer twelvemonth Mr. Godwin has scarcely come home once in a month? He's seemed to shun the place somehow, and I can't help thinking that he has some kind of trouble on his mind, and that he tries to drown it in the racketing and rioting of that rampageous London. You see, sir, he and his only son didn't agree well together, and young Mr. Godwin left home two or three years ago, and it may be that preys on our Mr. Godwin's mind."

"But he used to work in an office in the northern wing?"

"Yes; and that's one of the reasons why I feel sure our poor Caleb saw no ghost on the night he was taken ill."

"How is that?"

“Why, you see, sir, the very night Caleb was taken, Mr. Godwin was in his office; and it isn’t likely the most audacious ghosts would show themselves when there were lights burning, and a city gentleman and his friend in the office.”

“His friend! Mr. Godwin was not alone then?”

“No; there was a gentleman with him—a strange gentleman. I can remember it all as if it had happened yesterday. I suppose it must have been Caleb’s illness that impressed it upon my mind, you see, sir. It was a very hot evening, and the house felt so oppressive like, that me and my niece Susan, who is head-housemaid here, we took a turn in the garden. It was quite dark when we went out, but it was very pleasant for all that. Mr. Godwin’s confidential clerk, Jacob Danielson, happened to be down here that evening, and was sitting in the dining-room, when the strange gentleman came.”

“Indeed! the stranger came late then?”

“Yes; it must have been dark when he came. My niece and me were sitting under one of the great cedars on the lawn, and the dining-room windows being open and the lamps lighted, we could see everything that was going on in the room. We saw the stranger walk in through one of the windows, while master and his clerk were sitting quietly over their wine; and the strange gentleman seemed excited about something, as we could guess from his manner. But Mr. Godwin, he was as quiet as a stone statue, and presently, after Jacob Danielson had gone away in a dog-cart to catch the train from Hertford, the stranger and master left the dining-room together, and went to the library; for me and my niece could see the lights through the great painted window, though we couldn’t see anything of what was going on inside. But presently, through the open doors of the hall—for, being such a hot, oppressive night, all the doors were left wide

open—we saw Mr. Godwin and the stranger going towards the corridor leading to the northern wing, Mr. Godwin carrying a lamp."

The housekeeper paused to draw breath after this long speech. Lionel Westford was terribly excited, and it was with difficulty that he concealed the extent of his agitation.

"And after this?" he said interrogatively.

"After this me and my niece walked about a bit, first here, then there, keeping out in the cool till supper-time; and we'd been walking about nigh upon an hour, and were strolling along one of the pathways close to the north garden, when who should come upon us sudden like but Jacob Danielson, which we had thought to have started by the train from Hertford! We couldn't help being a little startled by his coming upon us so sudden, and there was something in his manner that seemed as if he'd been excited, or almost frightened like; and this was something out of the way for him, for, generally speaking, he's more like a machine made out of cast iron than a human being. 'Where's the gentleman?' says he to me and my niece,—'where's the strange gentleman? Have you seen him go away?' 'No,' I replied; 'Mr. Danielson, I have not.' 'O,' says he, 'I thought you might have seen him; it's of no consequence; good evening;' and with that he walks off very fast; and though there wasn't much in what he said, there was something in his manner that seemed to make me and my niece turn all cold and shivery like, in spite of the sultry evening."

"And did you see the stranger after this?"

"No; he left as quietly as he came. I daresay Mr. Godwin showed him the short cut across the park, for none of us in the servants' hall saw him go away."

"Indeed! And this was the night upon which your

cousin Caleb was taken with the fever?"

"It was, sir."

"Well; I can't help feeling a sort of curiosity about this haunted northern wing. I'm not exactly a believer in ghosts; but I've often wondered whether there might not be some little truth in the numerous stories so firmly believed by many sensible people. I should like very much to explore those old rooms. Is there any way of getting into that part of the building?"

The housekeeper shook her head.

"No, sir. Mr. Godwin keeps the keys locked up in his own library, and wouldn't let them out of his hands on any account."

"But he allows the servants to clean the rooms sometimes, I suppose?"

"Not he, sir. He says he'd rather have the dust a foot deep than he'd have his papers pried into or meddled with. But there is a way of getting into those rooms for all that, Mr. Wilton, if anyone had the courage to go that way."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. This place is very old, you know, sir, hundreds of years old; and they do say that there was all sorts of queer hiding-places made in the days of the Lollards. However that may be, the cellars under the northern wing are almost big enough for a regiment to hide in, and there's an underground passage leading from the cellars to a grotto at one end of the laurel-walk."

"I know the grotto," answered Lionel eagerly. "I noticed it some days ago."

"It's a regular ruinous place; but if you grope your way through the archway at the back, you'll find a flight of

stone steps leading down underground, and at the bottom of those steps there's a passage leading, as I've heard say long ago when I was a girl, to the cellars. But, mind you, Mr. Wilton, I never knew anyone to go down that underground passage, and goodness knows what state it may be in. I don't suppose Mr. Godwin so much as knows of its existence. So if you go, Mr. Wilton, you know the risk you've got to run."

Lionel Westford laughed aloud at the old dame's warning. Fortunately, the housekeeper's ear was not acute enough to discover the artificial sound of that laughter.

"You needn't be afraid of my running any risk, my dear Mrs. Beckson," he said. "I should very much like to see a ghost, if I could meet the gentleman or lady without putting myself to any very great trouble. But I certainly have no inclination to tempt the perils of an underground journey, even though I might be rewarded by an introduction to all the phantoms in shadowland. No, no; I'm no coward; but I have no wish to be entombed alive, and some of the old brickwork of your passage might happen to give way, perhaps, and bury me under its ruins." This is what Lionel Westford said. What he intended to do was something very different.

"I must watch my opportunity," he thought, "and pay a secret visit to the northern wing when every member of this household is sleeping."

CHAPTER XXIX.

“SHE WEPT, DELIVERED FROM HER DANGER.”

Violet awoke, feverish and unrefreshed, from the heavy slumber into which she had fallen from sheer exhaustion. She awoke to see the broad summer sunlight streaming through the old-fashioned windows of her room.

At first she looked about her, dazed and bewildered by the strangeness of the place in which she found herself, and scarcely knowing whether she were dreaming or waking.

Then, with a terrible suddenness, the events of the previous night flashed back upon her memory. She sprang hastily from her bed, and ran to one of the windows; she wanted at least to know whither she had been brought.

But the prospect to be seen from the window told her very little. She looked out upon a flat swampy expanse, across which stretched a long avenue of poplars,—the weird, ghastly-looking trees which she had seen in the chill morning light as she was driven up to the house.

In the far distance she saw the river, widening to the sea. Violet had spent her life so entirely in one neighbourhood that she had little knowledge of the other parts of England. She had no idea that the broad river was the Thames, and that the county in which she found herself was Essex. Nor had she any idea of the distance which she had been brought upon the previous night. In

her bewilderment and agitation she had lost all count of time. But her intense anxiety about her mother had made the few hours during which she had been travelling seem multiplied tenfold. She was utterly ignorant, therefore, of the locality in which this dismal old house was situated—as ignorant and helpless as a child.

For some time she stood motionless before the window, staring at the flat barren swamp with the vacant gaze of despair. Then she suddenly clasped her hands and lifted her eyes in mute appeal to Providence.

“Surely Heaven will not desert me,” she thought; “surely, if only for my mother’s sake, I shall be spared!”

This thought seemed to inspire the helpless girl with new courage. She sank upon her knees before one of the old carved-oak chairs, and remained for a long time in the same attitude, praying fervently.

Then she rose and dressed herself neatly, with hands that had ceased to tremble. The cold water with which she bathed her head and face revived her considerably; and when her toilette was finished, she looked almost as calm and self-possessed as if she had been in her own home.

She had to cope with unknown and mysterious persecutors; and she knew that any weakness or cowardice would render her only the more completely powerless to protect herself.

What was the danger that assailed her?—and why had she been brought to this lonely country-house? Again and again the unhappy girl asked herself these two questions; but she could find no answer for them.

Presently the deaf old housekeeper made her appearance, carrying a tray, upon which a simple breakfast was neatly laid. Violet ran to meet the old

woman, and clasping her hands entreatingly, begged her to speak—to explain the mystery.

The poor girl repeated her questions again and again; but this time it seemed as if the housekeeper either could not or would not hear a word. Yet she nodded to Violet, with a friendly look on her withered face; and to the helpless girl there was something reassuring even in that slight action.

The old woman set the tray upon the table, and then retired; but just as she reached the door, she stopped, and looked back with a very significant expression at Violet.

“Don’t be down-hearted, poor child,” she said. “Keep up your spirits, my pretty. There’s help nearer at hand than you think, perhaps, my pet. Perhaps there is,—perhaps there is. There’s an awful lot of wickedness in this world; but there’s goodness too, praised be the Lord! so don’t be cast down.”

With this she retired, leaving Violet very much at a loss to determine whether there was any hopeful meaning in these oracular utterances, or whether they were only the wandering expressions of a half-demented brain.

She went to the door and tried to open it; but it was locked. She listened; but no sound broke the dismal silence, except the long hoarse crow of some distant chanticleer, or the plaintive lowing of the cattle in one of the flat meadows by the river. Mariana’s moated grange could not have been more dreary than this unknown habitation seemed to Violet Westford.

After listening wearily for a long time, hoping for some sound that would betray the neighbourhood of human life, Violet stationed herself at the window. Here at least she fancied there was some chance of help. Surely in the course of the day some human creature must pass below that window.

She opened the casement, and placed herself on the old-fashioned window-seat, a living image of patience and resignation. But she watched in vain. The hours crept by, insupportably slow in their progress. The long summer day wore itself out; the sun sloped westward; but still no living creature appeared upon the broad flat below that open window.

Violet's heart sank with a dull feeling of despair. She had taken one cup of tea out of the quaint little silver teapot and old dragon-china cup and saucer on the tray brought her by the housekeeper, but she had eaten nothing. Her dry lips were burning with fever, and she was sick and faint from exhaustion.

During almost every moment of that weary day her mother's image had been present with her. She had pictured Mrs. Westford's feelings—her suspense, her terror, her anguish; and sometimes she could scarcely endure to remain in that silent room, knowing as she did the sufferings that would be caused to that devoted mother by her mysterious absence. There were times when she felt inclined to leap from the window, even at the risk of her life: there were moments when she felt that she must escape or perish. But a sense of religion, the pure spirit of faith and love that had been instilled long ago into her mind, supported her now under this most bitter trial. When she suffered most, she clasped her hands and prayed silently for help and deliverance.

The sunlight made a slanting track of crimson glory on the broad river in the misty distance. Already the evening shadows were gathering in the gloomy wainscoted apartment.

Violet began to think with terror that another dreary night of suspense lay before her, when she heard a key turned in the lock. The door was opened, and a gentleman entered the room.

This time she recognized the Marquis of Roxleydale, to whom she had been introduced in the Circenses green-room on the previous evening. The young nobleman had been dining with his tempter and accomplice, Rupert Godwin, and had been drinking somewhat deeply.

The banker had driven to the Moat from the nearest railway station early in the afternoon. He knew the weakness of his tool and dupe, and he feared that his diabolical scheme would not be fully carried out unless he was himself near to pull the strings of his puppet, and direct the dark windings of the plot.

The old Essex mansion was large and rambling. Lord Roxleydale and the banker had dined in a tolerably comfortable room at a remote end of the building; where no sound of their voices, no echo of the servants' footsteps, could reach the wing in which Violet watched and waited through that weary day.

At sunset the young Marquis presented himself before his victim, flushed with wine, and duly instructed in the dark plot concocted by Rupert Godwin.

That plot was one which could scarcely have failed to ensnare a weak or ambitious woman; and Rupert Godwin, who thought meanly of all womankind, fancied that Violet Westford would be utterly unable to resist the temptation offered to her.

The Marquis was to affect only honourable intentions. He was to make her a formal offer of his hand; but he was also to propose an elopement and a secret marriage, as the only means by which he could dare to make Violet his wife; pleading his minority as the reason for this course.

Violet, ignorant of the world, eager, no doubt, to seize the golden chance of becoming Marchioness of Roxleydale, would of course speedily accept this

proposal.

This is how the man of the world argued. It needed but the simplicity of an innocent girl to overthrow all his carefully-laid plans.

Lord Roxleydale's yacht, the *Norse King*, was lying at anchor in the estuary of the Thames. If Violet consented to the clandestine marriage proposed by the Marquis, she was to be induced to go on board the yacht, under the pretence of crossing the Channel, in order that the marriage might be performed in France, where secrecy would be more easily ensured.

Once on board the *Norse King*, the Marquis could take her whithersoever he pleased. He was the possessor of a charming little villa on an island near Naples; and it was thither that Rupert Godwin advised him to convey his helpless victim.

Violet once away, the banker felt that his scheme of vengeance upon a hapless wife and mother would be complete. Then, and then only, would he see Clara Westford's proud head bowed to the dust; then, and then only, would he feel that he had avenged the wrong inflicted on him by the woman he had loved.

The Marquis approached Violet as she stood near the open window, pale but self-possessed, with the last rays of the declining sunlight gilding her hair.

"My dear Miss Watson," he said, "I come to you this evening as the humblest suppliant who ever sued for pardon. Can you forgive me?"

"My forgiveness will be easily won, Lord Roxleydale," Violet answered quietly; "and may Heaven forgive you also for the cruel and purposeless wrong you have inflicted upon one who never injured you; to whom, indeed, you are so complete a stranger that I am still

utterly at a loss to comprehend the motive of your extraordinary conduct. I could very easily pardon you the pain you have inflicted upon *me*; but it is much more difficult for me to excuse your conduct when I think of the anguish it must have caused my mother. She is a widow, my lord; and her life lately has been full of trouble. She did not need this new trial."

The Marquis blushed crimson at this reproach. He was very young—too young to be altogether base or shameless; and he felt the reproof conveyed in Violet's quiet words.

But he had his tempter's lesson by heart; and those better feelings were only transient.

"My dear Miss Watson—my dear Violet, for I have been told that sweet name belongs to you; and what other name could so well harmonize with your loveliness?—my own sweet Violet, your mother's anxiety can be speedily set at rest. A few lines in your handwriting will assure her of your safety. It is not yet too late for the London mail. Write, and your letter shall be immediately sent to the post-town."

"And it will reach London—"

"Early to-morrow morning."

Violet reflected that it was scarcely likely that she herself could reach London sooner than the following morning, under the most favourable circumstances. And was it not terribly probable that she might be kept for days a prisoner in that hateful house? It would be madness to reject any chance of giving at least some relief to her mother's fears and anxieties. The Marquis seemed to be sincere, and she was so completely in his power that he could have little motive for deceiving her.

"I will write," she said, moving towards a table upon

which there was an inkstand and portfolio. “O, Lord Roxleydale, if you ever loved your own mother, have pity upon mine, and on me!”

This appeal galled a hidden wound that lay deep in the young man’s heart. The time had been when he had dearly loved the most tender and indulgent of mothers; and that is an affection which never wholly dies out, even in the breast of a hardened sinner. Lord Roxleydale knew that he had been of late years a bad and neglectful son, and Violet’s simple words stung him to the quick.

“Do not talk of my mother,” he said; “there are some subjects that will not bear speaking of. Write your letter, Violet, and I will see that it is posted.”

He walked to the window, and stood looking out at the dusky prospect. The darkness was gathering rapidly; and one long line of crimson light defined the low horizon.

Violet wrote only a few cautious lines. How could she have written at any length, when she was utterly uncertain as to her own fate—surrounded, perhaps, by dangers? She wrote the following brief note intended to reassure her mother:—

“DEAREST MOTHER,—I am safe and well. At present I can tell you no more than this. Believe this, and be at rest till you hear from me again, or see me. You will not doubt that I shall return to you as speedily as possible. You will not doubt that I am only kept away from you by the sternest necessity.

“Ever and ever your own
“VIOLET.”

She folded her letter, placed it in an envelope, and directed it. The Marquis took it from her.

“Dearest Violet,” he exclaimed, “I only leave you to get this conveyed to the post; when I return I will explain my

conduct—I will endeavour to win your forgiveness."

He left the room, and Violet heard the key turned in the lock. That one simple action filled her with terror. This man, under all outward appearance of respect and consideration, was her enemy, her most dangerous enemy, since he took advantage of her helplessness to approach her in the character of a lover. She was a prisoner in that lonely house—a close prisoner, in that unknown and solitary building, where the only creature in the least friendly to her was a deaf and perhaps imbecile old woman.

What position could be more terrible to this girl, who, amidst all her sorrow, had never before known danger? "O, my Heavenly Father!" she cried, leaning in a half-fainting state against the oaken wainscot, "Thou, who art a Father to the fatherless, hear my prayers, have pity upon my helplessness, and raise up some friend in this bitter hour of need!"

She had scarcely spoken the words when the oaken panelling behind her was pushed suddenly on one side; and she felt herself supported by a slender arm—an arm that felt like that of a woman.

It seemed as if Heaven had heard her prayers. It seemed almost as if a miracle had been performed in her behalf. A cry of joyful surprise half escaped her lips; but in the next moment it was stifled by a hand, a soft feminine hand, pressed against her mouth.

"Hush!" murmured a low voice; "not a cry—not a whisper!"

Then the mysterious friend half drew, half lifted Violet through the opening in the wall.

The helpless girl, so suddenly, so miraculously rescued, fainted in the arms of her preserver. But she was not long

unconscious. Presently she felt cool perfumed water sprinkled upon her forehead; a pungent aromatic odour revived her senses; and the evening breeze blew in upon her from an open window, by which her unknown friend had placed her.

She raised her heavy eyelids and looked up, clinging to her preserver.

She looked up, and saw a gentle, careworn face bending over her—a beautiful face, with regularly chiselled features, and a tenderly gracious smile. A face that was framed in bands of silvered hair, and upon which the traces of suffering were only too evident.

The owner of this face was tall and slender. She looked, perhaps, somewhat taller than she really was on account of her dress, which was of black silk, very rich and costly, but made with an extreme simplicity. A small cap of the most exquisite Honiton lace shrouded her silvery hair.

“O madam!” exclaimed Violet, “you will not leave me? You will not send me away from you?”

“No, child, not till I can place you in the care of your own friends,” answered the lady. “Poor girl, you are still trembling.”

“I have suffered so much,” murmured Violet, in a low tremulous voice; “and it has all seemed like some dreadful dream. Ah, madam, it seems to me as if Heaven raised you up to befriend me in answer to my prayers. Where did you come from? How did you know that I wanted your help?”

“My presence in this house is indeed providential,” replied the lady. “I only arrived at ten o’clock last night; but a few hours before you yourself were brought here. Thank heaven I arrived in time to save you, and to hinder my wretched son from the commission of any deeper

wrong than that of which he has already been guilty!”

“Your son, madam?”

“Yes, my poor child. I am Lord Roxleydale’s most unhappy mother. A letter from an old friend informed me of my son’s latest follies, and urged upon me the necessity of making one more attempt to withdraw him from the set in which he has involved himself. I have made many efforts on his behalf, and have begun almost to despair of his reformation. But my friend told me that Albert was looking ill, and—well, I suppose—I suppose I am still weak enough to love him better than he deserves. I left Yorkshire, and came here, intending to spend the autumn in this house, which is within easy reach of town, and from which I could visit my son as often as I pleased. I little thought that my coming would happen so fortunately.”

“But the Marquis—he will follow me here!”

“No! He does not yet know of my presence in this house. He is quite ignorant of the secret of that sliding panel, which I happened to remember having heard of when I was first married, and spent a summer in this house. Nancy Gibson, the old housekeeper, told me of your arrival, and it is in consequence of the information afforded me by her that I have been enabled to watch over you. You are as safe here, and in the rooms adjoining, as if you were a hundred miles away from your foolish and wicked persecutor.”

The Marchioness led the way to an adjacent apartment —a handsome room, with ponderous old-fashioned furniture. The shutters were closed, the heavy curtains drawn, and a pair of tall wax candles lighted a comfortably-arranged tea-table.

“Come, my poor child,” exclaimed Lady Roxleydale, “a cup of tea will restore new strength to your nerves. Sit

down by me, and tell me how it was you were brought here last night. Be candid, and confide in me."

"Willingly, dear madam. Believe me, the events of last night are as great a mystery to me as they can be to you."

Violet felt a sense of unspeakable gratitude towards the gentle lady who had rescued her. She told the whole story of her adventures, with a simple candour which made a most favourable impression on Lady Roxleydale, whose strict education and somewhat old-fashioned prejudices had by no means inclined her to look very indulgently upon a *figurante* from the Circenses. The girl would fain have left the Moat that night, in her anxiety to return to her mother; but the Dowager told her the journey to town would be impossible until the next morning, and that she herself would undertake to convey her safely back to that anxious mother early the next day.

So that night Violet slept in peace, safe under the protection of her new friend, comparatively happy in the thought that the morning's post would convey her letter to Clara Westford.

The poor girl little dreamt how false that hope was. Lord Roxleydale had met Rupert Godwin in the hall as he was about to despatch Violet's letter to the post; and the banker, seeing the envelope in his hand, had easily gained from him the history of its contents.

It is scarcely necessary to say that Rupert Godwin interfered to stop the posting of the letter. He had a packet for the post himself, he said, taking the missive from Lord Roxleydale's hand, and he would see that Violet's letter was posted with his own. A carriage was waiting to convey him back to the railway station. He had schooled his protégé carefully in the part he was to play, and, having done this was eager to get back to town. He was well aware of the penalties attending the

abduction he had planned, and had no wish that his own hand should appear in any part of the work.

He took Violet's letter, bade the Marquis a hasty good-night, and got into the hired fly that had been ordered to fetch him.

Lord Roxleydale was only too glad to return to the apartment where he had left his beautiful prisoner, and where he naturally expected to find her.

His mortification was extreme when he found the bird flown from the trap so artfully set, so heartlessly baited; and it was with profound humiliation that he heard, by-and-by, of his mother's presence in the old house.

Had Rupert Godwin been near to sustain him, or to shame him into a display of hardihood, Lord Roxleydale might have tried to carry matters with a high hand. As it was, he left the Moat, and went quietly back to town, very much ashamed of the transaction he had been engaged in, and fully resolved, that whatever follies or escapades might vary the monotony of his future life, he would never again try his hand at an abduction.

"It may be all very well in a novel or a play," he said to himself as he sat smoking in the solitary *coupé*, which a judiciously invested half-crown had secured for him; "but it doesn't answer in real life; and it makes a man feel uncommonly small when he's trying it on."

CHAPTER XXX.

UNDERGROUND.

Lionel Westford was resolved to lose no time in putting into execution the plan which had been suggested to him by his interview with the housekeeper.

He determined to explore the secret passages and cellars, and the deserted chambers of the northern wing, in the dead of the night, while the household at Wilmingdon Hall was wrapped in slumber.

It was a bold determination; for it needs a stout heart to brave the unknown and mysterious. The perils of a cavalry charge seem little to many a young Englishman, when compared to the mystic terrors of a haunted mansion.

But, once convinced that duty called for prompt action, Lionel Westford was the very last to flinch from any trial that lay before him. He had much of his father's spirit—the spirit of the true-hearted sailor, who is the first to face death and danger, the last to succumb to failure or defeat.

Lionel left Mrs. Beckson's apartment at eight o'clock, after gratifying the old housekeeper by his friendly interest in her conversation.

Eight o'clock; and he knew the habits of the household well enough to be aware that at eleven every member of the family would have retired to rest.

He returned to his own apartment. A pair of wax candles, newly lighted, were burning on the table. One of these he extinguished. He would have need of light during his examination of the northern wing, and he did not know what length of time that examination might occupy.

He seated himself by the table, drew the one lighted candle towards him, and took up a book; but he found it quite impossible to concentrate his attention upon the page before him. His mind was haunted, his whole being was possessed by the thought of the work he had to do.

The task was, indeed, a terrible one. Alone, in the dead of the night, he was to explore a long range of deserted chambers, in search of some evidence of a foul and mysterious deed which he believed to have been committed in the northern wing of Wilmingdon Hall.

The longer he deliberated upon all he had heard, the more conclusive appeared the evidence which pointed to the banker's guilt.

A stranger had come to the Hall on that oppressive summer evening, more than a twelvemonth ago, and had never been seen to leave the house or grounds.

This much was clearly to be inferred from the housekeeper's account of the matter. It was just possible that this stranger might have left the house unseen; but in so large a household the chances were very much against his departure being unobserved.

Then there had been something in the manner of the clerk, Jacob Danielson, peculiarly calculated to excite suspicion.

Had he been the witness of a crime, or the accomplice of a criminal? His conduct had been, at any rate, a part of the mystery which was dimly revealed in Caleb Wildred's

wandering talk.

Lionel Westford sat musing thus, with the book in his hand, through the long tedious hours between eight o'clock and midnight.

And ever and anon, when his reverie was darkest; when the shadow of an assassin, with vengeful countenance and arm lifted to strike, loomed before his mental sight, a second image—the image of a beautiful woman—would arise, as if to mock the dark horror of his thoughts.

He was in love, honestly and truly in love, with Julia Godwin; and a dull despair gnawed at his heart as he reflected that the work he was now engaged in might bring misery and shame upon her.

And yet honour forbade that he should abandon his task. Come what might, he must go on to the last, even though the performance of that work of duty should entail upon him a lifetime of misery.

At last the great stable-clock struck twelve. One by one the solemn-sounding strokes tolled out upon the stillness of the summer night. Lionel Westford opened the window and looked out.

There was no vestige of light from any other window in the long range of rooms. The household had evidently retired for the night.

"I will wait half an hour longer before I venture to leave this room," the young man thought.

He feared to run the smallest risk of interruption. He had carefully thought out his plans, and his only dread was the hazard of his footsteps being overheard by any light sleeper as he made his way through the inhabited portion of the house.

Once in the grounds, he feared nothing. Not all the terrors of the northern wing could stir his breast with one coward thrill, now that his course of action was fixed. The dauntless spirit of the sailor's son was aroused; and Lionel Westford was worthy of the true-hearted father whose noblest pride had centered itself in his children.

At half-past twelve the watcher flung aside his book—that book which had served so little to distract him from his own cares—he took the unlighted candle, put on his hat, and went out of his room.

With slow and cautious footsteps he made his way along the corridor, descended the stairs, crossed the hall, and entered the dining-room.

He knew that the great hall-door was locked every night by the old butler, who made quite a state ceremony of the business, and who always carried the keys to his own apartment.

Lionel's only mode of exit from the house was by one of the dining-room windows. These were secured by massive shutters and heavy iron bars; but the bars might be removed by strong and skilful hands.

To remove them silently was a critical task; but Lionel succeeded in accomplishing it, and stepped out upon the broad gravel walk before the windows.

The cool night air blowing upon his fevered brow gave him fresh vigour. He crossed the lawn with rapid footsteps, and entered one of those long laurel-avenues so familiar and so dear to him; for it was in those dark and gloomy alleys he had been wont to meet Julia Godwin.

The moon was young as yet, and there was only a faint glimmer of wan silvery light; very different from the mellow radiance which sometimes glorifies the midnight landscape.

In the laurel-walk there reigned impenetrable darkness. Lionel groped his way to the end of the arcade, and entered the grotto. He found the archway described by the housekeeper, and, feeling with the point of his foot, discovered the topmost step of the narrow stairs leading to the cellars. Before he commenced his descent he took a fusee-box from his waistcoat-pocket, and lighted the candle he had brought with him.

He was not far from the house; but he was at the back of the northern wing, and he knew that no restless watcher was likely to see the glimmer of that light.

Slowly and cautiously he descended the slippery stone steps, stooping all the while, for the arched roof was too low to admit of his remaining upright.

On every side he saw the evidence that this hidden staircase had been disused for years: spiders' webs brushed against his face, and scared reptiles started under his foot and crawled away from before him as he advanced. With every step he took he seemed to disturb some living creature that had lain in its nook unmolested hitherto. A palæontologist might here have discovered extinct races—forgotten tribes of newt and adder, spider and toad, and divers curious specimens of the genus rat.

Withered and rotten leaves of many bygone summers strewed the broken and crumbling steps; the moss grew green upon the roof and walls; and it was with difficulty that Lionel preserved his footing on the slippery stones beneath his feet.

The housekeeper had not misled him. He found the secret passage, and groped his way along it until he came to an arched doorway. The door was studded with great iron-headed nails, and was deeply set in the solid masonry. This door Lionel knew must be the entrance to the first of the cellars.

But here he felt that his task would most likely come to an abrupt termination. What was more probable than that the cellar-door would be securely locked against him?

He pulled a rusty iron handle, and to his surprise the door yielded. He forced it open with an effort that required all his strength, so stiffly did the hinges move from long disuse and entered the first cellar under the northern wing.

He knew that he now stood beneath the first room at the western angle of the deserted wing. The seventh window from this western angle was the one to which Caleb had pointed when he talked of the foul deed that he had witnessed within.

Lionel had ascertained that there were two windows in every room on this lower floor, and only two. The seventh window must therefore belong to the fourth room, counting always from the western angle of the building.

Pausing, with the candle raised above his head, to look round the first cellar, Lionel Westford saw nothing but a black and empty vault, festooned with cobwebs, and littered with fragments of wood that had once been stored there.

The door between this cellar and the next stood open. The second cellar was as empty as the first; but the walls were lined with stone bins which had once held wine, and the floor was thickly covered with damp, mouldy-smelling sawdust.

The third door was shut, but not locked. Lionel pushed it open, and entered the third cellar.

He was now drawing very near to the room with the seventh window.

The third cellar was different from the two others. There was a massive iron safe in one angle of the wall; and a narrow stone staircase in an opposite angle wound upwards.

The cellar was to all appearance empty.

Lionel Westford ascended the winding staircase, and found himself upon a small square cupboard-like landing, with a narrow door. He felt tolerably certain that this door must lead into the fourth room—the room with the seventh window.

But here, where he was most eager to examine further, his investigation was brought to a sudden stop; for when he tried the door he found it firmly locked against him. He paused; baffled and bewildered by the small result of his labours.

He had taken infinite trouble to procure his information; and in the dead of the night had braved the ghostly terrors of the northern wing.

And what had he found? Only three empty cellars, and a door locked against him.

“Thank Heaven that I have found no more!” he thought. “My best hope is that the old gardener’s horrible fancies may have been no more real than a feverish dream.”

He was standing on the topmost of the stone steps as he mused thus, and was about to turn away from the locked door, when his eye was caught by a fragment of stuff which hung from a jagged nail in the edge of the panel.

He extricated the fragment from the nail, and examined it by the light of his solitary candle. It was a piece of bluish cloth, torn from a man’s coat—a narrow strip some six inches long. But the bluish colour was partly obscured by a dark stain. Some dark liquid had dyed that torn

fragment of cloth, which felt stiff between Lionel's fingers.

A thrill of horror ran through his veins. Something whispered to him that the black stain upon the cloth was the stain of human blood. He put the torn fragment in his breast-pocket, and then began carefully and minutely to examine the stone steps on which he was standing.

It was not the scrap of blue cloth alone that had been disfigured by that hideous stain. Dark splotches appeared on every one of the stone steps—black and terrible blots, which made themselves plainly visible, even on the damp-stained stone.

At the bottom of the steps a great pool of blood had soaked into the worm-eaten wood which formed the flooring of the cellar.

Caleb was no idle dreamer. There was little doubt that he had watched through the chink of the shutter, and had indeed witnessed the commission of some most horrible deed.

A murder had been committed. The blood of the victim remained—a dark and damning stain, a fatal and overwhelming evidence against his murderer.

Lionel's heart sank within him with a dull sense of despair. Julia Godwin's father was an assassin, and Providence had appointed him as the instrument of that assassin's detection.

"How she will hate me!" thought the young man; "how she will curse the day on which the purest feelings of her nature prompted her to interest herself in my fate! But it is my duty to denounce this wretch—even though he is her father."

The examination of the cellar was not yet completed.

Lionel Westford paused to think, endeavouring to penetrate the mystery of the place.

The torn coat-sleeve steeped in blood, the traces of blood on every step, the great black pool on the floor—all pointed to one conclusion.

Rupert Godwin's unknown victim had been hurled down the stairs after the commission of the murder. The body had lain bleeding at the foot of the stairs, and must have remained for some time in the same position, for there were no traces of blood in any other part of the cellar.

But when and where had the body been removed?

Doubtless in the dead of the night, by that secret passage, the murderer had returned to the scene of his guilt, and had dragged away the corpse of his victim.

To conceal it——where? In a grave dug stealthily in some remote and desolate corner of the grounds.

"But the murdered victim will not rest in his hidden grave," thought Lionel; "the Hand that has led me to the scene of the crime will lead me to the grave of the dead. The Hand that has pointed to this cellar will point further yet upon the dark road I have been appointed to tread. Providence is stronger than man, and I, who of all others would wish to think well of Julia Godwin's father, am destined to be the discoverer and denouncer of his guilt. The Eumenides, who forced their direful work of retribution upon Orestes, are only typical of the Providence which appoints the task of the Christian avenger."

The young man did not leave the cellar until he had found a new evidence of the banker's crime. The light of the candle revealed some dark object lying in a corner of the cellar. Lionel stooped and picked up a glove—a glove

of tanned leather.

He put this in his pocket with the fragment of cloth. By this time he had been nearly an hour in the cellar, and his search had been a most minute one. There was nothing more for him to do but to return by the way he had come to the inhabited part of the Hall, only too terribly convinced that the father of the woman he loved was one of the vilest of mankind. He went back through the cellars and along the subterranean passage, looking right and left as he went, and awe-stricken by the thought that he might at any moment come suddenly upon some trace of the corpse that must be hidden somewhere within the precincts of Wilmingdon Hall.

But no such evidence of the banker's crime met his eyes. He returned to the grotto, and emerged once more into the gardens. The pure breath of the night-air was strangely welcome after the charnel-like atmosphere of the cellars below the northern wing,—those cellars which, from the moment of his finding the dark stain upon the scrap of cloth, had seemed to Lionel to be tainted with the odour of blood.

He crossed the lawn, where the night-dew lay thick and heavy, entered the dining-room, and barred the shutters. Then with a stealthy footstep he ascended the staircase, and returned unheard to his own apartments. As he stole upward in the darkness, he could not but picture to himself the assassin creeping thus stealthily through the silent house to remove the body of his victim, and to deposit that most fatal evidence of his crime in some secure hiding-place.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ON THE TRACK.

The feelings of Clara Westford on that night upon which Violet was lured away from the theatre may be more easily imagined than described.

She arrived at the stage-door of the Circenses only ten minutes after Violet had left the theatre with Rupert Godwin's servant.

Mrs. Westford had by this time become well known to the people employed at the stage-entrance to the theatre, as she had come every night to wait for her daughter and accompany her home. She was not allowed to go behind the scenes, nor had she any wish to penetrate those mysterious regions; but she was always accommodated with a seat in a quiet corner of the hall. To-night, however, instead of his usual civil "Good-evening, ma'am," the tall-porter greeted Mrs. Westford with a stare expressive of intense astonishment.

The widow was quite at a loss to understand the meaning of the man's gaze. But she walked quietly to her accustomed seat in the most retired corner of the hall.

"Why, ma'am," exclaimed the porter at last, "when you walked in just now anyone might have knocked me down with a feather. I thought you was ill—very ill."

"No, indeed, my good friend. What should have put such an idea into your head?" asked Mrs. Westford, smiling at the man's earnestness.

“Well, I’m blest! But there must be some mistake, ma’am, for your daughter was fetched away just now all in a hurry, by a man who said he was a doctor’s servant, and had brought his master’s carriage to fetch her; and I never did see a poor young lady in such a state of agitation. She was as pale as death, she was, and trembling like a hasping leaf.”

“My daughter! You must be mistaken! It must have been some one else.”

“O no, indeed, ma’am. I knows your daughter very well, and a sweet pretty-spoken young lady she is too. The doctor’s servant had brought a note, he had, to say as Miss Watson’s mother was took very ill, and she was to go home directly minute. He told me so while he was waitin’ for your daughter to come down stairs.”

“And Violet, my daughter, went away with this man?”

“She did, ma’am. She hadn’t been gone above ten minutes when you came in.”

Clara Westford lifted her hand to her forehead with a gesture expressive of bewilderment. Her face had grown ashy pale. She felt that some great calamity was close at hand; but as yet she was too entirely bewildered to understand the full import of the communication that had startled her.

“Only ten minutes!” she murmured, echoing the porter’s words. “I must go in search of her. She cannot be gone far.”

“It must be twenty minutes by this time, ma’am,” said the man; “for it’s full ten since you came in. And as for lookin’ for the young lady in such a neighbourhood as this, you might us well expect to find a needle in a bundle of hay. The best thing that you can do is to go quietly home. Of course, as soon as your daughter finds

she's been fetched away by mistake for somebody else, as she must have been, she'll go home, and perhaps will get there before you can."

"But if it should not have been a mistake! If it should have been a plot—some villanous scheme to get my daughter into the power of a scoundrel!"

Clara Westford said this to herself, rather than to the man. She was thinking of Rupert Godwin's threats—his dark hints at dangers to which her daughter was exposed in that theatre.

She had defied him, secure in the belief that Providence would have pity upon her helplessness, and would shield her from the power of her persecutor.

She had defied the sworn enemy who had cast so black a shadow upon her youth. She had dared to defy him, and already he had asserted his power; already she felt how feeble a creature she was to cope against his vengeful machinations.

"I ought to have remembered how often the wicked are permitted to triumph upon this earth," she thought. "O heaven! if the blow had fallen upon me only, I could have borne it; but my daughter—my innocent darling! I cannot bear that she should suffer. Welcome any misery to me, if my suffering could preserve that bright blossom from being trampled in the dust!"

Thought flits through the brain almost as rapidly as summer lightning flashes across the face of heaven. These thoughts passed through Clara Westford's mind as she leant half-fainting against the back of the chair from which she had risen.

The porter's compassion was excited by her evident distress.

"You just go quietly home, ma'am," he said, in a

consoling tone; “and I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if you was to find your daughter had got there before you.”

Clara shook her head despairingly.

“You don’t know what reason I have to be terrified by this business,” she said. “I will trust you, my good man, for I can see that you pity me. You are well acquainted with the dangers of a theatre. I daresay you know everything that goes on in this place?”

“Well, ma’am, I hear pretty nigh all that is to be heard, I daresay,” answered the porter.

“My daughter was very young—very inexperienced. She was much admired, perhaps; and I know that unprincipled men are sometimes admitted behind the scenes of a theatre. Tell me, my good man, did you ever hear that my daughter was persecuted by the attentions of any of these men?”

“Never,” answered the man heartily; “there ain’t so many as ever come behind the scenes in this house. People as don’t know no better talk a great deal of nonsense about theatres, and think that my Lord This and Sir Harry That are always lolling about behind the scenes. But, bless your heart, ma’am, oftener than not you’d find our green-room as quiet as a church; though I don’t say but what one or two particular patrons do get let in once in a way. And as for your daughter, I have heard say from them as have took notice of her, that she was one of those modest quiet young ladies as the wildest of young men going would never dare to insult.”

In the intensity of her gratitude for these comforting assurances Clara Westford stretched out her hand, and grasped the grimy paw of the stage-doorkeeper.

“My good friend,” she exclaimed, “you have spoken the pleasantest words that I have heard for long from any

stranger's lips. I will go home. I will try to think that this business has been only a mistake, and that my daughter will return to me in safety. But stay; let me ask you one question. You heard the name of the doctor who sent for my daughter?"

"No, ma'am; the servant may have mentioned the name; but I can't say I caught it, if he did."

"Nor the address?"

"No, ma'am; unfortunately, I didn't hear that either."

"Then I have no clue," murmured Clara despairingly.

She bade the porter good-night, and left the theatre. She walked rapidly through those crowded streets, in which she could not count a single friend. But quickly as she made her way homewards, the time seemed cruelly long, so eager was she to reach her lodging, where it was just possible that she might find Violet safe.

But, alas, only heart-sickening disappointment awaited her. All was dark in the window of the little sitting-room. Violet had not returned. Clara Westford tottered with feeble footsteps up the narrow staircase, and entered the empty room. Hitherto she had been supported by hope. Now despair came upon her: all at once her strength seemed to forsake her. She threw herself upon the old-fashioned rickety sofa, and gave way to a paroxysm of grief.

For a long time she was completely overwhelmed by that convulsive outburst of despair. But at last she grew calm, with the dull calmness of misery.

"I must save her! I must save her!" she thought,—"even at the peril of my own soul!"

She did not kindle any light, but sat in the darkness, with her head resting on the arm of the sofa, and her

forehead tightly pressed in her two hands.

The unhappy woman was trying to think of a friend—some long-forgotten friend, who might help her in this bitter hour of calamity.

But the poor have few friends on earth. Clara Westford had been long-forgotten by those aristocratic relations who had believed in the disgrace of Sir John Ponsonby's beautiful daughter. She had disappeared from the world as completely as if the grave had hidden her. She had scrupulously avoided all possibility of any meeting with those who had known her before her marriage with the merchant captain.

Now, therefore, she could only count those friends whom she had known in Hampshire during her happy married life—simple, well-to-do country people, unversed in the ways of the world, who would be quite incompetent to help her in this crisis of her life, even if they had been within call, and their friendship of that sterling metal which resists the biting influence of adversity.

Clara had known them only during the summer of her existence. Their friendship had been very pleasant to her; but she had found no opportunity of testing its quality or measuring its force. She had dined with her friends, and her friends had dined with her. They had killed the fatted calf to do her honour; but while doing it they had been perfectly aware that she had fatted calves of her own in the homestead. It was not to such untried friendship as this that Mrs. Westford could appeal in a desperate crisis.

"It is to my direst enemy I must appeal," she thought. "Rupert Godwin has triumphed, and he alone on earth can help me to recover my lost child."

Early the next morning Mrs. Westford walked to a quiet street near St. James's-square. On his visit to her lodging

the banker had left his card on her table, inscribed with the address of his London abode.

But even this desperate step resulted in disappointment. At the banker's lodgings Mrs. Westford only found James Spence, the valet, who informed her that his master was out of town, and was not likely to return until the following day.

"If Mr. Godwin is at his country-house, I will go down there to see him," Clara said to the valet. "My business is most important; indeed, it is a matter of life and death."

"Unfortunately, madam, Mr. Godwin is not at Wilmingdon Hall," the man answered very politely; "and I am sorry to say I cannot inform you where he is. He told me nothing, except that he was going into the country, and would return to-morrow morning."

"To-morrow! Then I will call here again," said Clara, with a sigh of real despair.

She turned away, sick at heart, to retrace her steps to the dreary lodging, now so utterly desolate.

She walked slowly, for her feeble limbs could scarcely drag themselves along. She had money in her purse; but she never thought of hailing any vehicle. The dull stupor of her brain seemed to render her almost unconscious of physical suffering. The sunlit streets, gay with busy people hastening hither and thither, lively with that bustling activity which looks like happiness, swam before her weary eyes, worn and dim with long weeping: yet she walked on, wending her steps mechanically towards her joyless home. She was in the busiest part of the Strand, when she suddenly heard her name spoken, in a voice that sounded strangely familiar—a voice that was associated with the happy past.

She started like a creature newly awakened from some

hideous dream, and a taint flush passed over her wan face.

A hand was laid gently upon her arm. A young man, with a frank, manly countenance, bronzed to an almost Indian hue by exposure to sun and wind, was looking earnestly in her face.

“Mrs. Westford!” he exclaimed, “dear Mrs. Westford! Is it really you? I am so surprised to meet you thus—in London, and alone.”

Clara Westford looked at the speaker with a dreamy bewildered gaze. The bronzed face seemed at first strange to her; but the well-remembered voice brought back the past.

She looked at the stranger for some moments in silence; then her lips parted, and she gasped the familiar name—

“Gilbert Thornleigh!”

Yes; this bronzed stranger was no other than Gilbert Thornleigh, the first mate of the *Lily Queen*.

“Gilbert!” said Clara Westford; “can it indeed be you?”

“Yes, dear Mrs. Westford; myself, and no other. I have survived all the perils of shipwreck—the dangers and privations of a difficult journey in the wildest part of the coast of Africa—and have set foot once more on British ground. I can’t tell you how pleased I am to see the old streets, the familiar faces, and to hear my mother tongue spoken on every side of me. Need I tell you the delight I feel in seeing you? And yet, dear Mrs. Westford,” exclaimed the young man, changing his tone suddenly, and looking anxiously at Clara’s face, “I confess that I am sorry to see you looking so pale and careworn, so sadly altered since I saw you in Hampshire. And your dress—You are in deep mourning. Great heavens! Violet! she is

not dead?"

The sailor's bronzed check changed to an almost livid line as he asked that terrible question.

"Not dead! No, no; not dead!" Mrs. Westford answered in a strange, half-bewildered way.

"But I am sure that some calamity has happened to you," exclaimed Gilbert Thornleigh. "There are traces of sorrow in your face. You are ill. I am sure you are ill."

"I am ill," answered Clara; "the street in which we stand spins round me. I cannot understand what has happened. I meet you here—you whom I thought dead. You were saved, then? You were rescued from the wreck of the *Lily Queen*?"

"Yes; I and three of the crew contrived to swim ashore. We had a hard fight for it, I can tell you, for it was no common squall that sent the *Lily Queen* against the rock that shattered her brave old timbers as you'd shatter a wine-glass if you were to dash it against the curbstone yonder. We had nothing but our life-belts and our strong arms to rely upon, and we had to swim against a terrific sea; but somehow or other we did reach the land. The poor fellows who trusted to the boats went down to the bottom, every one of them; and the ship herself was ground to powder."

"And my husband—Harley? He was no doubt the last to abandon the sinking vessel? I know his brave true heart. You were saved, but Harley perished."

Gilbert Thornleigh stared at his companion in utter bewilderment.

"Dear Mrs. Westford," he exclaimed, "you are surely trying to mystify me. Your husband was not on board when the ship was lost. Captain Westford did not sail with us in the *Lily Queen*."

“He did not sail in the *Lily Queen*!”

Clara Westford repeated the sailor’s words almost mechanically, looking at him with wild dilated eyes.

“He did not sail? He was not with you when you were wrecked?” she exclaimed.

“No, most decidedly not. He intrusted the ship’s papers to me, and I sailed as his deputy. I was at this very moment on my way to the Waterloo Terminus, where I meant to have taken the train to Winchester, fully expecting to find yourself and Captain Westford at the Grange.”

“Gilbert Thornleigh,” exclaimed Clara, “I must be mad —surely I must be mad! You say my husband did not sail in the *Lily Queen*? Yet this black dress has been worn for him, and for him alone. From the hour in which he left the Grange to sail for China on the 27th of last June, I have never seen my husband’s face, nor have I received the faintest token of his existence.”

“You have not seen him? You believed that he had sailed last June?”

“Most firmly.”

“Great heavens!” cried Gilbert Thornleigh, “there must be some terrible mystery here. Some calamity must have happened to the Captain.”

“Yes,” answered Clara, with the dull accent of utter hopelessness, “nothing but death could separate Harley from his wife and children.”

The sailor had offered her his arm, and she had taken it almost unconsciously. He led her out of the bustle and confusion of the Strand into one of those quiet streets that lead down to the river. Here they were undisturbed; here they could talk freely of the strange mystery that

surrounded the fate of Harley Westford.

“I cannot understand it,” murmured Clara, with a dreary despair in her tone. “It’s all a bewildering dream.”

Little by little Gilbert Thornleigh contrived to subdue Mrs. Westford’s agitation, while he told her, slowly and deliberately, the story of the last day before the sailing of the *Lily Queen*.

He told her how Harley Westford had quitted the ship, declaring that he would recover his money from Rupert Godwin’s hands at any hazard. He told her how the vessel had waited in the dock, not only until the following morning, as Harley Westford had ordered, but until the following sunset, the young man deferring departure to the very last, in the hope that the Captain would rejoin his ship.

Then a lurid light broke upon Clara Westford’s mind.

In this calamity, as in every other, she saw the one dark figure always between her and happiness—Rupert Godwin, always Rupert Godwin, her implacable enemy, her relentless persecutor.

And now a hideous fear took possession of her. Rupert Godwin had destroyed her husband!

Yes; with his own desperate hand, or by the hand of some hired assassin, Rupert Godwin had murdered his fortunate rival.

By slow degrees this conviction shaped itself in Clara Westford’s mind.

“I can understand it all now,” she said. “There was good reason for my dark forebodings, my gloomy presentiments. When Harley left me on that bright summer morning, he left me to go to his death.”

“Dear Mrs. Westford, let us hope for the best,”

murmured the sailor; but there was little hopefulness in his tone.

“Tell me one thing,” said Clara: “are you positive that my husband lodged the sum of twenty thousand pounds in Rupert Godwin’s hands? Are you sure that Harley did not owe money to the banker?”

“As certain as I am of my own name. Your husband had been a very fortunate man, and the twenty thousand pounds were the savings of his life.”

“Then the document by which my children were made penniless and homeless was a forgery,” exclaimed Clara.

She told Gilbert Thornleigh the story of Rupert Godwin’s seizure of the Grange and all its contents. But she could not speak or dwell long on this subject; she could only think of one thing—the mysterious disappearance of her husband.

“He has been murdered, Gilbert,” she said; “my heart tells me that it is so. He has fallen a victim to the relentless Rupert Godwin.”

Gilbert Thornleigh shook his head incredulously.

“Impossible, dear Mrs. Westford!” he exclaimed. “Rupert Godwin has a high position in the world. He would never be guilty of such a crime—a crime which must ultimately be discovered, and for which he could have no adequate motive.”

“I tell you, Gilbert, there is no infamy—no deed, however dark—of which Rupert Godwin is not capable. I know him. I know the cruelty of his heart. He is a man without conscience and without mercy. Why should such a man hesitate to commit murder?”

The sailor was still incredulous. It is so difficult for a generous nature to believe in the possibility of crime.

“Some accident may have happened to the Captain,” he said. “He may never have reached the bank.”

“If any accident had happened, I should have been almost sure to hear of it,” Clara Westford replied decisively. “Gilbert Thornleigh, I think you loved my husband?”

“I did, as truly as ever a son loved his father; and I had good reason to love him. No father was ever kinder to his son than the Captain was to me.”

“Give me a proof of your devotion,” said Clara, with passionate energy; “aid me to discover my husband’s fate.”

“I will,” replied the young man; “my life is at your service. I will shrink from neither trouble nor peril in the performance of the duty I owe to my Captain.”

“Then let us begin our work immediately. O, Gilbert, I can neither know peace nor rest till this dark enigma has been solved.”

The young man was silent for some moments, thinking deeply. He was trying to form some plan of action.

“When Captain Westford left me on board the *Lily Queen*, I know that he was going straight to Mr. Godwin’s banking-house,” he said at last. “The first fact we have to ascertain is whether he ever reached that place. We can at least attempt to settle that question by making inquiries of the clerks at the bank.”

“I have not much faith in any of Rupert Godwin’s creatures; but let us lose no time in questioning them. Providence may give us help in an attempt to fathom the mystery of this man’s crime. Let us go at once to the bank.”

Gilbert Thornleigh was almost as earnest as Mrs.

Westford. He called a cab, and told the man to drive to Lombard-street. They alighted before the door of the banking-house. Gilbert went into the principal office, followed by Mrs. Westford.

An old man, with a queer, almost humpbacked, figure and a wizen face, was seated at one of the desks, bending over a ledger. He looked up as Gilbert and his companion entered the office. He cast at the sailor only a brief and careless glance of indifference; but the whole aspect of his face changed as he looked at Clara Westford.

The eyes were fixed in a long earnest gaze, and the lips trembled. It was evident that some sudden and violent emotion shook the man to his inmost soul.

This man was no other than Rupert Godwin's confidential clerk, Jacob Danielson.

"I have come to ask a question relating to an event that happened more than a year ago," said the mate of the *Lily Queen*. "Can you call to mind the dealings of this house during last June twelvemonth?"

"Perhaps I can," answered the clerk, not looking at Gilbert Thornleigh, but keeping his small deep-set eyes fixed intently upon Clara Westford, who stood a little way behind the sailor. "It depends very much upon the nature of those dealings. What is it that you want me to remember?"

"A captain in the merchant service, named Harley Westford, lodged a sum of money in the hands of your principal during that month, a large sum for a single deposit—twenty thousand pounds. Do you remember the circumstances?"

"I do."

"He returned the same day to withdraw the money, or

he intended to do so?"

"He did return: and not finding Mr. Godwin here, he followed him to his country seat, Wilmingdon Hall, in Hertfordshire. I was there when he arrived."

"And he claimed the return of his money?"

"He did."

"Were his claims acceded to?"

"Mr. Godwin told me as much."

"The money was returned?"

"I repeat that Mr. Godwin told me so. I left Wilmingdon Hall to catch the ten-o'clock train from Hertford. When I left, Captain Westford was still with Mr. Godwin. I was so unlucky as to lose the train. I returned to the Hall. When I returned the Captain had left, no doubt carrying his twenty thousand pounds with him. Mr. Godwin told me that he had restored the money that evening, as the Captain was obliged to rejoin his ship by daybreak; otherwise she would have sailed without him."

"She did sail without him," answered Gilbert Thornleigh; "from that hour to this, the Captain has never been seen by his friends. He disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened to swallow him up."

"Strange!" murmured the clerk thoughtfully.

"Very strange," replied the sailor; "there has been foul play somewhere. I should not care to be in Rupert Godwin's position. Harley Westford was last seen in his house. Harley Westford's fortune was lodged in his hands. There are two questions that I must have answered, somehow or other; the first is, was that fortune ever restored to its rightful owner? The second is one of even darker meaning: Did Harley Westford ever leave Wilmingdon Hall alive?"

Jacob Danielson looked at the speaker with a strange expression.

"Bah!" he exclaimed. "Do you suppose such a man as Rupert Godwin would lie in wait to murder one of his customers for the sake of twenty thousand pounds? Mr. Godwin is a millionaire, and that which seemed a wonderful fortune to the merchant captain would have been only a trifle to him."

"Mr. Godwin may be a millionaire to-day," answered Gilbert Thornleigh; "but if the tongue of common report spoke truly, he was no millionaire last June twelvemonth. He had just made great losses, and there was a rumour that he was likely to become bankrupt."

"The tongue of common report is a lying tongue," replied Jacob Danielson. "Come, young man, this talk is madness. Rich men, such as Rupert Godwin, do not commit crimes. Seek for your captain elsewhere; we are not responsible for his safety."

"Perhaps not," answered Gilbert; "but the law may ask you and your employer some strange questions about that meeting at Wilmingdon Hall. My first task shall be to put the case in the hands of the police; they may be able to discover whether Harley Westford ever left that place alive."

"Perhaps so," responded the clerk coolly. "The police are very clever, no doubt; but they are sometimes baffled. They have made two or three rather notable *fiascos* lately. Good morning. Stay! In spite of your insolent insinuations, I should really be glad to be of service to you. If I should obtain any information likely to aid you in your search for the missing Captain, I will send it to you. Where shall I address my letter?"

He looked at Clara Westford as he spoke, and it was

she who answered him.

“You can address your letter to me, Harley Westford’s wife, at No. 4, Little Vincent-street, Lambeth,” she said eagerly.

Jacob Danielson started at the sound of her low earnest voice, but neither Clara nor her companion observed his emotion. They were too deeply engrossed by their own anxiety.

They left the bank immediately after this. The young man put his companion into a cab, and then parted from her, promising to go at once to the proper quarter, where he might place the matter of Harley Westford’s disappearance in the hands of the detective police, and promising also to call upon her early the next day, in order to tell her the result of his interview with the chief official at Scotland-yard.

Before she took off her bonnet and shawl Clara Westford seated herself at her desk and wrote a letter to her son, telling him of the return of Gilbert Thornleigh, and of the mysterious disappearance of the Captain, and imploring him to exert himself to the utmost in his endeavours to fathom the mystery.

“By a providential chance you happen to be in the near neighbourhood of Wilmingdon Hall,” wrote Clara Westford, “which I am told is within a few miles of Hertford. For Heaven’s sake, my dear Lionel, make a good use of that chance, and try by every means to discover whether your unhappy father left Rupert Godwin’s house alive on the night of the 27th of June.”

CHAPTER XXXII.

ESTHER VANBERG HAS HER WAY.

Esther Vanberg thought very little more of Violet after the base scheme, in which she had assisted, had been successfully carried out.

Her lovely rival was gone; that was all she cared about. The stage was now clear for herself. Mr. Maltravers was in a dilemma, and was glad to allow the handsome and dashing Esther to appear in the very part he had intended for Violet. Most complete, therefore, was the triumph of the Jewess.

She had but little dramatic ability, or she would long ago have been elevated to a more important position in the theatre—in the days when her beauty had been fresher than it was now. But she managed to speak the few lines allotted to her without breaking down, and she looked superb.

The character she had to perform was that of a woman of rank; which gave her an opportunity of displaying some of the jewels which had been presented to her by the wealthy and generous young Duke of Harlingford.

Her dress was a triumph of art from a court milliner in Clarges-street—a satin train of the softest pink almost covered by a tunic of Malines lace. The delicate hue of the dress contrasted exquisitely with the girl's pale-olive skin; and she looked as perilously lovely as that "Serpent of old Nile," whose fatal eyes cost Antony a world.

A diamond bracelet encircled one of her slim wrists; a massive band of yellow lustreless gold clasped with a large ruby star adorned the other. Her purple-black hair was drawn off from her proud clearly-cut face, coiled in a heavy knot at the back of her head, and secured by a diamond comb.

Attired thus, Esther Vanberg looked indeed worthy of the rank and title of duchess.

There were many that night in the crowded theatre who thought as much; but there was one young man sitting alone in a private box, who would gladly, ay even proudly, have bestowed upon her that rank and title.

This solitary young man, whose handsome face brightened as he watched the beautiful actress, was no other than the Duke of Harlingford, Esther Vanberg's doting admirer.

The haughty girl had quarrelled with him about some absurd trifle, and had dismissed him from her drawing-room as coolly as a sovereign would banish an offending courtier. During three or four weeks the infatuated young nobleman had in vain sought for admission to the pretty little house in Mayfair. Every day he received the same kind of answer—Miss Vanberg was not at home; or Miss Vanberg was engaged.

The Grand Monarque himself, in the plenitude of his power, could scarcely have treated his subjects with more supreme hauteur than the Duke had to endure from this friendless, nameless ballet-girl.

But unfortunately opposition only increased the young man's infatuation. The worse Esther Vanberg behaved to him, the more ardently he worshipped her.

Every night found him at his post in the private box, which he had hired for the season, content to gaze at his

idol, who did not even condescend to glance towards the spot where he sat.

He had the privilege of entering the green-room of the Circenses whenever he pleased; but when last he was there, Esther Vanberg had passed him by with a look of superb disdain. He had spoken to her; but she had not deigned to reply to him. So that now the weak-minded young man had not the courage to intrude in that charmed circle.

But to-night, to the Duke's surprise and delight, the lovely Jewess was pleased to be gracious. She looked towards his box with the most bewitching smile of recognition. The enraptured young nobleman saw that he was forgiven. He hurried round to the stage-door directly the piece was over, and made his way to the green-room. There were several members of the company assembled there, engaged in discussing the merits of the new piece, and amongst them the Duke beheld the object of his adoration.

Esther Vanberg was seated on a sofa, fanning herself with an Indian fan of gaudy feathers and exquisitely carved wood. She beckoned the Duke to her side with a wave of her fan.

He was only too glad to obey the summons. In a moment he was by her side, bending over her in an attitude of respectful devotion.

Strange as it may seem, the Duke respected this capricious, self-willed woman. Her despotic temper, her insolence and pride, kept him at her feet.

She gave him her slender jewelled hand with a gesture of superb condescension.

"Come, Vincent," she said, "let us be friends once more. I am tired of seeing your gloomy face in that stage

box. Who were those people that used to place a death's-head upon their banquet-table, to remind them of their mortality? I'm sure you would make a very good substitute for the skeleton head, if that sort of thing were the fashion nowadays. You look absolutely funereal."

"My dear Esther, when a fellow calls at your house a dozen times, and is told every time that you are out, though he hears you strumming—"

"What?"

"I beg your pardon, playing the piano."

"Well, say no more," replied Miss Vanberg graciously; "I daresay I have behaved rather badly to you during the last fortnight. But I'm sure I must have had awful provocation—though I can't exactly remember what it was. However, you may consider yourself forgiven."

"My darling Esther—" exclaimed the enraptured Duke.

"Stay!" cried the young lady, with an imperious wave of her fan; "you are only forgiven conditionally. I want you to do me a favour."

"My adorable angel, is there anything you could ask that I would refuse to do?"

"Of course not," answered Esther with the air of an empress: "you will not refuse to do anything that you *can* do. But in this case the question is, whether you can or not."

"My dearest Esther, if it is possible, consider it done; if it is impossible, be assured that it shall be done."

"O, it's the simplest thing in the world, if you only go to work about it cleverly. You know how fond I am of riding, and how anxiously I look forward to the hunting-season, when I mean to go down to Berkshire, and enjoy the delight of a run across country. Well, a few evenings

ago, Captain Angus Harding was in the green-room, and was talking most rapturously about a crack hunter that was to be sold at Tattersall's the following day at two o'clock. A magnificent creature, he said; a chestnut, without a white hair about him; a perfect flyer, with only one defect, and that the common fault of chestnut horses —ahem!—and dark-haired women—rather a queer temper. The animal is called Devilshoof, and has been ridden by the great steeplechaser Mr. Palgrave Norton. Captain Harding declared that he would have given a thousand pounds for such a horse, if he could possibly have afforded the money."

"Poor *dayvil*!" drawled the Duke. "Angus Harding is always hard-up. He ought to be called Angus Hardup, by Jove!" added the young nobleman, delighted with his feeble attempt at wit.

Miss Vanberg laughed heartily. She was in a charming humour to-night.

"Well," she continued, "of course you may imagine that after hearing such an account of this horse, I was seized with a desire to have him. I kept my own counsel but determined to send my groom to Tattersall's to bid any money for Devilshoof. I gave him my orders early the next day, and my man was in Tattersall's yard at a quarter before two; but—would you believe it?—that abominable Harding had misled me as to the hour of the sale. Devilshoof had been sold for seven hundred guineas at half-past one. Imagine my annoyance."

"Yes; it was provoking," answered the Duke; "but as the horse is a queer temper, I call it rather a lucky escape."

"Temper!" exclaimed Esther Vanberg, with a scornful laugh. "Do you think I should have been afraid of the animal's temper? I like a spirited horse. I like my temper

to be at war with the animal I ride, for I know I shall conquer, and I feel a thrill of pride and triumph in the sense of power. I hate a quiet horse. I would just as soon stay at home and sit on the sofa, as go jogging up and down the Row on one of your placid animals which are warranted 'quiet for a lady.' Now, my dear Harlingford, what I have to say to you is this: when I set my heart upon a thing, I am not accustomed to be disappointed. I *have* set my heart upon this horse; so you must get him for me."

"But, my dearest Esther, you say that he was sold."

"What of that? He can be bought again, I suppose? The man who bought him may be induced to sell him for a higher price?"

"That depends upon the character of the purchaser. Who is he?"

"Lord Bothwell Wallace."

"Then I'm afraid the matter is quite impossible," replied the Duke. "Bothwell Wallace is a great man in the shires, and will scarcely care to part with a horse he fancies."

Miss Vanberg tossed her head disdainfully, while her brilliant eyes flashed angrily upon the Duke.

"O, very well," she exclaimed; "let it be just as you please. I shall know how to estimate the worth of your pretended affection, when you cannot even gratify me in a little whim like this."

Now, this was a cruel speech, and a very unjust one into the bargain; for the Duke had already spent a fortune upon the gratification of Esther Vanberg's little whims, never having been in the habit of denying her anything, from Marie Antoinette's own writing-table, in tortoise-shell and Sèvres, to the title-deeds of the prettiest villa on

the banks of the Thames. But the weak young man was ready to do anything, however foolish, rather than incur one angry glance from the bright eyes of his idol.

"Well, my darling," he said, almost piteously, "I will exert myself to the utmost to accomplish what you want. But Wallace is awfully rich; and I really don't see how I am to induce him to part with a horse he likes. However, I'll do my best."

"Pray do," answered Esther, rising languidly, and drawing a costly Indian shawl about her shoulders, "and don't come near me until you can tell me that Devilshoof is mine. Never presume to approach me again if you fail in getting him, for the sight of you will be actually obnoxious to me. Good-night."

She held out her hand once more. The Duke kissed the jewelled fingers, and accepted his sentence of banishment as meekly as if Esther Vanberg had been the Emperor of all the Russias.

He wrote on the following day to Lord Bothwell Wallace, offering that nobleman a thousand guineas for the horse which had been bought at Tattersall's for seven hundred. He informed Lord Wallace that the horse was wanted for a lady who had set her heart upon possessing him.

The Duke fully expected a decided refusal to this offer; but the letter which he received did not contain an actual refusal. Lord Wallace wrote:

"MY DEAR HARLINGFORD,—I shall be very glad to get rid of Devilshoof for the sum which I paid for him; but I will *not* sell him to a lady. I and my grooms have tried him, and we find him one of the worst-tempered brutes it was ever our bad fortune to encounter. You've been in my harness-room at the Caravansera, and you know I'm

rather great in the invention of teasers in the shape of bits. I've tried all my latest discoveries on Devilshoof without effect. The brute is an incorrigible bolter; and whatever good there ever was in him has been taken out of him by gentleman jocks. He is so bad a temper that I don't care to keep him in my stud, in spite of his good looks. I shall send him back to Tattersall's, and have him sold for whatever he will fetch. But no lady shall ride him with my concurrence.

"Yours faithfully,
"WALLACE."

The Duke of Harlingford imagined that this letter would perfectly satisfy Esther Vanberg. She would, of course, not care to possess a horse which a hunting-man like Bothwell Wallace refused to ride. The Duke put the letter in his pocket, ordered his cab, and drove at once to the coquettish little mansion in Mayfair.

Esther was at home, fluttering about her drawing-room in an exquisite morning-dress of muslin and lace. She was arranging the hot-house flowers in her vases, and looked up with a cry of delight as the Duke entered the room. Looking up thus, in her dainty summer dress, with her hands full of flowers, and all the colour and brightness of her sunlit drawing-room for a background, she made a picture which a Meissonier might have been pleased to paint.

"I triumph!" she exclaimed. "Devilshoof is mine!"

"No, my dearest Esther; but——"

"But what?" interrupted the Jewess. "I will have no such word as 'but' uttered in *my* house. I thought I told you not to come near me until that horse was mine?"

"Precisely, my darling," answered the Duke, handing Lord Wallace's letter to the angry beauty; "but if you will

only read that, you will understand why I have not bought him."

Esther Vanberg read the letter, and then tossed it from her with a gesture of disdain.

"Well!" she exclaimed; "of course you wrote to say that you would buy the horse?"

"My dear Esther!—after receiving such an account of him?"

"Bah!" cried the Jewess contemptuously. "What cowards you men are, in spite of all your pretended love of manly sports! A horse is a little hot-tempered, and you are actually afraid to ride him. I should despise myself for such cowardice! Write to Lord Wallace immediately, and tell him that you will give him his own price for Devilshoof."

"But, my darling Esther, you would never be so rash as to ride him? It would be sheer madness."

"Never mind what it would be; sit down and write."

The Jewess pointed imperiously to the Marie Antoinette writing-table.

For some time the Duke resisted; but Esther Vanberg's power over him was boundless, and in the end she triumphed.

He wrote to Lord Wallace, telling him that the lady had set her heart on the horse, and would have him at any price.

It was with great unwillingness that the weak-minded young man wrote this letter; for the thought of danger to his beloved Esther inspired him with utter dismay; but he had not firmness enough to oppose any fancy of the woman he so tenderly loved.

He received a reply from Lord Wallace in a few hours.

It ran thus:

"DEAR HARLINGFORD,—If the lady whom you wish to gratify has set her heart on *committing suicide*, she may as well do so in one way as in another. I can only tell you once more, that Devilshoof is unsafe for a lady to ride. He requires to be ridden by a man with a wrist of iron, and a temper as determined as his own.

"Always yours,
"WALLACE."

The Duke hurried off to Mayfair with this second letter. Esther Vanberg received it eagerly, and laughed gaily after reading it.

"A wrist of iron, and a temper as determined as his own!" she exclaimed, repeating the Viscount's words. "Well, well; I don't know about the wrist of iron; but I know that no horse that ever was foaled can have a more determined temper than I have. We will see which is the stronger Devilshoof or I."

"You mean to ride the horse then, in spite of Wallace's warning?"

"Mean to ride him?—of course I do!" cried the Jewess, who was walking up and down the room in the highest spirits. "How gloomily you look at me! Poor Harlingford! one would suppose I was going to jump over a precipice, or to do something or other that would be certain death. You men are all cowards. I'll show you that a horse can be conquered. Send Lord Wallace a cheque for a thousand pounds, and tell him to send Devilshoof to my stables."

Again the Duke remonstrated, entreated, implored; but again Esther triumphed, and the foolish young man acceded to her request. Had she ordered him to jump out of her drawing-room window into the street below, his compliance with her command would have only been a

question of time.

The cheque was sent; and early next morning Esther went round to her stables to look at the animal.

It was a pouring-wet day, and the Jewess could have found it in her heart to quarrel with the very elements, so great was her disappointment. She wanted to have ridden Devilshoof that morning.

“I suppose to-morrow will be fine,” she said. “Mind, Harlingford, you hold yourself disengaged, to ride with me at eleven in the morning. I shall ride as far as Richmond Park or Wimbledon Common, for the sake of a gallop on the turf.”

“I shall be ready, Esther,” answered the Duke gravely; “but I wish you would ride any other horse than Devilshoof. You used to be so fond of your mare Waterwitch.”

“Yes; but that is ages ago. I’m tired of her now: she’s almost as fat as one of those horrible animals you took me to see at Islington; and I mean to ride this chestnut beauty.”

She laid her little white hand on the animal’s arching neck, and he looked at her with his large brown eyes, which had something almost demoniac in their fiery brightness. The appearance of the horse fully justified his name of Devilshoof.

“I don’t know how it is,” exclaimed the Duke. “I suppose Wallace’s letter has made a coward of me. But I give you my honour, Esther, I would gladly sacrifice every penny I possess if you would promise me never to ride that horse.”

“My dear Harlingford,” cried the Jewess gaily, “you shall not be allowed to give way to such foolish fancies. I never felt in better spirits than I do to-day; and I

anticipate a most delightful ride to-morrow.”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE EVIDENCE OF THE MINIATURE.

After his secret visit to the vaults below the northern wing, a perpetual fever of mind possessed Lionel Westford. He shrank from every chance of meeting with Julia Godwin. He brooded continually upon the circumstantial evidence of the blood-stained shred of cloth, the black pool of blood, the leather glove, which he had found in the cellar.

A man had come to Wilmingdon one evening in the June of the past year, and had never been seen to go away.

The ravings of the old gardener were not the result of a disordered mind; they were the offspring of an intellect which even in its decay retained the memory of a dreadful scene.

Lionel Westford's mind was tortured by conflicting feelings. He knew that, having fallen upon the clue to a crime that had escaped the eye of justice, it was his sacred duty to place that clue in the hands of the police, in order that the secret of Wilmingdon Hall might be dragged to light, and that justice might overtake the criminal.

But that criminal was Julia Godwin's father. The image of the woman he loved, pale, agonized, grief-stricken, rose before him; and he felt that he *could not* be the means of bringing her father to the gallows.

Then he tried to believe that no murder had been committed on that June evening. He tried to think that Rupert Godwin was not guilty of the worst crime which man can commit. It was all one great mystification, probably the result of a sequence of accidents. The blood-stained fragment of a coat, the glove, the ravings of Caleb Wildred might all be explained perhaps in quite a different manner from that in which Lionel had been inclined to read them.

“Why should Rupert Godwin murder this stranger?” thought the young man. “What motive could he have had? Pshaw! I have been a madman to suspect him of such a deed—as mad and foolish as that poor half-witted gardener, whose ravings, after all, may be utterly meaningless.”

It was thus that Lionel Westford reasoned with himself, —so anxious was he to believe in the innocence of his mother’s enemy. But, argue with himself as he would, the dark and terrible truth was perpetually thrusting its hideous image before his eyes.

It was quite in vain that he tried to think lightly of the mystery. A dreadful weight oppressed his mind. He remembered the strange feeling which had come over him on the day when he for the first time entered Wilmingdon Hall.

“It is useless to struggle against the truth!” he exclaimed one day, after a long period of mental conflict. “The shadow of crime darkens this place. The foul taint of blood poisons the very atmosphere. Murder has been done here; and, come what may, I must do my duty—yes, even at the cost of Julia Godwin’s peace.”

The long struggle had come to an end at last. Lionel Westford resolved to lose no more time, but to leave Wilmingdon Hall that very day, and seek an interview

with one of the chief members of the detective police immediately he reached London.

Under these circumstances he sat down to write to Julia Godwin, his employer, his patroness.

He had only occasion to tell her that particular business obliged him to go to London, and that he was therefore compelled to relinquish his employment without a more formal notice.

He had only to tell her this, and to thank her for her goodness—to express his appreciation of the benevolent feelings that had prompted her to employ him.

But, simple though the matter of the letter was, he found it very difficult to write. He knew that the task he was about to undertake was one which might bring despair and anguish upon the woman whose generosity had rescued him from starvation—the woman whom he fondly loved.

His letter was very cold, very formal. He dared not trust himself to reveal one spark of real feeling.

He sealed and directed it. He then set in order the drawings upon which he had been employed; and next hastily gathered together his few possessions.

These he packed in his portmanteau; but he resolved on leaving the portmanteau behind him until he should be able to send for it. He wanted to quit the house unnoticed; he wished his departure to be undiscovered till he was far from Wilmingdon Hall. He wished, above all things, to escape the chance of meeting with Julia Godwin. Such a meeting would have been fatal; for the young man felt that he should have failed in the endeavour to conceal his feelings.

He descended the stairs, crossed the hall, and went out upon the lawn. The drawing-room windows were open,

and he could hear Julia Godwin singing. The song was very familiar to him, for he had often sat in the summer twilight listening dreamily to the melody. The rich tones of the singer went to his heart. He was leaving her—perhaps forever. Or if they ever met again, would she not look upon him as her worst and bitterest foe?

He could not quit the Hall without stealing one last glance at the face which had bewitched him.

The long French windows were open to their utmost extent. Lionel stole softly across the pathway, and stood for some moments gazing silently at the face of the singer.

Julia Godwin was very pensive. There was a look of profound thought, or it might be of profound sadness, in her large dark eyes. The tones of her voice were tremulous, and her hands moved slowly over the keys of the piano.

For but a few moments Lionel Westford lingered. He dared not trust himself to stay longer, lest Julia should glance upward, and see him standing by the open window. There was nothing he more dreaded than an interview with Rupert Godwin's daughter, and yet it was very difficult to turn away from that window.

He did turn, however, and stole off unnoticed. He made his way across the park, and walked to Hertford—no public vehicle plying on the country road.

He was going straight to the railway station, when he suddenly remembered that there might possibly be a letter from his mother or sister waiting for him at the post-office.

He accordingly turned back, and went to the office. There was a letter—a letter addressed to him in his mother's handwriting; but the writing seemed strangely

tremulous.

“O Heaven!” he thought; “I hope my mother is not ill.”

He tore open the envelope hastily, and read the letter as he walked towards the railway station. It was the letter which Clara Westford had written after her interview with Gilbert Thornleigh.

No words can tell the horror of the young man as he read that communication.

His father, his beloved father, had been known to start for Wilmingdon Hall on a night in the June of the previous year, and had never been seen since. Twenty thousand pounds had been paid into the hands of Rupert Godwin—of that very Rupert Godwin who had represented Harley Westford as deeply indebted to him, and who had driven the Captain’s wife and children away from the home that had so long been their own.

The people walking that day in the High-street of Hertford must have been startled by the white face of Lionel Westford as he sauntered along, brooding on the contents of his mother’s letter. Could it be that his father had fallen a victim to the murderous hand of Rupert Godwin? Could it have been the blood of his own father which he had traced down the cellar-steps below the northern wing?

By what means was he to fathom the truth?

Should he go on to London, and place the whole case in the hands of the police? Or should he return to Wilmingdon Hall, and endeavour himself to discover whether the visitor whom Rupert Godwin had taken into the northern wing was indeed Harley Westford?

He decided on returning to the Hall. He fancied that he had hit upon a plan by which he might at least settle the question of his father’s identity with the stranger who

had been seen by the housekeeper to enter the northern wing in company with Rupert Godwin.

The sun was setting behind the noble elms and beeches of Wilmingdon Park when Lionel Westford once more walked along the avenue leading to the Hall.

Half-way between the lodge-gates and the house he turned aside into the winding path which he had been directed to take on his first coming to Wilmingdon.

As he proceeded slowly along this shadowy pathway he took a small object from his waistcoat-pocket and looked at it intently. It was a gold locket, attached to a chain of soft golden-brown hair. That soft brown hair had been cut from Clara Westford's head. The chain had been a birthday gift from the mother to her son. The locket contained a carefully painted and faithful likeness of Harley Westford, taken shortly before that luckless midsummer which had been the commencement of so many sorrows.

Lionel had a purpose in choosing this shadowy path through the thick shrubbery. He was going to the fernery, the spot where he had first seen Caleb Wildred.

He knew that the fernery was a favourite retreat with old Caleb, and that the half-witted gardener would often spend whole days there, brooding over his dark fancies, mumbling and muttering to himself.

Lionel was not disappointed. Caleb was there this evening, sitting on a fragment of the rockwork, his elbows on his knees, his chin in the palms of his hands, in the attitude of a person who is thinking very deeply.

He started as Lionel's footfall sounded on some newly-fallen leaves, the first of the fading summer. A moment afterwards he looked up with a half-imbecile smile.

"Ah!" he muttered, "a stranger—a stranger! a young

man who talks to old Caleb sometimes. I'm not afraid or you. No, no. You are kind to me, and I'm not afraid of you. But you won't try to find out the secret, will you? You won't ask me to betray my master? I've lived in this place so long, so long—man and boy, man and boy; and you can't surely ask me to bring a Godwin to the gallows—not to the gallows!—no, no. They used to hang 'em in chains when I was a boy; and I've heard the dry bones rattle and the rusty irons creak on the old coach-road between Hertford and London. You wouldn't ask me to hang one of the Godwin's—one of the old stock!"

Lionel Westford seated himself upon the rockwork beside the old man. He laid his hand gently on Caleb's wrist, and tried to soothe him.

"Come, Mr. Wildred," he said, "let us talk seriously. You have allowed your mind to dwell too much upon this business. I want you to help me; I want you to give me your aid in a very serious matter. Look at this picture, and tell me if you ever saw the face before?"

Lionel Westford opened the locket which contained his father's miniature, and held the picture before the old man.

For a few moments Caleb Wildred stared at it with the blank gaze of imbecility. Then a sudden change came over his face; his eyes dilated, his lips trembled convulsively.

"Great God of Heaven!" he cried, "the secret—the secret! Where did you get that picture?"

"Never mind that," answered Lionel, who could scarcely control his agitation; "look at the face, and tell me if you ever saw it before?"

"If I ever saw it before!" cried the old gardener, in a voice that rose almost to a shriek of agony; "he asks me if

I ever saw that face before! Why, it haunts me by day and by night—it follows me wherever I go! If I look into the deep dark water, I see it looking at me from the bottom, calm and smiling, as it looked that night; if I shut myself up in the darkness, I can see it still, with a light of its own about it. Wherever I go, it follows me, and tortures me, because I keep that wicked secret—that horrid secret of my master's guilt. Take the picture away, young man, unless you want to drive me raving mad. It is the face of the man who was murdered in the northern wing!"

Lionel Westford uttered one long cry of despair, and fell to the ground, with his father's miniature still clasped in his hand.

When consciousness slowly returned, the young man found himself alone, lying face downwards on the grass.

The sky was dark, save for the faint and silvery glimmer of distant stars high in the vault of heaven. It was late, and the dew had fallen. Lionel Westford felt a deadly chill creeping through his bones.

There was a heavy feeling in his brain—a dull drowsiness which was almost stupor; and yet the memory of what had happened still held its place in his mind.

The image of his father, slain by Rupert Godwin's murderous hand, was vividly impressed upon his imagination; he saw it before him, almost as palpable as the giant trunks of oaks and elms looming darkly through the night.

He tried to rise, but found that his limbs were stiff and aching. It was only with a powerful effort that at length he staggered to his feet.

When he looked about him, the scene around seemed to swim before his eyes, the ground to reel beneath his feet.

“O God!” he exclaimed, “am I going to be ill? Is my hand to be rendered powerless at this moment, when I have such need to use it as the avenger of my father’s death?”

Slowly, and with tottering footsteps, Lionel Westford made his way across the lawn, and approached the Hall. He knew that the principal doors leading into the great entrance-hall were never locked until late at night. He would be able to open them, and enter the house unnoticed.

He had changed his mind with regard to his plan of action. He wanted to make the most of the strange chance which had placed him beneath the banker’s roof —he wanted to obtain still further proof of Rupert Godwin’s guilt.

An alarming sense of helplessness was upon him as he approached the mansion—a feeling of stupor and dizziness, which increased with every moment.

He opened the door, and entered the hall. None of the servants happened to be about, and he was able to ascend the staircase and reach his own apartments entirely unnoticed. There were no candles burning on the table of the sitting-room, but in the semi-darkness of the August night he could see that the letter he addressed to Julia had been removed. There was no white spot upon the dark ground of the table-cover.

With weary, heavy steps he tottered into the adjoining room, and flung himself upon the bed. It seemed as if he could not have gone a step farther, even though his life had been at stake. Many-coloured lights flashed before his dazzled eyes, a singing noise sounded in his ears, and little by little the image of his murdered father faded and melted away as Lionel Westford lapsed into a state of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FEVER-STRICKEN.

When the servant who had been in the habit of waiting upon Lionel Westford entered the young man's bedroom late at night, in order to close the shutters of the apartment, he found Lionel lying on the bed in the state of unconsciousness into which he had fallen. The astonishment of the servant was very great. Several hours had passed since he had entered Lionel's sitting-room in order to prepare the table for dinner. He had then found the apartment empty, and the letter addressed to Miss Godwin lying on the table. He had taken that letter to Julia, and had been told by her that Mr. Wilton had left the Hall for an indefinite period, and that his services would therefore be no longer needed in the chintz-rooms at the end of the corridor.

But now he found Lionel Westford lying on the bed, dressed in his walking clothes, and his hair damp and dishevelled.

Lionel's face was turned towards the wall, and it never occurred to the man that he might possibly be ill. Only one idea entered his mind; and that was, that the artist had been drinking somewhere during his absence from the Hall, and had returned intoxicated to fling himself dressed upon his bed.

"If a servant did such a thing, he'd lose his situation," thought the man; "but I suppose your artist chaps can do what they please. Miss Godwin seems to have an

uncommon fancy for this one, but I don't know what she'll say when she hears of his goings-on."

He left Lionel's room, and descended to the lower part of the house. Julia Godwin was seated in the drawing-room; but she was not alone. Mrs. Melville was on guard as usual, with her eternal embroidery-frame before her, the very pattern of primness and propriety.

She had watched Julia narrowly since the coming of Lionel Westford, and she by no means approved that young lady's evident liking for the artist.

The man-servant entered the drawing-room and told the two ladies of Mr. Wilton's return.

Nothing could exceed Mrs. Melville's indignation.

"Returned!" she exclaimed; "returned to the Hall without giving any notice of his return, or offering any explanation of his conduct, after writing a formal letter to Miss Godwin announcing his departure! I really never heard of such impertinence. What can he mean by such conduct?"

Julia said nothing. She had been cruelly wounded by the receipt of Lionel's cold-worded letter telling her of his departure, and she had been very silent throughout the afternoon and evening. She bent over her book so as to keep her face concealed from Mrs. Melville and the servant, and made no remark whatever.

"Julia, my dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Melville, "did you ever hear of such mingled audacity and ingratitude? I am really quite distressed upon your account, as this person is a kind of *protégé* of yours. Are you not surprised, my love, and are you not indignant at such insolence?"

Poor Julia was obliged to look up as she answered these energetic questions.

"There may be some reason for his conduct, perhaps, Mrs. Melville," she said gently. "He may have changed his mind, and may have decided on returning to the Hall. He knew how much I wanted those pictures finished, and he may have been anxious to complete them."

"But, my dearest Julia, to return in such a manner, and to lie down in his clothes, just like some horrid intoxicated member of the working-classes! O, it's really dreadful!"

"That's about it, I think, mum," answered the servant, with an ill-concealed grin. "I fancy as how Mr. Wilton has took a little more than is good for him, and finding hisself queer, he come back here to sleep instead of going up to London by rail."

"Intoxicated!" shrieked Mrs. Melville; "an intoxicated man has dared to enter this house! Go to Mrs. Beckson immediately Thomas, and tell her to go to Mr. Wilton's apartment and order him to leave the Hall without a moment's delay. Not for an instant will I suffer an intoxicated person to pollute this house by his odious presence."

"Stop, Mrs. Melville," said Julia; "we do not know that Mr. Wilton is intoxicated; and I should think from what I have seen of his habits that such a thing is most unlikely. In any case, he must not be turned out of this house to-night. It is just possible that he may be ill. To-morrow morning will be quite soon enough for any investigation that you may wish to make; and unless I am very much mistaken, Mr. Wilton will be able to give a satisfactory explanation of his conduct."

"But, my darling Julia, I cannot really suffer an intoxicated person to—"

"This is my father's house, Mrs. Melville; and on this point I must beg to have my own way."

Mrs. Melville gave a dubious kind of cough. She felt that she was treading on dangerous ground. Julia Godwin was a spoiled child, and the banker might be very apt to resent any offence against his darling.

“Well, my sweetest Julia,” murmured the widow meekly, “if you really wish an intoxicated person to remain in the house—”

“I merely wish to hear Mr. Wilton’s own explanation of his conduct to-morrow morning,” Julia answered quietly. “You can go, Thomas,” she added, turning to the servant, who had lingered to see the result of this little battle between the two ladies.

No more was said that night upon the subject of Lionel’s return, but there was some little restraint between the two ladies all the evening. Julia occupied herself with her book, which she affected to find intensely interesting; but Mrs. Melville could see by the subdued light of the reading-lamp that her face was very pale.

“There is no doubt as to the state of her feelings,” thought the widow; “the silly girl has fallen in love with this handsome young adventurer. I must enlighten Mr. Godwin upon the subject the first time he comes to Wilmingdon.”

Early the next morning the two ladies were seated at breakfast in a prettily-furnished room opening into the garden. Julia was still pale and thoughtful; the widow was still watchful of her charge—fearing that she might be blamed for any foolish attachment formed by the banker’s daughter, and might perhaps forfeit a most profitable and agreeable position. She tried to win Julia to talk in her usual cheerful and animated manner; but the girl was evidently preoccupied, and Mrs. Melville was obliged to abandon the attempt to sustain any

conversation.

They were still seated at the breakfast-table when a knock sounded on the door, which was opened the next moment to give admittance to the portly form of Mrs. Beckson, the housekeeper, who entered, curtseying with profound respect.

"I am sure, ladies, I am very sorry to intrude upon you in the midst of your breakfasts, especially being the bearer of unpleasant news, as one may say, for of course illness is not pleasant, even when relating to a stranger, thank Providence, and not a member of the family, but still a remarkably civil-spoken and genteel young man, who has no doubt seen better days, which is the case with so many of us, only it isn't our place to rebel against the ways of Providence; and I'm sure, Miss Godwin, and you too, Mrs. Melville, ma'am——"

Julia had risen, deathly pale, and trembling violently. She did not even make any attempt to conceal her agitation.

"For pity's sake, tell us what is the matter, Mrs. Beckson!" she exclaimed, interrupting the rapid flow of the housekeeper's speech. "Is Mr. Wil——is any one ill?"

"Yes; it is Mr. Wilton, Miss," answered Mrs. Beckson. "And I think I never, in the whole course of my life, see any one in such a raging fever."

Mrs. Melville turned uneasily towards Julia; she expected that the girl would faint. But there was no weakness in Julia Godwin's nature; she had all a woman's tenderness, but more than a woman's courage and endurance.

She resumed her seat, and betrayed no further emotion, except such anxiety as any woman might reasonably feel for a person residing beneath her father's roof.

“Have you sent for the doctor, Mrs. Beckson?” she asked very quietly.

“O yes, Miss! I sent off immediately. William Jones, one of the stablemen, has ridden off to Hertford as fast as he can gallop; but, go as quick as he may, it must be some time before he can get back with Doctor Granger; and in the meantime I’ve told Thomas to get the poor young man into a nice warm bed, and to bathe his head with vinegar and water.”

“He is very ill, then?” said Julia.

“Awful bad, miss! Since my poor cousin Caleb was took with the brain-fever that night last June twelvemonth, I never see any one half so bad—and this poor young man seems even worse than Caleb. When our Thomas went into the room this morning, he found Mr. Wilton sitting at the open window shivering just as if he’d shake to pieces, and yet in a burning fever all the time. And what’s the strangest part of the whole business, he was raving about murder, and treachery, and stabbing, and such-like, just for all the world like our Caleb.”

“Strange!” murmured Julia.

It was strange. A kind of horror filled the girl’s breast as she thought that this was the second person who had been stricken with sudden illness—with illness which reduced them from sanity to raving madness; and that the minds of both should dwell on the same dark and hideous subjects.

“It is enough to make one superstitious,” she exclaimed, with a shudder; “it is enough to make one believe that there is really some truth in the ghastly stories the servants tell of those empty rooms in the northern wing.”

That morning was a sad one for Julia Godwin. She

wandered from room to room, trying to occupy herself, trying to distract her mind from the one subject upon which it unceasingly brooded, but trying in vain.

She could only think of the artist whom she knew as Lewis Wilton. He was ill—suffering; in danger, perhaps.

For the first time she discovered that this man, whom she had sought to benefit from an impulse of pure womanly compassion, had now become dearer to her than any other creature in the universe, except her father. A blush of shame dyed her face as the truth gradually revealed itself to her.

To love one who had never sought her love—to love a stranger, whose station was in the eyes of the world infinitely beneath her own—a stranger with whom she had become acquainted under such peculiar circumstances! What would the world say, should it ever know that Miss Godwin's charity had ended by her falling in love with the object of her compassion?

Then, after some minutes of bitter and humiliating reflection, Julia's mind wandered back to those long afternoons in which she had wasted hours talking to the artist in the laurel-walk or beneath the solemn darkness of the spreading cedars.

She remembered the low tones of his voice, the noble sentiments which had dropped, as if unconsciously spoken, from his lips.

"The world might despise him because of his poverty," she thought; "but whatever his present position may be, I feel sure that he is a gentleman by birth and education."

There was some comfort in this thought. There is no such torture for the heart of a proud woman as the idea that she has wasted her love upon one who is unworthy of her respect.

“I am not so mean a wretch as to remember his poverty,” thought Julia. “I know that he is noble-minded, generous-hearted, intellectual. What more can be needed to render him worthy of any woman’s affection?”

And then Julia Godwin bent her head with a modest gesture, and a tender smile illumined her countenance, as some good fairy’s voice seemed to whisper gently in her ear, “Ah, Julia, and you know, too, that he loves you.”

Even at such a time as this Julia Godwin could not repress the thrill of happiness that stirred her breast as the conviction that she was beloved by the young artist stole gradually upon her. But in the next moment the thought of his illness sent an icy chill through her heart. He was in danger; he might die.

Men, as young and bright as he, had often been snatched suddenly away in the very morning of life. He might die.

Julia threw down the book which she had been vainly trying to read, and went out through the French window on to the broad gravel walk in front of the house.

Along this walk the doctor must come. Julia paced slowly up and down, waiting for his coming with extreme anxiety. Several times, almost in spite of herself, her eyes wandered upwards to the windows of the room in which she knew Lewis Wilton must be lying.

The Venetian shutters were closed; all was still. Mrs. Melville came out of the breakfast-room, and joined the anxious girl in her promenade up and down the gravel walk.

Her presence tortured Julia, who found herself compelled to reply to all manner of commonplace observations at a time when her mind was distracted by secret anxiety. But the widow was not a person to be

easily shaken off. She talked perpetually, and seemed as if she would not allow Julia to escape from her sight.

At last the doctor's gig drove up to the door of the Hall. Julia hurried forward to receive him.

"My dear Mr. Granger," she said, "I wish you to tell me the exact truth with regard to the patient you are about to visit: for if there is any danger, I must write at once to my father."

Her manner was so calm and collected that the surgeon was quite unable to guess the real state of her feelings.

"My dear young lady, you are perfectly right," he replied; "if there is any danger, it will be better for you to write at once to Mr. Godwin. In any case you shall hear the truth directly I have seen this young man."

He entered the house. Julia remained without, still accompanied by Mrs. Melville. An agony of suspense tortured the proud girl's heart during the interval that elapsed before the doctor returned.

He was not long absent, yet the time seemed intolerably tedious. Every moment Julia fancied she heard the surgeon's step in the hall; every moment she expected him to emerge from the door.

At last he came. He looked very grave, and Julia could see at the first glance that Mrs. Beckson had not exaggerated Lewis Wilton's illness.

"He is very ill?" she said interrogatively.

"Yes, my dear Miss Godwin; I am sorry to say the case is very serious. It seems to be rather a complicated case. There is rheumatic fever, evidently the result of exposure to cold and damp; and there seems to be some very great disorder of the brain, which must have been caused by mental excitement. I cannot imagine what has so upset

the young man's mind; but the delirium is of an aggravated kind. I am afraid the servants must have frightened him with some of their stories about the haunted rooms in the northern wing, for his ravings all seem to relate to some story of a murder in one of the cellars under the deserted rooms."

"That is very strange!" exclaimed Julia. "I should have fancied Mr. Wilton was far too highly educated to be affected by any such foolish stories."

"There is no accounting for this sort of thing. Superstition is not always to be controlled by education."

"And you think there is danger, and that I ought to write to papa?"

"I do indeed, Miss Godwin."

"You will require further medical help, perhaps," said Julia. "Shall I ask papa to bring a physician from London?"

"No, Miss Godwin; I think there is no necessity for that. There is danger; but the case is not beyond the skill of an ordinary practitioner. If there should be any change in the aspect of the fever, I will ask for aid; as it is, care and watchfulness can alone help our patient."

"Who is watching him now?"

"Mrs. Beckson, and the servant, Thomas Morrison. He will need very careful watching; for in those fevers in which the brain is affected there is sometimes danger of the patient doing himself some desperate injury. A man has been known to cut his throat—to jump out of a window. There is always a risk of some terrible catastrophe."

Julia's face grew ashy white to the very lips.

"For shame, Mr. Granger!" cried Mrs. Melville

indignantly; “you have quite unnerved my sweetest Julia.”

“Pray pardon me!” exclaimed the penitent doctor. “I should have remembered that I was talking to a sensitive young lady, and not to a brother surgeon. I hope you will forgive me, Miss Godwin.”

“You have no need of my forgiveness,” Julia answered. “I asked you to tell me the truth, and I am very glad that you have done so. I will write to papa immediately.”

She had quite recovered herself by this time, and was able to speak with perfect composure. The surgeon took his leave, after promising to call again before dusk.

Julia despatched a servant to the station at Hertford, with a message which was to be telegraphed to Mr. Godwin’s London lodgings.

The telegram was duly delivered; and at five o’clock that afternoon Rupert Godwin entered his daughter’s morning-room.

“Well, my dearest girl,” he exclaimed, “what is all this melancholy business? Your artistic protégé seized with brain-fever, and you as much concerned about the matter as if your pet Skye terrier’s valuable life was in danger. What is it, my darling?”

He took his daughter in his arms and embraced her tenderly.

Infamous as this man’s life had been—hard, cruel, and remorseless though his nature was, he was at least sincere in his love for his beautiful daughter. And yet it was a selfish affection, after all—such a love as a Sultan might feel for his favourite slave. She was a part of himself, an element of happiness in his life.

Julia told her father the circumstances of the artist’s

departure from Wilmingdon, and his mysterious return the same evening. She told him all that had happened that day, and the opinion of the Hertford surgeon.

“It is such a strange business altogether, papa,” she said. “Mr. Granger fancies that Mr. Wilton’s mind has been affected by some of the servants’ stories about the northern wing. He has done nothing but rave about a murder committed in one of the cellars. Papa, papa!—what is the matter?”

Julia Godwin had ample cause for this exclamation, for the banker had started from her as suddenly as if a thunderbolt had fallen between him. What bolt from heaven could have been more appalling than the words just uttered by his daughter’s innocent lips?

The father and daughter had been standing together near the open window. The afternoon twilight shone full on Rupert Godwin’s face.

When Julia looked at him, she saw that great beads of perspiration had started to his forehead. His face was livid; a convulsive trembling shook him in every limb.

“Papa!” cried Julia, “for pity’s sake speak to me! What is the matter?”

For some moments Rupert Godwin struggled to speak; but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth.

At last, with a terrible effort he spoke; but even then the words had a strange, confused sound, like those of a man only just recovering from a fit.

“It is nothing,” he said, “only a physical affection. It is a kind of nervous fit that comes upon me suddenly now and then.”

“But, papa, it is very dreadful. You ought to consult a physician.”

“Pshaw, child! I tell you it is nothing!” exclaimed the banker impatiently. “I will go upstairs and see this ailing protégé of yours.”

There was an attempt at carelessness in the tone, but the banker’s face had not lost its livid hue. He hurried from the room, and Julia stood in the doorway looking after him, inexpressibly shocked and terrified by his manner.

“Is it really a haunted house?” she thought; “and does some dark shadow fall upon every one who enters it?”

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN ALARMING DISCOVERY.

Rupert Godwin's livid face was terrible to look upon, as he ascended the broad oak staircase that summer afternoon; but by a most powerful effort of his iron will he contrived to control his countenance and assume a perfectly placid expression by the time he reached the end of the long corridor, out of which Lionel Westford's apartments opened.

He stopped for a few moments outside the door of the bedroom, with his hand upon his breast. He was trying to still the tumultuous throbbings of his heart.

"This man knows my secret," he thought; "but how, how has he made the discovery? *He*—a stranger, utterly uninterested in ferreting out the truth? The fiends of hell must have meddled in the business. The doors were all locked and double-locked in the northern wing; it is impossible, therefore—quite impossible, that he can have penetrated to the cellar where—"

Rupert Godwin did not finish the thought. He shuddered faintly, as if the end of that unspoken sentence were too hideous to be endured, even by his stony nature.

"He cannot know," thought the banker. "It must be some old story, which happens by a strange chance to be like the ghastly truth."

His countenance was quite composed by this time. For many years, for the larger half of this man's lifetime, his

face had been seldom other than a mask, beneath which he concealed his real feelings.

He entered the sick-chamber. Thomas Morrison, the footman, was sitting near the window reading a newspaper; Mrs. Beckson was dozing in a comfortable arm-chair. The sick man was lying on a bed exactly opposite Rupert Godwin, as he entered the room.

Never before had the banker, to his knowledge, seen his daughter's protégé. Yet that white face lying on the pillow seemed strangely familiar to him.

He tried in vain to think when and where he had seen a look which was now recalled to him by the expression of those pallid features.

There was something very ghastly in the young man's appearance, for his head was bound with damp linen cloths, which entirely concealed his hair.

Every now and then that weary head rolled restlessly round upon the pillow, and the pale parched lips muttered some indistinct words.

Mrs. Beckson rose and curtsied respectfully to her employer. She offered him the easy-chair, from which she had risen, and the banker seated himself by the side of the bed.

"Is your patient still delirious?" he asked anxiously.

"O yes, sir; just as bad as ever, as far as that goes; but more quiet like. His raving and going on was quite dreadful a few hours ago, but he's worn himself out at last, poor dear young gentleman, and now he's been lying there for an hour and more, just as you see, rolling his poor head about and muttering to himself."

"What is it that he says in his delirium?" asked the banker.

His face was almost as fixed as a mask carved out of granite while he waited for an answer to his question.

“Always the same thing—always the same thing, sir,” said the housekeeper. “Something about a murder, and blood-stains in the cellars under the northern wing.”

“Have the servants been telling him any foolish ghost-story?”

“O no, sir; that’s next to impossible; for there is no story of a murder, nor anything whatever, connected with the cellars. They do say the northern wing is haunted; but the story they tell is only about the ghost of a young lady who died of a broken heart, on account of her lover being killed in the civil wars; and they do say she walks in the passages of the northern wing every new-year’s eve at twelve o’clock precisely.”

“Humph!” muttered the banker; “there is no accounting for the queer ideas that get into the brain of a delirious man. I suppose this young man has been reading a novel, and has mixed up the story with his knowledge of this house. He’ll have some other fancy to-morrow, I daresay. You can leave him for the present, Mrs. Beckson; and you too, Morrison. I heard the bell ringing for tea in the servants’ hall just as I came upstairs. I’ll keep watch over your invalid.”

“You’re very kind, sir; but I’m afraid you’ll find it dreadfully wearing to hear him going on, always the same thing over and over again.”

Lionel Westford turned his head upon the pillow, and looked full at the banker, with bloodshot and dilated eyes.

“Rupert Godwin!” he said, in low, distinct tones, —“Rupert Godwin—the murderer of—”

He paused for a moment, and then, with a long moan

of anguish, he cried:

“Oh, it is too hideous—too horrible! I cannot believe it!”

“Now, isn’t it dreadful to hear him, sir?” exclaimed the housekeeper. “He’s been going on in that foolish way for the last hour, mixing up your name with his mad fancies.”

“There is nothing strange in that,” answered the banker coolly. “Delirious people always have these absurd fancies. This is not the first case of fever that I have seen.”

“And it isn’t the first that I’ve seen either,” returned Mrs. Beckson. “There was my cousin, Caleb Wildred, who was taken ill last year—last June twelvemonth; just after that strange gentleman came to the Hall; the night that Mr. Danielson was with you, as you may remember, sir. Caleb was just for all the world like this young gentleman; and what’s the strangest part of the business is, that Caleb said exactly the same things. His talk was all about a murder, and a body thrown down the steps of one of the cellars in the northern wing.”

Once more, as in the drawing-room half an hour before, the banker was taken completely off his guard; once again that iron nature was shaken; the big drops of perspiration started to the livid brow; the strong limbs were seized with a sudden trembling.

“Caleb said that?” he gasped. “Caleb Wildred?”

“Yes, sir; he was always telling the same story; his talk was exactly like this gentleman’s talk—the same words, as far as I can remember.”

“Where is he?” cried Rupert Godwin. “Speak, woman! —where is he?”

He rose as if he would have rushed to find the old gardener that very moment; but in the next instant he recovered himself, and sat down again quietly by the side of the sick-bed.

“Bah!” he exclaimed; “I was almost beginning to think that there must be some meaning in these mad ravings, and that some dark deed had really been committed beneath my roof. But it is all nonsense. These two men must have heard the same story—some lying tradition of the past, no doubt. You may go, Mrs. Beckson; I will remain with the invalid for half an hour, while you take your tea.”

The man-servant had already departed. Mrs. Beckson curtsied, and retired; but there was a puzzled expression on her honest countenance. She was surprised and bewildered by the banker’s unusual conduct.

For some time after the housekeeper’s departure Rupert Godwin sat quite motionless, watching the pallid face of the sick man, and listening to those muttered words which were every now and then repeated in the same accents:

“Rupert Godwin—the murderer—blood-stains on the stairs—blood in the cellar—cruel—treacherous!”

Always the same words—the same broken sentences—again and again, again and again.

The bloodshot eyes gazed at vacancy; but there was a fixed look of horror in them, as if the eyeballs had been struck with sudden rigidity while beholding some hideous sight.

At last the banker rose from beside the bed, where he had seemed fixed as if by some unholy spell.

Lionel Westford’s clothes lay on a chair near the bed, and on the dressing-table were scattered a handkerchief,

a bunch of keys, some letters and papers which had been taken from his pockets.

The banker went over to the dressing-table, and examined the different objects lying there.

His hand struck against a hard substance lying under a cambric handkerchief.

He removed the handkerchief, and saw a gold locket attached to a chain of soft auburn hair. He opened the locket, and a frank manly face looked out at him with a confiding smile.

It was the face of the brave, generous-hearted sea-captain, Harley Westford.

It was the face of the man whom Rupert Godwin had stabbed on the threshold of the cellar-steps.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DISCOMFITED.

For some minutes Rupert Godwin stood with the open miniature in his hand, gazing at the face of his victim.

At first a kind of stupor seemed to obscure his senses, and he could only stand motionless, staring blankly at that frank handsome countenance.

His senses were confused by the suddenness of the shock. It was some time before he could reason calmly about what had happened.

How had Harley Westford's miniature come to be lying there? How had the sea-captain's likeness fallen into the possession of Julia Godwin's protégé?

For some little time he stood with the picture still in his hand, wondering at the extraordinary chance which had brought it there. Then he set to work to examine the letters and papers, in the hope that they might give him some clue to the mystery.

The first letter which he took up revealed the entire truth. It had been lying seal upwards, or Rupert Godwin could scarcely have failed to recognize the handwriting.

It was the letter addressed to Lionel at the Post-office, Hertford, under his initials only. It was the letter which Clara Westford had written to her son, telling him of her meeting with Gilbert Thornleigh, and setting him upon the track of his missing father.

Rupert Godwin sank into the nearest chair, that terrible letter clenched tightly in his hand.

“They are on my track,” he muttered in a thick voice, for the muscles of his throat seemed paralyzed by agitation; “they are on my track. How am I to avoid them?”

He looked towards the bed. Never, perhaps, had a darker or more threatening face glowered above a helpless and unconscious invalid.

“Only by wading deeper in crime,” he said, this time with slow deliberate accents; “only by wading deeper.”

He thrust the letter into his breast-pocket, and then sat brooding, with his face hidden in his hands.

When he at last uncovered it, there was a strange look of determination in that ashen face. He walked to the side of the bed, and stood for some moments looking down at the sick man.

“*His* son!” he muttered; “*his* son! That was the likeness which sent a chill through my breast. But it is all a mystery still. How did he discover the secret of the cellar? Did he come here on purpose to find out the truth? No, that can scarcely be; for his mother’s letter is dated only two days back, and when she wrote that letter her suspicions were only just aroused. No matter; I dare not bewilder my brain by trying to solve these questions. I must act; they are on my track, and action alone can save me. Shall I fly? No, not while there is one inch of safe ground to fight for, amidst an ocean of peril. Flight is the first resource of the coward; it is the last hope of the bold criminal. This young man knows my secret, somehow or other. What matters how, since he does know it? He and Caleb Wildred have discovered the truth; but as yet they have not denounced me, except in

the ravings of delirium. Their tongues must be stopped."

The housekeeper returned while Mr. Godwin was absorbed in these meditations.

"You can resume your seat by the side of your patient, Mrs. Beckson," he said; "there has been no change. I shall remain at the Hall until this young man is out of danger; and I shall look into his room now and then, to see how he is going on. You need never be surprised by my coming. I am a light sleeper, and I daresay I shall look in once or twice in the course of the night."

"I'm sure it's very kind of you, sir, to take such an interest in the poor young gentleman."

"I think it's only natural that I should feel an interest in a sick man; common humanity demands as much," answered the banker coolly. "By the bye, you will be watching for a very long time. I hope you are wakeful?"

"O yes, sir, pretty wakeful."

"You take something to keep you awake, I hope?"

"Well, sir, thank you, I've just taken a cup of strong tea, and I may take another in the course of the evening."

"Tea is not the thing. You should try coffee."

"Is coffee better than tea, sir?"

"Infinitely better. I'll send you a strong cup of coffee by-and-by. I always take coffee after dinner."

"To be sure, sir. Well, I will take a cup, if you'll be so very kind as to send it."

The banker went to his room, changed his dress, which was dusty with travelling, and bathed his head and face in cold water.

Then he descended to the dining-room, where he found

Julia waiting for him.

He dined with his daughter and her duenna. Julia was too entirely preoccupied by her own emotion to perceive the silence of her father; it seemed only natural to her that an air of gloom should pervade everything, while the man she loved lay suffering upstairs. But Mrs. Melville remarked the banker's abstracted manner, and wondered at it; she thought that he had perhaps discovered the secret of his daughter's affection for a penniless stranger.

After dinner, the ladies retired to the drawing-room, while Rupert Godwin remained seated at the foot of the long dinner-table.

Here his coffee was brought to him, about twenty minutes after the ladies had left him. The servant placed the salver by his master's side, and immediately quitted the room. The coffee was served in a small antique silver coffee-pot. There was only one cup and saucer, of Sèvres china, on the salver. Rupert Godwin rang the bell, and told the servant to bring a second cup and saucer.

"I want a cup of my own coffee to be taken to Mrs. Beckson," he said. "Strong coffee is the best thing in the world to keep any one awake."

But when the man returned with the cup and saucer, Mr. Godwin said:

"You need not wait. I will take the coffee myself to Mrs. Beckson. I am going to the sick-room."

It seemed strange that so proud a man as Rupert Godwin should trouble himself to take a cup of coffee to his housekeeper, and the man-servant thought as much.

He might, perhaps, have thought Rupert Godwin's conduct stranger still, had he seen him take a small vial from his waistcoat-pocket, and pour about a teaspoonful of a thick dark fluid into one of the coffee-cups.

That little vial was one which the banker had taken from his dressing-case before descending to the dining-room that evening. The dark fluid was opium.

The coffee, made as strong as a Turkish potentate might have taken it, and very much sweetened, almost entirely disguised the bitter flavour of the opium. The banker tasted half a spoonful of the mixture.

“No,” he muttered; “I don’t think Mrs. Beckson will discover anything queer in the taste of that coffee.”

He took the cup and saucer, and carried them to the sick-room.

“There, my good Beckson,” he said, “I don’t think you are very likely to fall asleep after taking this.”

He handed her the coffee. The old woman had been nodding and blinking in her easy-chair when he entered the room, but she opened her eyes and endeavoured to appear very wakeful, as she took the cup of coffee from her master’s hand. Rupert Godwin left her, and returned to the lower part of the house. His private apartment, the room specially sacred to him, was the library. It was there that he kept the keys of the northern wing in a small iron safe, the key of which he carried always in his pocket.

The keys of the doors in the northern wing could only be obtained, therefore, by the breaking open of this small iron safe, of the use of a false key.

But the locks were not of a kind to be easily opened by a false key. It was, indeed, supposed to be quite impossible for any false key to open them.

The banker examined the safe. The keys of the northern wing hung in their usual place; the dust which had accumulated during the last twelvemonth was thick

upon them.

Rupert Godwin was utterly unable to understand Lionel Westford's discovery of his crime.

"How did he find out my ghastly secret?" he thought. "By what devilry did he stumble upon the truth?"

The banker dared not dwell upon this question. His brain, even *his* clear and powerful intellect, seemed to grow dull and confused, as he tried to solve the dark riddle.

He went to the drawing-room, where Mrs. Melville and Julia were seated. The widow was occupied, as usual, with the embroidery-frame. Miss Godwin was sitting with an open book before her—a book whose pages might quite as well have been blank paper.

"Julia," said the banker, "I feel tired after my journey down here, and considerably upset by this vexatious affair of your protégé's illness. I shall go to bed at once, and I should advise you to retire early; for you too have been worried by this affair."

"Yes, papa," answered Julia, without looking up from her book; "I shall go to bed very early."

"Good-night, my love."

"Good-night, dear papa."

Julia rose from her seat, and the banker pressed his lips to her forehead. He wished Mrs. Melville good-night, and then left the room.

In less than ten minutes afterwards Julia flung down her book with a weary sigh.

"I *am* very tired," she said. "Good-night, dear Mrs. Melville."

"Good-night, sweet child. You are pale, my love; this

tiresome business has quite upset you."

Julia was glad to escape from the widow's sympathy. She retired to her own apartments, which were at some distance from the rooms occupied by Lionel Westford.

She dismissed her maid, and exchanged her silk dress for a loose white dressing-gown. In spite of what she had said to Mrs. Melville, she had no inclination for sleep; on the contrary, she felt more than usually wakeful. Every nerve was strung to its utmost tension—all her senses seemed intensified.

She went to the window and flung it open; but even the chilly night air failed to cool her burning brow. The anxiety of the day, the emotions which she had been compelled to repress, had affected her very acutely. Now that she was alone, free to give way to her agitation, she leant her head against the sash of the window, and sobbed convulsively.

"I love him so dearly," she murmured; "and yet I cannot save him from suffering. I dare not even inquire whether he is better or worse."

For a long time Julia stood at the open window, gazing out into the obscurity of the summer night.

Then she seated herself near a pretty little reading-table loaded with new books, and tried to read.

She sat for more than an hour with a volume in her hand. Her eyes travelled along the lines, her hand turned the leaves, but she paid little attention to the contents of the book. Her mind dwelt perpetually upon Lionel's danger. She remembered what the doctor had said about his delirium. If he were not watched, he might do some desperate act; in fevers, such as his, men had been known to commit suicide. No words can express the horror with which this idea inspired her.

In the loneliness and silence of the night this feeling of horror increased every moment.

What if those who watched the sick man should fail in their watchfulness? Mrs. Beckson was an old woman, and so not unlikely to give way to drowsiness. Thomas Morrison might desert his post.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck eleven—half-past eleven—then twelve; and still Julia sat brooding over this one agonizing fear.

The sick man's attendants would neglect him, to the peril of his life.

Hideous images arose before her. She saw Lionel blood-stained, dying, with a ghastly wound across his throat. Every moment she expected to hear a maniac shriek ring through the silent house.

At last the agony of this one thought became almost too intense for endurance. Julia flung aside her book, and began to pace up and down the room.

By this time it was a quarter-past twelve.

"I will not endure this suspense any longer," Julia exclaimed at last. "At any hazard, I *will* know if he is safe. One peep into his room will tell me if Mrs. Beckson is awake. If I only know that he is carefully watched, I can resign myself to the knowledge of his suffering."

She opened the door and looked out into the corridor. All was dark and silent. There could be little doubt that the whole household was sleeping, except the two servants who watched the sick man.

Julia wrapped a dark shawl about her head and shoulders, and then, with light and cautious footsteps, crept along the corridor.

She opened the door of Lionel's apartment. The handle

turned almost noiselessly in her cautious hand. She looked into the room, and one glance told her that her anxious fears had not been groundless.

Mrs. Beckson's head lay back upon the cushions of her easy-chair, and her heavy breathing was that of a person in a profound slumber.

There was no other attendant in the room.

The invalid was asleep. He lay quite motionless, his pale face turned towards the door by which Julia had entered. The voluminous chintz curtains were drawn on the other side of the old-fashioned four-post bedstead.

Julia advanced into the room with the intention of awakening Mrs. Beckson; but just as she was approaching the housekeeper's chair, she was startled by the sound of footsteps in the corridor.

Her first impulse was to hide. She dreaded the discovery of her visit to the sick-chamber, since that discovery must betray an unusual anxiety for Lionel's welfare.

She obeyed that first impulse, for there was no time for reflection. She crept swiftly past the bed round to the other side where she could be most completely concealed by the curtains.

From between a very narrow opening in these curtains she was able to see everything that happened in the room.

The footsteps in the corridor drew nearer. They were those of a man. Presently the door was cautiously opened, and Rupert Godwin entered the room.

Julia was not very much surprised at this late visit of her father to the sick-chamber. What more natural than that he should be anxious about the young man who was

a dweller beneath his roof?

She fancied that he would at once awaken the housekeeper and that he would be very angry with her for having fallen asleep daring the hours of her watch.

But to Julia's surprise the banker made no attempt to arouse Mrs. Beckson. He walked past her with no further notice than one sharp scrutinizing glance, and bent with a thoughtful face over the bed.

From between the curtains Julia watched her father's face. There was something in the expression of that familiar face which chilled her heart, and inspired her with a sudden terror—a terror whose nature she could not define.

Rupert Godwin held a candle in his hand, and the light of it shone full upon his gloomy countenance. Julia stood motionless, almost breathless, gazing at him from her hiding-place behind the curtains. Presently he passed the flame of the candle slowly backwards and forwards before the eyes of the sleeper.

Lionel Westford's eyelids never stirred.

Then the banker turned towards Mrs. Beckson, and watched her intently for some moments.

No words could express Julia's astonishment at her father's conduct; she was paralyzed by that shapeless fear which had taken possession of her mind as she saw him bending over the sick man.

Presently he approached the table, upon which the patient's medicine-bottles had been placed. There were two bottles, one large and half empty, the other smaller and nearly full.

The banker lifted the small bottle and looked at it. Then he removed the cork and smelt the mixture. It was a

saline draught to be taken the first thing in the morning, and it was colourless as water. Rupert Godwin took a tiny vial from his waistcoat-pocket—so tiny, that Julia could only just distinguish what it was, as the banker held it between his finger and thumb. He withdrew the cork with his teeth, for his left hand was occupied with the medicine-bottle.

Then, slowly and deliberately, he poured several drops of some colourless fluid from the tiny vial into the larger bottle containing the draught. He replaced the medicine-bottle in the precise spot from which he had taken it, looked once more at each of the sleepers, and then crept stealthily from the room.

Whatever purpose had brought him thither had been achieved. Could Julia doubt that it was a dark and dreadful one?

She shivered as if stricken by an ague fit, and there was a sickness worse than death at her heart. She loved her father so dearly; could she believe him to be——

What? A midnight poisoner?

His actions pointed to this hideous conclusion. What motive but the deadliest of all motives could have brought him to that room, in the stillness of the night, to tamper with the sick man's medicine?

"It cannot be!" thought the horror-stricken girl. "I must be mad, or dreaming. That which I have seen cannot be real. It cannot be!"

She clasped her hands tightly upon her forehead. She was trying to collect her scattered senses.

"O God, it is too real," she murmured, "too real!"

Her father's face had revealed more than even his actions. There was no evidence that the liquid he had

dropped into the sick man's medicine was poisonous in its nature; but his face had been the face of an assassin.

"O Heaven!" thought Julia; "I have heard of people becoming suddenly mad, and being tempted by some diabolical suggestion to the commission of a deadly crime. Surely it must be thus with my father."

The wretched girl clung to this belief as to one faint ray of hope. It was better to think that her father was a madman, a hapless distraught creature, possessed by the devil, than that he was a deliberate and cold-blooded assassin.

Slowly and stealthily Julia crept from her hiding-place and advanced to the little table upon which the medicine-bottles stood. She looked at the housekeeper, fearing every moment that she might awake; but the old woman slept on in a heavy slumber, induced by the drugged coffee.

Julia took the medicine-bottle in her hand, and looked anxiously round the room.

She was looking for an empty bottle.

Presently she perceived one standing on a corner of the mantelpiece. Into this she poured the contents of the vial which her father had tampered with.

She then filled the vial with pure water from the water-bottle on the wash-hand stand.

The poisoned medicine she carried away with her, departing as noiselessly as she had come, after one last anxious glance at the two sleepers.

Throughout the remainder of that wretched night Julia Godwin sat at her window, staring vacantly out at the starlit heavens.

She saw those stars fade slowly in the chill morning

light; but still she sat motionless, like a creature whom some great horror had changed into stone. Yet in all this long agony her senses did not fail her.

At seven o'clock she went to her dressing-room, after disarranging the coverings of her bed, so that her maid might not discover that she had been up all night. She locked the bottle containing the medicine in a desk in her dressing-room, and then commenced a careful toilette.

At half-past seven her maid came to her, and found her very nearly dressed.

"I was a little earlier than usual this morning, Mitford, but you are just in time to do my hair," Julia said very calmly; "have you heard how Mr. Wilton is going on this morning?"

"Yes, miss. He is pretty much the same, I hear; still delirious, but a good deal quieter. Poor Mrs. Beckson's quite upset, I hear, this morning. She fell asleep, poor old soul, and slept all night, and woke this morning with a dreadful headache, and quite put out to find that she had been asleep so long. However, luckily her patient seemed to have been very quiet, so there was no harm done."

Julia Godwin shuddered as she thought of the harm that *might* have been done during the watcher's slumber, if Providence had not interposed to shield the banker's intended victim.

When the bell rang for breakfast she went down to the dining-room. Surely her father would not be there; or, if he were there, his manner would reveal the frenzy of a distraught brain. But, to her utter bewilderment, she saw him, calm and self-possessed, seated at the head of the breakfast-table, with an open Bible under his hands.

Yes; it was unspeakably horrible. This man, this midnight poisoner, was about to read the Gospel to his

assembled household!

It was a rule with Rupert Godwin to read morning prayers to his family and servants whenever he slept at his country-house. Whatever his life might be in London, in Hertfordshire his habits were those of extreme respectability.

Julia watched him with dilated eyes as he read. Presently he began prayers. The servants knelt; the master also sank upon his knees.

The proud girl's noble spirit revolted against this hideous hypocrisy. She rose from her seat and walked to one of the windows, where she remained looking out at the garden, while her father read the morning prayer, in which he besought the grace of Heaven for that kneeling household, and implored the Divine guidance for all the actions of his life. Even as he read Rupert Godwin perceived the figure of his daughter standing by the open window, and was not a little disturbed by her unusual conduct.

Presently, when the servants had risen from their knees and left the room, Mr. Godwin went to the window where Julia stood.

"Why did you not join in our prayers just now?" he asked, looking at her with concealed terror.

She turned her face towards him. It was deadly pale, and the dark eyes fixed themselves upon the banker's countenance with a strange earnestness.

"I could not kneel and pray this morning," she said in tremulous accents. "I could not ask for Heaven's blessing on this household, or on—you."

She looked at him intently as she pronounced that last word. His face grew livid; but he was able to conquer all other evidences of his agitation.

“Why not, Julia?” he asked coldly.

“O, my unhappy father, cannot you guess the reason?” cried the wretched girl in an outburst of passionate grief.

The banker looked at her with a scowl upon his face.

“Are you mad, Julia?” he exclaimed. “What, in the name of all that is ridiculous, has inspired you with this folly? I have a peculiar aversion to anything in the way of heroics. What is the meaning of these tragic airs?”

“O, father, father!” she cried, suddenly bursting into tears. “Heaven grant that I have wronged you!”

She rushed from the room before Rupert Godwin could question her further. A hundred conflicting feelings tortured her breast, but amidst them all there still lingered one ray of hope.

Her father might be guiltless of the poisoner’s dark intent. She could not believe that the parent she loved so dearly was the worst and vilest of earth’s creatures.

“It is too horrible—too horrible!” she murmured, when she had reached the shelter of her own apartment and flung herself upon the bed, hiding her pale face in her clasped hands. “It is too bitter a blow, too cruel, to be forced to hate the father I have loved so dearly. To hate him! The father I have been so proud of—from whom I have never known anything but love and indulgence. And yet, can I do otherwise than hate him, if he is what he seemed to be last night? A murderer—and the vilest of murderers—the secret assassin, who carries death to the unconscious sleeper!”

She brooded on the scene of last night until her brain grew dizzy with the violent strain that was made upon it. Why should her father attempt the life of Lewis Wilton—the penniless obscure artist? What motive could have induced him to injure this stranger, whom accident only

had thrown across his path? No—an attempt so purposeless could only be the murderous freak of a madman. Or was it not possible that Julia had been mistaken in the import of the scene she had witnessed, and that the liquid added to the medicine was harmless—some experimental remedy which Mr. Godwin chose to administer in secret, rather than encounter the opposition of a medical practitioner, or the prejudices of an ignorant nurse?

No words can depict the agony of this unhappy girl. Noble and pure of heart, she could but detest guilt and treachery. Yet she was devoted to her father; and her breast was tortured by the thought of his peril, should his guilty attempt become known to the world.

"I will ascertain the truth," she thought; "come what may I will discover the nature of the liquid which he mingled with the sleeper's medicine. If it should be something harmless after all, O, what happiness!—what a blessed relief from this unendurable agony of mind! And yet, can I hope it?—can I forget my father's face as he looked at me to-day—so dark, so livid, so like the countenance of a murderer?"

While Julia abandoned herself to her sorrow, the banker paced the breakfast-room, tormented by horrible fears—fears which until lately had been almost strangers in his breast. His daughter's conduct had affected him more acutely than anything that had happened to him for a long time.

Could *she* suspect? No, it was impossible. Elsewhere suspicion might arise, but not *here*—not in her mind. She is as innocent and confiding as a child.

He thought over the events of the previous night, and he could perceive no flaw, no blemish, in his deadly work; all had been planned so carefully, all had been

executed so successfully, and at an hour when Julia must naturally have been asleep in her own room.

It was impossible that she could know anything.

“I understand it all,” thought the banker. “She is in love with this Lionel, and he has revealed his real name to her, and has told her the story of his mother’s wrongs.”

Reassured a little by this thought, Rupert Godwin paced his room with a quick nervous step, listening for the opening of the door. He was waiting for the coming of the person who should announce to him the death of Lionel Westford.

But the door was not opened; no one came. Breakfast remained untouched upon the table, where the richly painted Worcester china, the antique silver dishes, the mellow brown of a ponderous ham, the golden tints of a raised pie decorated in alto relievo by some Benvenuto Cellini of pastrycooks, would have made a study for a painter of still life.

The poor envy the rich sometimes, and it is only natural that the penniless should murmur complainingly against the waste and luxury of a millionaire’s household, and be rather slow to recognize the harmony of a universe in which one man has half-a-dozen country seats, a shooting-box in the Highlands, and a house in Park-lane, while another man’s children look at him with wan haggard faces as he sits moaning with his gaunt elbows on his bony knees—out of work! Yet if the veriest pauper in all England could have looked into that splendid room and watched the dark face of Rupert Godwin, he would have hugged himself in his rags as he contemplated the misery of a bad man surrounded by the luxury of a prince.

No one came to speak the slow solemn words that tell of death; and yet the time had long passed at which

Lionel Westford should have taken his medicine.

Again and again Rupert Godwin had looked at his watch. At last he could endure the suspense no longer. He left the breakfast-room, and went straight to Lionel's apartment.

He expected to behold the face of the dead, still and shadowy in a shrouded chamber. But the chamber was not darkened; the windows had been opened, and the balmy morning air blew into the room. Lionel was lying with his eyes fixed upon the door. He raised himself in the bed as Rupert Godwin entered, and fixed those wild bloodshot eyes upon the banker.

"My father's murderer!" he cried, pointing to the advancing figure. "Don't you see him? Will no one seize him? Will no one hold him for me? My father's murderer, Rupert Godwin!"

Mrs. Beckson was seated by the bedside. She had taken a cup of strong tea, and had recovered in some measure from the effects of the opiate given her by the banker, though her head ached, and she felt a sensation of drowsiness that was very difficult to shake off.

Nothing could exceed Rupert Godwin's bewilderment when he found his intended victim still living, still vigorous, still able to proclaim his guilt.

He looked at the bottles on the table near the bed.

The bottle which he had tampered with was empty.

"Who gave the invalid his medicine?" he asked.

"I did, sir," answered Mrs. Beckson.

"He took it quietly?"

"O yes, sir. Though he does rave and go on so at times, he always takes his medicine quietly enough."

“There was none spilt, then?”

“Not a drop, sir.”

The banker looked at his housekeeper very intently. It was evident that she was speaking the truth.

No suspicion had as yet entered her mind. Here, at least, there was safety.

But how was it, then, that the poison had failed in its effect? It was not a poison likely to fail. Rupert Godwin had laid his plans deliberately, and was not a man to make any mistake in a deadly business like this.

He left the room. He dared not remain longer in that apartment, to be denounced as a murderer.

At present that denunciation was only regarded as the senseless raving of delirium. What if those who watched the invalid should come by-and-by to believe in it—to search, to investigate? It was all one dark labyrinth of horror. Rupert Godwin felt as if a network had been closing round him, slowly but surely—a fatal web, from which escape would ere long be impossible.

“I must remove this man somehow,” he thought, as he went back to his own room. “The poison has failed, and I must try some other means, less deadly, less dangerous, but as certain. I think I know of a plan by which Lionel Westford’s lips may be as surely closed as if he slept the cold slumber of the dead.”

CHAPTER XXXVII.

PUT TO THE TEST.

The doctor from Hertford came at noon to see his patient. As he left the sick-chamber he was met by Julia, who had been watching for him at the door of her own apartment.

She beckoned the surgeon into her pretty sitting-room. A small portable easel was arranged upon the table, with an open colour-box, a palette, and a sheaf of brushes. It seemed as if Julia had been painting.

Amongst the colours and brushes there was a little medicine vial, filled with a colourless liquid, but bearing no label whatever.

“Good morning, Mr. Granger,” said Julia. “How is your patient?”

She was quite calm, although still very pale; and she asked the question in a quiet tone that betrayed no emotion except a natural interest in the invalid.

The surgeon shrugged his shoulders.

“I cannot say that there is much change,” he said, “either for better or worse. It is a very peculiar case, Miss Godwin—a case in which the mind seems more affected than the body. I am about to speak to your father on the subject, and I shall propose calling in further medical aid. I must confess that the case is somewhat beyond me, the mind is so very strangely affected. One rooted idea seems to have taken firm possession of the brain.”

"And that idea is——"

"A very horrible one, Miss Godwin—something about murder and treachery; and unfortunately my patient has taken it into his head to mix your father's name with all his wild talk. There is no accounting for these delirious fancies. Good morning."

"Stay, Mr. Granger," exclaimed Julia. "I want to ask your advice about something."

"And I shall be most happy to give it."

"It is a very trivial subject. When I was in town some weeks ago, I was recommended a wash to mix with my colours for painting. It is a mixture intended to brighten the tints, I believe; but the shopkeeper who recommended it told me that I must be very careful how I use it, as it is of a poisonous nature. I am so foolish as to be almost afraid to use the wash at all after having heard this, and I should be very glad if you would tell me whether it really is poisonous."

Julia Godwin placed the medicine vial in the surgeon's hand. He removed the cork and smelt the liquid.

"Poisonous!" he exclaimed; "I should think it was poisonous indeed! Why, my dear young lady, do you know that there is a considerable admixture of prussic acid in this fine wash of yours? Upon my word, people have no right to sell such stuff, even if it does give brilliancy to the water-colours, which I can scarcely believe."

Julia's pale face grew white to the very lips.

"There is prussic acid in it, then?" she said.

"Most decidedly, my dear Miss Godwin; but there is no occasion for so much alarm. So long as you do not let any of this liquid approach your lips there is no possible

danger."

"And if—if an accident were to happen—if any one were to drink that stuff?"

The surgeon smiled.

"Well, my dear young lady, that imprudent person would not live to drink anything else. But I will take the bottle home and analyze its contents, if you like."

"O, no!" exclaimed Julia, taking the bottle hastily from his hand, "not on any account; there is no occasion."

"I should recommend you to throw the stuff away."

Julia went to one of the windows, and poured the contents of the bottle upon the mould of a box of flowers in her balcony.

"You are satisfied now?" she said, with a smile.

Heaven knows how difficult it was for her to assume that careless manner, that smiling countenance.

"Quite satisfied," answered the surgeon. "Good morning."

He left the room, closing the door after him. In the next moment Julia flung herself on her knees, her hands clasped above her head, her tearless eyes raised piteously to Heaven.

"O God of mercy, have compassion on my misery!" she cried; "for now I know the worst. My father is a villain and a murderer! I understand all now—that delirious raving about murder and treachery; those wild accusations which mystify the watchers in the sick-room: I understand all now. Beneath them there is hidden some fearful story, and it is to seal for ever the lips of his accuser that my father would have committed a murder."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

RIDING TO HER DOOM.

Esther Vanberg's prophecy respecting the weather was fully realized. The sun shone with unusual and most un-English splendour upon that morning on which she had arranged to ride Devilshoof for the first time.

In spite of the pain and terror with which her hardihood inspired him, Esther's devoted adorer presented himself in her drawing-room as the hands of the Sèvres timepiece indicated the appointed moment.

The Duke was pale and anxious-looking. He could not forget Lord Wallace's warning with respect to the thoroughbred hunter. But the Jewess was almost as radiant as the summer sunlight which was shining into her tiny conservatory. She was walking up and down the room in high spirits, singing a gay little Swiss ballad, and slashing the trailing skirt of her riding-habit with a turquoise-handled whip.

She looked superb in her equestrian costume. The closely-fitting habit revealed the outline of her graceful figure. A tiny turban hat, adorned with a peacock's breast of shining green and purple, was perched coquettishly upon her queen-like head. The blue-black hair was coiled in a tight mass of plaits at the back of this regal head, and secured by a small golden comb. Her head-gear might very easily have been in better taste, but it certainly could not have been more becoming, and it was the becoming rather than the correct which the strong-

minded Miss Vanberg affected.

“Esther,” cried the Duke of Harlingford, “you look positively adorable!”

“I am always adorable,” answered the Jewess, gaily, “when I happen to be in a good temper, which perhaps is not very often. But to-day I am bent upon enjoying myself. You must give me a superb luncheon at the Star and Garter, Harlingford. This is the very weather for whitebait and moselle. If I were a person of fortune, I would have iced moselle laid on all over my house, like the water-service, and a cistern of Badminton on the roof. O, how I long for a canter over the greensward of Richmond Park! Devilshoof has been saddled for the last ten minutes. Look at him!—did you ever see a greater beauty?” exclaimed Esther, pointing to the open window.

The young Duke looked out, and in the street below he saw the thoroughbred chestnut in charge of a groom, who seemed to have some little difficulty in keeping the animal quiet.

Certainly, the horse was a superb creature; but as certainly he was an animal that few women would have cared to ride.

“How do you like his looks?” asked the Jewess.

“Not at all,” answered the Duke, gravely.

Then, after a pause, he said earnestly:

“Esther, I have some little claim upon your affection. You know how devotedly I have loved you. You know that I am even ready to break with all my family for your sake—to snap my fingers at the prejudices of the world in which I live, in order that I may make you my wife. You know this, Esther! I do not boast of my love, or make any merit of my devotion; for I am so weak where you are concerned that I cannot help loving you, in spite of my

better reason. I never refused to gratify any whim of yours; and I have not received much kindness in return for my obedience to your fancies. For the first time in my life I ask you a favour. Do not ride that horse."

There was a tender earnestness in the Duke's tone that for a moment almost melted the stubborn heart of Esther Vanberg; but in the next instant she drew herself up proudly, and met her lover's entreating look with a defiant smile.

"My dear Harlingford," she said, "I think I must have the blood of a warrior in my veins, for I have a horror of showing the white feather. I have set my heart upon proving the folly of Lord Bothwell Wallace's warning. Come, Devilshoof is getting impatient."

"Very well, Esther," the young nobleman replied sadly; "I have been refused the first and the last favour that I shall ever ask at your hands."

The Jewess turned to look at him wonderingly.

"You are offended with me, Harlingford?" she said.

"No, Esther; only grieved."

No more was said until the Jewess and her companion were mounted. They rode through the Park to the Kensington-road, crossed Hammersmith-bridge, and went through Barnes. Devilshoof seemed quiet and tractable enough under the light hand of his new mistress; and, after watching the animal intently for some little time, the Duke began to recover his spirits. Perhaps, after all, Bothwell Wallace had been mistaken about the horse.

Esther was in her gayest humour, and at such a time the brilliant Jewess could be marvellously fascinating. She talked a good deal of nonsense, perhaps; but what is more delightful than nonsense from the lips of a beautiful woman who is not quite a fool? The Duke forgot all his

fears, bewitched and delighted by his companion's vivacity.

They rode thus gaily onward to Richmond. During the whole of the journey Devilshoof had behaved splendidly, and Esther was loud in her praises of him.

At the Star and Garter they dismounted, and left their horses to be refreshed under the watchful care of Esther's groom. An obsequious attendant ushered the young nobleman and his lovely companion into one of the pretty little garden rooms, which the ruthless hand of that seven-league-booted giant, Limited Liability, has swept off the face of the earth. The Duke ordered the whitebait and moselle which his idol affected, with such accompanying delicacies as the taste of an accomplished German waiter might suggest.

"Pray let the luncheon be served quickly," Esther exclaimed, as she removed her hat, and threw aside her whip and gloves. "I am longing for that canter in the Park, Harlingford. I suppose you are reconciled to Devilshoof now?"

"Well, darling, I begin to think that Wallace must have exaggerated his vices. But I shall never feel easy while you insist on riding him. However, perhaps when you have sustained your reputation for pluck by a canter or two, you'll let me send the brute down to Leicestershire."

The luncheon was served very speedily. The Duke of Harlingford was well known at the Star and Garter, and swift are the feet and dexterous are the hands which perform the bidding of a ducal guest.

The cook had done his best, the perfume of the moselle was delicious, and the Jewess drank several glasses of the sparkling beverage.

"Here is to the health of my glorious hunter,

Devilshoof!" she said gaily, lifting the glass above her head.

Never had the Duke beheld her so bewitching. He was fascinated by her—intoxicated far more by the splendour of her dark eyes than by the pale ambrosia of Rhineland.

It was nearly four o'clock when Miss Vanberg rose from the table, and adjusted her coquettish little hat before the glass over the mantelpiece. Four o'clock, and a radiant summer afternoon. Richmond Hill was looking its gayest as the Duke and his companion mounted their horses before the portico of the Star and Garter. Carriages were passing to and fro; loungers were strolling on the broad terrace; dinner-eaters were beginning to arrive at the hotel; and in the distance a band was playing a German waltz, whose pensive strain mingled with the shrill happy voices of little children playing under the elms.

"I never felt in higher spirits," cried Esther, as she sprang lightly into the saddle. "Come, Vincent, now for our gallop in the Park!"

As she lifted her habit, and put her little foot into the groom's hand before mounting her horse, the Duke perceived for the first time a slender steel spur glittering at the heel of her patent leather boot. When she had adjusted herself in the saddle he turned to her with an anxious face. "Good heavens, Esther!" he exclaimed, as they rode away from the hotel, "you surely cannot be so mad as to intend using a spur with that horse?"

"And why should I not, you most fidgety man?" asked the Jewess, with a saucy laugh.

"Because, if there is any truth in what Wallace says, the animal has a devil of a temper, and a touch from a spur may send him half mad. For mercy's sake, Esther, be prudent!"

“Bah!” cried the haughty girl, with a contemptuous shrug of her shoulders; “one would think I was some school-girl who had only had half-a-dozen lessons in a riding-school. You forget that I have hunted in Leicestershire, and been in at the death after many a ride across the stiffest country in England. Come, Vincent! Hurrah for the horse that can carry me with the speed of a lightning-flash across hill and dale!”

She flung her arm above her head, waving the tiny riding-whip with a triumphant flourish.

They were in the heart of the Park by this time, on a broad open expanse of greensward, a sunny sky above them, the purple woodlands stretching far around, the birds singing merrily under that cloudless sky.

Devilshoof held his head high, his nostrils dilated as they scented the air sweeping across the broad expanse. He was going at a swinging canter, when Esther, delighting in her companion’s anxiety, suddenly shouted the loud view-halloo of the hunting-field, and planted her spur in the animal’s side. That one touch seemed to act like magic. In the next moment Lord Bothwell Wallace’s opinion of the horse was fully confirmed.

Away flew Devilshoof, scudding across the grassy expanse swift as the wind, uprooting little patches of grass with his flying hoofs as he tore along. At first the Jewess laughed gaily, pleased with the animal’s spirit. She turned round to look at the Duke with a smile upon her face, and waved her whip above her head as a signal to him to follow her.

But all at once this daring and obstinate woman began to be conscious of her folly. Danger lay before her—a danger whose extent she could not estimate.

The grassy expanse sloped suddenly downward; and at the bottom of the slope there was a rugged timber fence,

about eight feet high, dividing the Park from the enclosed lands beyond.

On the other side of this fence the ground sloped abruptly upward, stony, rugged, and steep.

Towards this danger, hidden until now, Devilshoof was flying at the speed of a racehorse.

In vain the Jewess tried to pull him up. The animal had got the bit between his teeth, and held it locked as if in an iron vice.

Esther Vanberg's face grew deadly white, but to the last her dauntless spirit defied danger. She was a first-rate horsewoman, and held herself as firmly in the saddle as if she had been a part of the animal she rode.

But the danger was close upon her now. Devilshoof went madly at the fence, cleared it with his fore-feet, but caught his hind-legs in the topmost rail, and fell crashing down against the rugged slope beyond.

The Duke of Harlingford, riding his hardest to overtake the Jewess, arrived only in time to see the catastrophe. The groom came behind him. Both men were white to the very lips, and breathless with terror. They knew the extent of the danger that had been seen only when too late.

They dismounted on the near side of the fence, tied up their horses, and clambered over the wooden boundary. It was the work of but a few moments; those few moments, however, seemed an eternity of agonized suspense to the Duke of Harlingford.

Between them, the two men contrived to drag the horse away from the motionless form of his rider. The animal's shoulder was broken.

"Take him away!" exclaimed the Duke in hoarse

gasping accents. “Take the cursed brute from my sight, and blow out his brains; he has killed the only woman I ever loved.”

“God grant it mayn’t be quite as bad as that, your grace; let us hope for the best,” said the groom, as he took the bridle and led the horse away.

The young man knelt down on the rugged slope beside the Jewess. Esther Vanberg was lying on her back, with her face looking upward to the afternoon sky. Her beauty was unblemished—no scratch disfigured the pale olive skin. The still face, with its closed eyes and long drooping lashes, looked as calm as the face of a statue.

Presently the eyelids were raised, very slowly, and the glorious dark eyes looked with a strange languid gaze at the face of the Duke.

“Esther!” he exclaimed, with a wild cry of rapture. “You are not dead! O, thank Heaven! thank Heaven!”

The strong man’s face sank upon his clasped hands, and he sobbed aloud. The revulsion of feeling had been even more difficult to bear than the agony that had preceded it.

The Jewess looked at her lover with a languid smile.

“Why, you dear, affectionate goose, who said I was dead? I never saw such a man—to be frightened about a trifle of a spill. That animal has thrown me, I suppose? Well, well, Vincent; you and your friend are right after all, I daresay; and I’ve been fairly punished for my obstinacy. I scarcely knew where I was just now. I fainted, I suppose?”

“Yes, darling; you were unconscious for a few moments. O, Esther, what an age of agony it seemed! I thought you were dead.”

“Dead! Why, I’m not even hurt. I only feel a kind of numbness—just as if I hadn’t any sense in my limbs. The shock, you know, and that kind of thing.”

“My own darling, where can I take you? The nearest lodge must be upwards of a mile from here; but I’ll carry you in my arms, if you feel fit to come.”

“Fit to come? Of course I am! I daresay I shall be able to walk when this numbness goes off. But perhaps you’d better carry me at first.”

The Duke lifted the light burden in his arms. Alas for that slender form! It hung as inertly in his arms as though it had been a corpse. There was no spring, no elasticity; it was a deadweight which the Duke carried.

He called to the groom, who left Devilshoof tied to the fence at some distance, while he came to render service to his mistress.

“Thank God for this escape, your grace!” the man said earnestly.—“We’ve had a rare fright about you, ma’am.”

Esther Vanberg was a liberal mistress, and her servants were attached to her, in spite of her violent temper. The Duke intrusted his beloved burden to the groom, while he himself mounted his horse. Then the groom placed Esther in the young man’s arms, and he seated her in front of him on the saddle, and walked his horse gently away.

“We shall meet a carriage before long, I daresay, my darling,” he said; “and I will get you a more comfortable mode of conveyance.”

The Jewess was very pale. Her large dark eyes were fixed on the face of the Duke with a strangely anxious and inquiring gaze. They looked unnaturally large now, those dark eyes, and all their lustrous brilliancy had faded.

“Do you think I am much hurt, Vincent?” she asked very earnestly. “I don’t suffer any pain; but this numbness in my limbs is so strange. There seems no life in me below my shoulders. What if the life should never come back?”

The Duke looked at her with his face blanched by a new terror. The revulsion of feeling upon finding her alive and conscious had been so great, that Vincent had imagined all serious danger to be past. But now an icy horror crept through his veins.

“I remember a man being thrown from his hunter down in Leicestershire,” said the Jewess, in a low faint voice, watching the Duke’s face anxiously as she spoke. “At first he didn’t seem hurt at all; but he was just like me—he couldn’t move a bit; and when they carried him home, the surgeon found that his back was broken. He died before it was dark that night. O, Vincent, do you think I am going to die?”

“Going to die!” cried the Duke. “What, darling, when I hold you in my arms—your own bright self, with your eyes looking into mine? Why, Esther, this is foolish; my brave girl’s proud spirit has gone all at once!”

“Yes, Vincent, the proud spirit has gone. It will never come back again. I’m afraid it was a wicked spirit, and led me into many evil deeds. I hope I am not dying, Vincent,” she said very slowly; and then added, in a still lower voice, “for I do not think I am fit to die.”

“You shall not die!” cried the Duke, with an almost savage energy. “How can you talk of dying, Esther, when you know that I would give the last drop of my heart’s best blood to save you? I tell you you shall not die. All the greatest surgeons in London shall be summoned. Science can do marvellous things, and it shall save you. I will give them every penny of my fortune, but, I say, they

shall save you! Fear nothing, my own darling. You shall know the power of a devoted love."

He drew her closer to him with his strong right arm, while his left hand held the reins.

At this moment carriage-wheels sounded on the road. The Duke looked round, and saw a plain brougham, drawn by one horse, which was approaching at a smart pace.

"A doctor's brougham, I'll lay my life!" cried the young man. "Nothing could be more providential. Cheer up, Esther darling; if there is a medical man in that carriage, he'll soon laugh your fears out of you."

The Duke drew up his horse, and waited for the advancing vehicle. He made a sign to the coachman as it approached, and the man stopped. Vincent rode up to the carriage-window.

The glass was down; an elderly, gray-haired gentleman, with a cheery, pleasant face, looked out.

"Is there anything the matter?" he asked, looking with quick observant eyes at Esther's pale face, and the slender form leaning so languidly against the Duke's shoulder.

"Yes. This lady has met with an accident, and I have been on the look-out for a carriage in order to beg a lift for her. Are you a medical man, sir?"

"I am."

"Thank God for that! Will you assist me to place the lady in your carriage, and see her conveyed to the Star and Garter?"

"Most certainly."

The doctor was an active little man. He arranged the cushions on the seat of the brougham, and then skipped lightly out of the vehicle, and took Esther Vanberg in his

arms.

“Any bones broken?” he asked, as cheerily as though a few fractured bones were of very little consequence when he was by to set them.

“No, thank Providence!” answered the Duke. “Miss Vanberg only complains of numbness in the limbs—nothing else; she is suffering no pain.”

All at once the doctor’s face changed. Its cheerful expression gave place to a very grave and earnest look.

Esther had been watching the medical man’s countenance very intently.

As she saw the change, a low cry of terror broke from her pale lips.

“I knew that it was so!” she said. “I am going to die!” And then, in low mournful accents, she murmured:

“So unfit to die! so unfit to die!”

The doctor recovered his professional presence of mind in a moment.

“My dear young lady,” he said, “I must not have any foolish alarm of this kind. As yet we do not know that there is danger. The sensation you complain of may be only the effect of the shock—the severe shaking, the——”

“You are deceiving me, doctor!” cried Esther angrily. “But it is no use. Your face told me the truth just now.”

The medical man saw that his thoughts had been read by those anxious eyes.

“I did not quite like that symptom of the numbness,” he said; “that was all. There may be nothing in it. Was it a very bad fall? Don’t talk, my dear young lady; your friend will tell me all about it.”

The doctor had placed himself on a little seat with his back to the horse. Esther was lying opposite to him. The Duke rode by the side of the carriage, as the vehicle drove slowly towards the principal gates of the Park—those gates which Esther Vanberg had entered so joyously less than an hour before.

The Duke of Harlingford related the circumstances of the accident. The medical man listened attentively; but while he listened he kept his eyes fixed on Esther's white face, and his fingers on her pulse. He tried to conceal his anxiety; but the brisk cheerfulness of manner that was common to him had quite forsaken him. He was very grave—very watchful, like a man who feels that danger is at hand.

"Shall we take her to the Star and Garter?" asked the Duke.

"You could not take her to a better place. You will telegraph for some female relations, I suppose—her mother, perhaps?"

"She has no mother. She is an orphan."

"Your sister, I conclude?"

"No," answered the Duke, looking at Esther with inexpressible affection; "she is a lady whom I hope to make my wife."

Esther returned his look, and the tears gathered slowly in her eyes. O, what a noble heart this was, which she had so often trampled upon and spurned in her pride and folly! What a devoted love! What a self-sacrificing affection, which she had trifled with and imposed upon in the haughty recklessness of her stubborn nature! But now that nature seemed melted all at once.

"Heaven have pity upon me!" she thought. "I believe I have been a demon until to-day. And now I seem

transformed into a woman, with womanly feelings—womanly tears! But the change comes too late!—too late, too late!”

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

The medical man felt rather inquisitive as to the name and position of his patient and her companion. The Duke was unattended; but from the appearance of the horse he rode, and from the careless manner in which he spoke of putting up at the Star and Garter, Mr. Granby, the surgeon, concluded that he was at least tolerably well off. But he had no idea of the rank of his patient's companion until the carriage arrived at the Star and Garter, when a bevy of waiters crowded to obey the orders of the fair-haired, elegant-looking young man, whom they addressed as "your grace."

The helpless girl was carried to a suite of spacious rooms on the first floor. She was laid on the sofa, and then the doctor turned round and addressed the Duke.

"I must beg you to leave us, sir," he said. "I require the assistance of some middle-aged woman, who has been used to wait upon an invalid. I daresay there is such a person in the house."

The waiter who had escorted them to the apartments replied that there was a person qualified to attend to the young lady, under Mr. Granby's direction.

"Very good," said the surgeon; "then you will be kind enough to send her to me immediately.—In the mean time, perhaps you will kindly assist me to wheel this sofa into the next room?" he added, to the Duke.

The adjoining apartment was a bedroom, large and airy, like the sitting-room, and overlooking the garden of the hotel. Beyond the garden stretched one of the fairest landscapes in England—the winding river, now crimsoned by the sinking sun; the distant hills and woodlands, purple with the cool shadows of evening.

Esther looked round the room with an expression of alarm.

“Why do you bring me here?” she exclaimed. “I shall not be obliged to sleep at Richmond, shall I? Surely I shall be well enough to go home?”

“Not to-night, my dear young lady; it is growing late, and you require rest,” said the doctor in a soothing tone.

The Jewess looked at him anxiously, but said no more.

The Duke was banished from the bedchamber. Pale, and restless with the slow torture of suspense, he paced up and down the sitting-room, while the doctor remained alone with his patient.

A respectable-looking woman appeared presently, escorted by the waiter. She was one of the head chambermaids, and she had lived in private families, where she had had considerable experience in nursing.

In cases of real need people seem, by general consent, to forget the very meaning of the word “trouble.” The woman came cheerfully to devote herself to the young lady who had fallen from her horse. She was a clean comfortable-looking woman, of about five-and-forty, called Martha Gibbs, the very *beau idéal* of a Martha.

The doctor opened the door, and Mrs. Gibbs went into the bedroom. Then the door was again closed, and the Duke of Harlingford resumed his weary pacing up and down the room.

How long the time seemed! And yet, during all that period of suspense, the young nobleman did not once look out upon the evening landscape, which spread itself like some glorious picture of earth's rarest beauty before the open windows.

His eyes were never lifted from the carpet, as he paced up and down, up and down, straining his ear to catch some sound of voices from the chamber within—sometimes hoping, sometimes despairing, but never praying. Alas! it was so long since this young man had lifted his voice in supplication to his Creator, that now, when he had such need to pray, the words would not come. Prayer seemed a mockery upon his lips. His frivolous, dissipated life; his association with men who scoffed at the very name of religion; all his own faults and follies,—arose before him in this dread hour of anguish, and he felt himself unworthy to ask for Heaven's compassion upon his sorrow. How doubly appalling is the face of death when it confronts the man who is without religion! Who does not remember that woful picture of the dying Dubois, fighting against death till the last, and then sending in hot haste for the Viaticum, with the *special ceremonial for cardinals*?

At length that period of agonizing suspense came to an end. The door of the bedroom was opened, and the medical man appeared.

One eager glance at his face told the Duke that the surgeon had melancholy tidings to impart. He rushed forward, and grasped Mr. Granby's arm.

"The case is much worse than I thought," he exclaimed; "I can see it in your face. Miss Vanberg's injuries are serious?"

"They are very serious."

"She will be a cripple for life?"

The surgeon shook his head sadly.

“O God!” cried the Duke, “then it is even worse than that! She will be paralyzed, perhaps helpless? No matter! She shall find what it is to be truly loved! O, doctor, for pity’s sake speak, and speak plainly—tell me the worst!”

The Duke raised his head, and looked earnestly at the surgeon’s face.

“I understand,” he said; “you can give me no hope. She is——”

He could not finish the sentence. He paused, struggled with the passionate sobs that rent his breast, and then gasped, in a hoarse whisper:

“I shall lose her?”

“On earth, your grace. Let us hope that you may meet her again in heaven.”

The Duke shuddered as he listened to those solemn words. Alas! he knew but too well that the life of the Jewess had not fitted her for a higher and purer sphere than this lower world. Proud and reckless, she had lived a pagan life, neither worshipping in the synagogues of her own people nor at any Christian shrine; and now that the shadow of death hovered near, Vincent, Duke of Harlingford, felt how utterly helpless were his rank and wealth to ward off one pang from the woman he loved.

“My God,” he murmured, “it is too bitter a stroke! And yet it is only a fitting retribution for my useless, frivolous life. But she seemed so little hurt!”

“Ah, my dear sir,” answered the doctor gravely, “those very symptoms which gave you hope filled me with alarm. The absence of pain, the numbness of the limbs—I knew too well what those portended. The spine is fractured.”

“And no science can save her?”

“No. It may give you some satisfaction to call in further aid. I will telegraph immediately, if you please, for the two best men in Saville-row.”

“For Heaven’s sake do so! But before you go give me one word of comfort. You have spoken her doom, but it will not be soon; she will live for some time, surely?”

Again the surgeon shook his head, with the same sad expression on his face.

“I wish to tell you the truth,” he said, “for I know that in these cases the truth is wisest and best. Miss Vanberg’s hours are numbered. If she has relatives whom she would wish to see, they had better be telegraphed for at once.”

“No,” answered the Duke mournfully; “my poor girl stands alone in the world. She has had many admirers, but not one friend, except myself,—a weak and dangerous one; for I yielded to all her caprices, against my own better judgment, and I allowed her to commit the imprudence that is to cost her her life. She has no friends, doctor; but there is one favour you can do me.”

“Your grace has only to command my services.”

“After you have telegraphed for the London surgeons, I shall be truly grateful if you will call upon some clergyman in this town, and request him to come at once to my poor girl. You reside in the neighbourhood, and are, no doubt, on intimate terms with some minister of the Church?”

“Yes,” answered the doctor, “I do know a clergyman in the immediate neighbourhood, one of the best men that ever breathed. I will call on him immediately after sending the telegram, and will bring him here with me.”

“I thank you very much. In the mean while I may see

her, I suppose?" said the Duke, looking with mournful, yearning eyes to the door of the bedroom.

"Yes, you may see her. She is quite conscious, and very calm—though she knows the worst."

The Duke bent his head. He could not speak, but he grasped the doctor's hand with a grateful pressure, and then passed silently into the sick-room.

Esther Vanberg was lying quite motionless, her eyes fixed on the door as the Duke entered. Never before had Vincent seen so much tenderness in those eyes. The shadow of death, so near at hand, seemed to have a very softening influence upon the Jewess.

She pointed silently to an arm-chair by the side of the bed. The Duke seated himself, and took the feeble hand which stretched itself towards him.

The proud woman was quite subdued. She could read the signs of an unspeakable sorrow in the pale face of her lover, and she felt how unworthy she was of such unbounded devotion.

"Dear Vincent," she murmured softly, "you must not grieve for me. You have all your life before you. It is better for your happiness, much better, that I should die. I have been a proud, capricious creature, and I never should have made a good wife. Believe me, dear, it is better as it is. I know that you will grieve just at first; but by-and-by the sorrow will all wear away, and you will only remember me as one of the pale shadows of the past. Then I hope you will marry a woman of your own station, a woman worthy of your love."

"My darling! my own dear love! I would give my dukedom, and the last acre of the Harlingford lands—I would give my very soul—if I could save you!"

"I know your true heart, Vincent; and I can believe all

you say, poor boy! But I know that my death will be ultimately for your happiness. And now, dear, I have done many wicked things in my life. I want to repent of them before I die—to atone for some, if I can. There was one cruel wrong I inflicted upon an innocent girl, prompted by an envious hatred of her good looks—and her success in the theatre. You'll despise me when I tell you how mean and cruel I have been—but I must tell you, Vincent, however hard it is to do it."

In as few words as could tell the story, Esther related the circumstances of the treacherous plot against Violet Westford. The Duke listened with a grave face. He was deeply grieved by the recital of Esther's sin.

"I was very wicked, was I not, Vincent?" she asked, when she had finished her story; "and you will hate me for my wickedness."

"No, Esther: but I hate the man who tempted you—that cold-blooded scoundrel, Rupert Godwin, who, for some wicked purpose of his own, played upon a woman's foolish jealousy, in order to make her the instrument of his treachery."

"Rupert Godwin!" cried the Jewess. "Is Mr. Godwin's name Rupert?"

"It is."

"Strange! strange!"

"Why so, darling?"

"I don't know; but the name is an uncommon one, and it is connected with the history of my childhood. O, Vincent, I have not many hours to live; but before I die I should like to tell you the story of my youth. I think it would make you understand why I have been a proud and extravagant woman—reckless of the feelings of

others, seeking only my own pleasure, heartless, ungrateful. If I live long enough, Vincent, I will tell you that story."

CHAPTER XL.

A FATAL LESSON.

While Esther Vanberg lay very calm and still, with her hand linked in that of the Duke, the door was softly opened, and the surgeon appeared on the threshold of the chamber.

He was not alone. Behind him came the ever-welcome visitor to the death-chamber, the minister of the Gospel. The proud heart may scorn Heaven's gentle laws while life is in its zenith, while the grave seems so far away; but, sooner or later, the dark hour comes, and the only earthly comforter is welcome.

"My friend, Mr. Champneys, has come to see our patient," the surgeon said softly: "shall you and I leave them alone for a little? The nurse will see that Miss Vanberg wants nothing. She understands all that is required."

The Duke rose from his seat by the bedside, and submissively followed the medical man.

They entered the sitting-room, and seated themselves in mournful silence. Candles had been brought, and the curtains drawn. A table had been laid for dinner, but the Duke took nothing but a glass of water.

"Is there no hope?" he asked presently, in heart-broken accents.

"None, upon this earth. I have telegraphed for the most eminent surgeons in England; but I have only done so in

deference to your affectionate anxiety. I regret to say that the case is quite hopeless. Miss Vanberg's life is a question of so many hours. She may possibly survive the night, but even that is doubtful."

No more was said. The two men sat in silence. Vincent Mountford covered his face with his hands. But this time he shed no tears. He was occupied in solemn prayer for the departing soul of the woman he loved.

For upwards of an hour he sat thus. Then the door of the bedroom was opened, and the clergyman emerged.

"I am leaving her in peace," he said. "I never talked with any one more humbly desirous to obtain solace from the true source of all consolation. I shall return in a few hours; my presence may afford some comfort. In the meantime, I wish you good-evening. Do not hesitate to send for me if—if there should be any unlooked-for change, or if the patient should wish to see me."

Mr. Champneys departed as quietly as he had entered; and next minute the door of the sick-room was again opened, and Martha Gibbs appeared on the threshold.

"Miss Vanberg wishes to speak to you, sir," she said, addressing the Duke.

Vincent Mountford hastened to respond to that summons. Once more he seated himself by the bed of the dying girl.

Mrs. Gibbs passed silently into the sitting-room, leaving the lovers alone together.

Even in the brief interval that had passed, the Duke saw a change in the face he loved.

Yes, the pale shadow was hovering nearer. The small hand was feebler; the dark eyes had a more spiritual light —the radiance of a soul fast escaping from its earthly

bondage.

“Vincent,” said the Jewess, “I want to tell you the story of my youth. Ah, no, no!” she exclaimed, answering his look of remonstrance; “it will do me no harm to speak. I should suffer more were I compelled to keep silence. The only excuse for my life lies in the story of my childhood. I must speak of that, Vincent, before I die.”

“Speak, then, darling! Every word of yours is precious to me.”

“Let me begin at the beginning. The first thing I can remember is living in a great city—Paris, as I found out afterwards. I remember beautiful apartments; windows that opened into a garden, in which there was a fountain in a marble basin. I remember a happy, idle life, spent in this fairy mansion, and in those beautiful gardens; shut in from the great city by high walls and sheltering chestnut-trees.

“I remember a face, a lovely woman’s face, darker than my own—dark with the rich olive hue of the South. I remember that foreign-looking face smiling upon me, and I knew that she to whom it belonged was my mother.

“She was my mother. Hushed in her arms I used to sink to sleep in the still summer twilight while she sang to me. O, Vincent, I can almost hear her voice now as I think of her; and the old time comes back—I am a child once more. My mother was not happy. I was only a very little child when I first discovered that secret. She was not happy. Sometimes she would sit, pale and silent, for hours together—with her hands lying listlessly in her lap. Sometimes her tears fell upon my face as I lay in her arms. Children are quick to perceive sorrow. I saw that my mother was unhappy; and, child though I was, I watched her closely.

“Few friends visited us in that splendid abode, and even to me its lonely splendour seemed sad and dreary.

“Now and then—at long intervals, as I thought—a gentleman came; a gentleman whom I was told to call papa. He took me on his knee sometimes, and caressed me; and when he was with us my mother’s manner changed from its dreary quiet, its outbreaks of passionate sorrow.

“When he was with us my mother seemed gay and happy. She would sit on a heap of cushions at his feet, looking up at him with her dark eyes, which had a light like yellow sunshine in them, smiling at him, talking to him, happy and vivacious as some joyous bird.

“Ah, how beautiful I thought her then, in her rich dress, with jewels flashing on her hands and arms!

“But as I grew older, my father’s visits were rarer; my mother’s sorrow became deeper and more settled day by day.

“Then, by-and-by, there was a sudden change in our life. My father came very often, but not alone; he brought with him a young Englishman, an empty-headed fop, as I know now, with a heart of ice. Even then, child as I was, I perceived the man’s shallow nature, and I instinctively detested him.

“But my mother cared very little what guests she welcomed so long as she was blessed with the presence of the man she loved. She smiled her brightest smiles upon my father’s friend, and greeted him with her sweetest words.

“My father came day after day, week after week; but his English friend always came with him. He bought my mother a carriage, and we went to races and fêtes; but the Englishman accompanied us everywhere.

"This may have gone on for some three months, when the end came.

"Ah, Vincent, that end was very terrible! It was the old, old story: passionate devoted love on the one side; on the other, selfishness and cruelty. The Englishman, whose name I forget, came one day to announce that the house which was our only home had changed hands. He was its new master. My mother might still be its mistress. He brought his credentials with him, in the shape of a letter from my father.

"That letter now lies amongst my private papers, Vincent, and I have read it again and again, until its every word seems branded on my brain. That horrible letter has influenced my life; for it taught me to believe all men false and cruel. I accepted their flatteries; I let them squander their fortune on my follies; but I never trusted them; and it is only now, when the world is fading away from me, that I begin to understand there may really exist one good man upon this earth.

"Shall I tell you the contents of that letter, Vincent? It was very brief, for the writer had used little ceremony.

"The man my mother loved had grown tired of her and of her devotion. He had sold her to his wealthy friend! *That* was the gist of the letter. The elegant house, the horses, the carriages, all had been lost at the card-table; and the last stake had been the woman whom he had sworn to love and cherish to the hour of his death!

"Within an hour of the receipt of that letter my mother and I left the luxurious home in which I had been born. She took me to England—to London; and London did indeed seem a dreary city after the bright boulevards and chestnut-trees of Paris. All through one long summer day we wandered in the dismal muddy streets of the most squalid neighbourhood on the Surrey side of the Thames,

and at length, worn out, wearied, and miserable, we took possession of our new home.

“Shall I tell you what it was like, Vincent, that new home,—the first that ever sheltered me in your native country?

“It was a garret, so poorly furnished, so utterly wretched, that a tolerably prosperous crossing-sweeper would have despised it for a habitation when his day’s work was over. The rain pattering against the casement beat in upon us through the gaps in the broken glass; and the chill night wind crept in through a hundred different cracks and crannies.

“‘This is the only lodging we can afford, child,’ my mother cried bitterly, as I stood in the midst of the wretched chamber, staring helplessly about me, utterly bewildered by the change in our position. ‘It is as good a home as either you or I have any right to occupy; for we are friendless outcasts, penniless wretches, who know not where to look for their daily bread.’

“Ah, Vincent, I dare not dwell upon that horrible time; for the shadow of death grows darker round me; and though I feel so little pain, the numbness seems creeping, creeping to my heart, and I know that the end must be very near.

“My mother went out on the day after our arrival, leaving me alone in that most miserable house. She did not return until late at night, and then she told me that she had obtained work which would give us, at the worst, enough to keep us from starvation.

“After this she went out every night, and was sometimes away from me half the day. She never came home till after midnight; and as soon as I was old enough to understand anything of London life, I knew that she was a *figurante* at a minor theatre on the Surrey side of

the Thames.

“By-and-by we moved to a lodging which, although very humble and very poorly furnished, was a palace in comparison with the miserable garret that had first sheltered us.

“So long as my mother lived, I never entered a theatre. She loved me with the same passionate affection which I felt for her; and she could not bear that I should be exposed to the dangers and temptations of a life in which she saw so many fall into a fatal career of extravagance and vice. Her life was a very hard one; and others saw the change in her which I was too inexperienced to perceive. Strangers saw that the hard life was slowly killing her.

“One day she came in from her morning duties at the theatre with the hectic tint in her cheeks heightened, and the fatal brightness of her eyes even more brilliant than usual.

“It was my birthday, she had told me early that morning, and I was fifteen that day.

“She took both my hands, and led me to the window.

“‘Turn your face towards the light, Esther,’ she said. ‘Let me see your eyes, for I am going to tell you something, and I want to see if you are my own true daughter.’

“I looked at her wonderingly; and we stood thus, each looking with fixed and earnest gaze into the other’s eyes.

“‘Esther,’ said my mother, ‘I saw your father in the streets of London to-day. I saw him, and spoke to him; to him—to the man for whom I fled from a happy home in my native country—for whose sake I broke my father’s heart! But the vengeance of Heaven follows such sins as mine surely—too surely; and that vengeance has tracked

me step by step ever since the fatal night upon which I was beguiled by your father's empty promises to leave the shelter of my home, trusting in the honour of a villain. To-day, for the first time after weary years of beggary, I met your father in the street. For your sake, Esther, and for your sake only, I followed and spoke to him. He was very much surprised to see me, and even more disgusted to see me such an altered creature. His face said as much. I told him that his daughter was growing into womanhood; that in all the world she had not one friend to replace the mother on whose face the hand of death had set its stamp. I implored him to have pity upon this friendless child; I promised forgiveness for my own blighted life—for the lies that had lured me from my home—the cool treachery which would have sold me with the goods and chattels lost at a gaming-table. I humiliated myself to the dust, Esther, for your sake—only for your sake!

"'Shall I tell you how that man answered my prayers? He told me to starve, or to rot, where I pleased; but not to obtrude my ghastly face on him. He had given me my chance, he said, and I might have squandered the wealth of a weak-minded fool who would have supported me in the splendour I was so fond of. I had chosen to fling away this chance, and whatever misery had come to me had been brought upon me by my own folly. He was not responsible for that folly, he told me, and he would not give me sixpence to save me from the pangs of starvation.

"'This was what he said to me, Esther; but no words can tell the brutal manner in which he spoke, the cold-blooded insolence of his gaze. He could not have looked more scornfully at the dirt beneath his feet than he looked at me—at me, whose girlish brain was well-nigh turned by his flattery when he stole me from my home.

"'You are indeed changed,' he said. 'I can scarcely

bring myself to believe that the creature I am looking at was once the vaunted beauty of Seville.'

"'I could find no words to speak my indignation. I was choked by the suffocating tears of shame and despair. He turned upon his heel, and left me—left me standing like a statue in the windy street, with the rain driving gustily at me, and the icy cold creeping to my very heart.'

"I burst into a torrent of sobs, and fell on my mother's breast. I tried to comfort her; but there are some sorrows in which any attempt at comfort seems a mockery; and hers was one of them.

"'Esther,' she said, 'I have told you this story as a solemn warning. You must be dull indeed if you cannot understand the bitter moral to be learnt from my life. Crush out from your heart every vestige of womanly affection. You are beautiful, and your beauty will win you lovers. Remember my fate! Remember that their admiration is the false worship of the profligate, who pays homage to the divinity that he is only eager to destroy. Value your charms only for their power to win the love you trample upon and despise. Be proud and pitiless, false and mercenary, as the wretches who pretend to adore you; for only thus will you keep them at your feet. They will be the slaves of a beautiful demon, who laughs at their devotion, and mocks them with false hopes, while she ruins them by her reckless extravagance, her insatiable avarice; but they would grow weary of the love of an angel, when once she has been won by their treacherous pleading. Take everything from them, but give nothing in return—not one true word, not one tender thought. Revenge my fate, Esther, and be warned by the misery you have seen. Remember the anguish of a woman who sacrificed her life to one unhappy passion, and who will die the heart-broken victim of a scoundrel.'

"This, and much more, my mother said to me, not

once, but many times, before she faded slowly from me, leaving me alone in the world.

“Such, Vincent, was the teaching of my early youth; such were the precepts that had been carefully instilled into me when I found myself lonely and destitute, with the world all before me.

“I was not quite sixteen years of age when my mother died. I looked in the glass; but my life had been such a secluded one, that but for my mother’s words I should scarcely have known that I was beautiful.

“At first I was stunned by my calamity, and I sat day after day in my lonely room, in the idle helplessness of complete despair.

“One day the proprietor of the theatre in which my mother had been employed called upon me, and offered to engage me, paying for my services at the same pitiful rate as my mother had received for hers.

“I accepted his offer, since it afforded me the only chance of escaping starvation. I entered the theatre, and in the following year I received the offer of an engagement from the manager of the Circenses, where I have been employed ever since, and where I first met you, Vincent, and won the love which I have done so little to deserve.

“But I think you will understand now why my heart has seemed cold and hard as stone. My mother had taught me to believe that my father was only a sample of the rest of mankind. She had believed herself, and she had taught me to think, that truth, honour, loyalty, generosity, pure and unselfish affection did not exist in the breast of any man living. I had learnt the fatal lesson only too well, and you know what that lesson had made me—a heartless, pitiless creature, eager for my own pleasure alone, at any cost to others; extravagant, reckless, greedy, valuing

those who admired me only for the wealth they lavished on me; proud and insolent, cold and ungrateful. To win you for my husband, to wear the coronet of a duchess, and to push my way into the great world in defiance of all who should oppose me—this was my ambition. But even to win such a prize as this I could not control the passionate temper which had so long been freely indulged; I could not curb the insolent tongue on whose reckless audacity I prided myself.

“Nothing but true and pure love could have exercised such forbearance as you have always shown me. O, forgive me, Vincent; forgive me for my heartless ingratitude! I see things in a softened light now that the shadows are closing round me, and I can understand how good, how noble you have been to me. You would have taken the nameless Jewess to your arms; you would have bestowed the sacred name of wife on the reckless adventuress who squandered your wealth and laughed at your love. Forgive me, Vincent! Remember my early teaching, the wrongs of my broken-hearted mother; remember these, and forgive me!”

“I do, Esther, with all my heart,” answered the Duke in a broken voice. “If you could live, darling; if heaven would spare you, the dismal lesson of the past should be forgotten in the happiness of the future, and you should learn that a man’s love can be as true and pure, as unselfish and devoted, as the affection of the woman who unites her fate to his.”

“Vincent,” said the Jewess, “when I am dead, you will go to my house and examine all my papers. If amongst them you can find any clue to the identity of my father, seek him out, if he still lives, and tell him of his victim’s death, and of the death of that daughter whom he refused to rescue from starvation.”

No more was said upon this subject. Esther gave

Vincent Mountford some few directions respecting the papers which he was to examine.

"And now," she said, "my true and only friend, I have one last favour to ask of you. My jewels and pictures, the furniture of my house, my carriage and horses, are worth a considerable sum. I should like them all to be sold to the best advantage—except such things as you, Vincent, may like to keep for my sake; and let the proceeds of the sale be given to Miss Watson, the girl whom I so cruelly injured in my wicked jealousy. You will do this, will you not, Vincent? It is the only atonement I can make for the treachery which may have caused so much pain. I trust in you, dear and faithful friend! Miss Watson must never know the name of the person by whose bequest she inherits the money; for if she did so, she might refuse to receive it. Let this last act of justice be as little known as the guilty act for which it is a poor reparation. Promise me, Vincent!"

The young man gave a solemn promise; and the dark eyes of the Jewess looked at him with a calmer light, as she lay back upon the pillow from which she was never to rise again.

It was late by this time, and the London surgeons had arrived. The Duke left the room as the medical men entered it.

Once more he paced slowly up and down the sitting-room; and, in spite of all that the Richmond surgeon had said to him, his heart was agitated by a faint thrill of hope.

That hope was soon changed to the calm quiet of despair. After about a quarter of an hour of suspense, the door of the bedchamber was opened, and the medical men came out, grave and silent, and in their solemn faces Vincent Mountford read the death warrant of the woman

he loved.

“There is no hope?” asked the Duke, appealing to the Richmond surgeon.

“None!” that gentleman answered solemnly.

Vincent Mountford sank helplessly down upon the nearest chair. This time he gave way to no passionate outburst of grief: this time he was calm and silent; but he felt that the one bright dream, the fond delusion of his youth, was melting away from him for ever.

The time might come when Esther Vanberg’s beautiful face would smile upon him, faint and shadowy as the face that haunts a sleeper in his dream; but that time would be slow to come; and to-night it seemed to the Duke of Harlingford as if all the joy and brightness of his life had vanished away from him, never to be recalled.

CHAPTER XLI.

SILENCED.

After the discovery of the deadly nature of that draught which Rupert Godwin had attempted to administer to the unconscious invalid, a dull stupor seemed to take possession of Julia's mind.

The horror of her thoughts was too terrible for endurance. The brain almost gave way beneath its burden. The heart which until now had throbbed with love for this guilty father was well-nigh broken by the knowledge of his crime.

"A secret assassin—a midnight poisoner!" thought the miserable girl, as she brooded over the events of the past few days. "Had his crime been of any other nature, had his guilt been the consequence of a moment's violence, the fatal act of sudden rage, I could have pitied and forgiven him. But how can I pity the criminal whose treachery hides itself beneath a smile?"

She paced up and down the room, her hands clasped before her face, maddened by the thoughts which distracted her over-tasked brain.

"And all my life, all my life, I shall have to keep this hideous secret hidden in my breast! Day after day I shall see my father smiling upon people who, were I to reveal what I know, would think the story of that night the wild delusion of a maniac. I can understand now why my brother could never be happy in this house—why there was always a gulf between him and my father, a yawning

gulf of distrust that was almost hatred. My brother's instinct revealed to him that fatal truth, to which my love has blinded me. He saw that my father was unworthy of a son's affection, and he ran away from a home whose atmosphere was hateful to him. He knew what I could not understand. He knew that it was the stifling atmosphere of falsehood and hypocrisy."

All that day Julia remained in her own apartments. Mrs. Melville came to her and entreated to be admitted; but the girl was inflexible, and refused to see anyone.

"I am suffering from a headache," she said, opening the door a little way, in order to speak to the widow, "and all I want is undisturbed quiet. My brain has been over-excited by the anxiety of the past few days. Pray do not ask to see me, dear Mrs. Melville. I shall be infinitely better if you leave me quite alone."

The widow was really alarmed by her charge's conduct. She went straight to Mr. Godwin's study, and informed him of what had passed.

But, to her surprise, she found the banker almost indifferent upon the subject of his daughter's illness. This man, who was known to be so fond and devoted a father, seemed to-day as if he scarcely understood the communication that was made to him respecting his idolized child.

"She is ill, you say?" he muttered impatiently. "Yes, yes; I thought she seemed ill this morning when I saw her. I don't wonder. Her mind seemed affected, I fancied. I begin to fear that the fever from which Mr. Wilton is suffering is contagious. I shall take Julia to Brighton with me to-night."

"I should imagine it would be very wise to do so. The dear girl is far too sensitive to be exposed to the excitement and anxiety of a sick-house," answered the

lady. “I will go at once and make arrangements for the journey. You will require me to accompany you, I conclude, Mr. Godwin?”

“No!” exclaimed the banker, turning upon her almost angrily; “I shall require no one. You were asking me the other day for permission to pay a visit to some friends in town. I give you that permission now, and I will write you a cheque for a half year’s salary in advance, if you wish it. My daughter and I will go alone to Brighton, and this house will be shut up and left in the care of Mrs. Beckson.”

“And Mr. Wilton?” asked Mrs. Melville wonderingly.

“Mr. Wilton’s comfort and safety will be provided for,” answered Rupert Godwin impatiently. “And now, Mrs. Melville, I must wish you good morning. I am very busy.”

The banker had been standing all this time at the door of his study. He closed it now, leaving Mrs. Melville bewildered by the strangeness of his manner.

Her bewilderment would have been even greater, had she seen him standing in the centre of the room, with his hands clasped about his head, staring vacantly at the floor.

“The net is closing round me,” he muttered; “it’s closing round me. The meshes gather about me thicker and thicker—the web grows tighter; and I shall find myself all at once bound hand and foot without hope of escape. My daughter suspects me. How or why she has learnt to do so, I cannot conceive; but she suspects. Another spy, whose lips must be sealed; another creature whose every word I must fear! Surely she would not betray me! No, no; she would not betray the father whom she has loved, unless the hideous secret escaped her in the ravings of delirium. I have to guard against that

danger as well as every other. O, what a life!—what a life! The hand of the avenger is upon me: it pushes me on to wade yet deeper in guilt; but at the end of all what do I see? Security? No; there is no security for the wretch whose secret is once known to any mortal but himself."

Then, after a pause of blank terror and dismay, Rupert Godwin lifted his head with an impetuous and defiant gesture.

"Bah!" he exclaimed; "I am a coward and a fool to-day. What was my intellect given me for, if not to triumph over meaner men? The world is still with me. The dupes and fools still trust the wealthy banker. Who would believe Rupert Godwin is an assassin—a thief—a baffled poisoner? No; I will not despair because that young man has fathomed the secret of his father's murder—I will not despair even though my own daughter suspects my guilt. The odds may be against me; but if the game is to be a desperate one, I will not throw away a single chance."

A servant opened the door of the library. In a moment Rupert Godwin's brow cleared. He was himself again; or rather, he resumed once more that false and smiling semblance which he presented to the world.

"Well?" he demanded. "Are those two gentlemen here?"

"They are, sir," answered the servant, ushering in two gentlemen.

One was Mr. Granger, the doctor from Hertford; the other was a little fat man, with a pale flabby face and sandy hair. There was a cunning expression in his reddish-brown eyes, and a physiognomist would have perceived the signs of a brutal and cruel nature in the low receding forehead, the thick lips and massive jaws.

This pale-faced, sandy-haired man wore the orthodox

costume of a medical practitioner, and exhibited that expanse of spotless cambric which is generally supposed to be the outward indication of that highly-prized grace—respectability. He seated himself opposite Mr. Godwin, while the Hertford surgeon stood near the window.

The sandy-haired man called himself Doctor Wilderson Snaffley, and he was the proprietor of a private lunatic asylum, on which he had bestowed the romantic appellation of "The Retreat." He had published several pamphlets on the efficacy of a paternal indulgence in the treatment of lunatics—pamphlets in which the pages quite bristled with Latin quotations.

"I little thought, when I saw your advertisement in the *Times* some weeks ago, that I should ever be under the necessity of appealing to you for assistance, Dr. Snaffley," said Rupert Godwin; "but I regret to tell you that I do require your services. A young man, who is a kind of protégé of my daughter's, something of an artist, employed out of charity to mount some drawings of my son's, has been seized with a fever, under which his mind seems entirely to have given way. Mr. Granger will tell you that he has been treating this young man for fever only; but the malady appears to have its seat in the mind, or at least mainly there. He has therefore come to the conclusion that this is a case requiring quite another course of treatment—he has come to the conclusion that this unhappy young man is mad."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Godwin," interposed the surgeon; "but I must remind you that the suggestion of madness first came from you."

"Did it?" asked the banker carelessly. "Well, it may be so—my memory is not quite clear upon that point. The first direct suggestion may have come from me. You medical men only deal in hints and innuendos. You are so abominably cautious. Indirectly you suggested the idea of

mental disease; for I have been much too busy to give this unfortunate young man's case any serious consideration."

"Certainly, certainly," said Dr. Snaffley, in a slow ponderous way, which, like his spotless shirt-front, seemed indicative of extreme respectability—a kind of social solidity. "Your duties, sir, are no doubt multifarious. We are aware of the onerous duties of such a position as yours, Mr. Godwin."

"You are very good," replied the banker. "But, however busy I may be, I must see that this young man is properly cared for. It is quite clear to my mind that he is mad. There seems no doubt as to the lamentable fact. Whether there is hereditary madness in this case I know not; for the unhappy young man is a mere waif, without friends or connections, so far as I can understand, and quite penniless. I know nothing of his past history; I only know that my daughter picked him up, almost starving, at a printseller's in Regent-street, where he was offering some drawings for sale, and that he has been employed in this house ever since."

"Very creditable to Miss Godwin's benevolent nature, I am sure," murmured Dr. Snaffley.

"Under ordinary circumstances, this young man would of course be handed over to the proper authorities, to be treated as a pauper lunatic. But I cannot suffer that. My daughter has chosen to undertake a work of benevolence —the rescue of a fellow-creature from destitution and despair. Whatever the cost to myself, I am bound to carry out that work to its furthest limit; so if this young man's mind is indeed gone, as I regret to say I believe it is, I am prepared to place him under your care, Dr. Snaffley, and to offer you whatever remuneration you may think fair and liberal."

The doctor bowed. His cunning brown eyes twinkled with gratification at having secured another inmate for that peaceful and delightful home which he called the Retreat; but he dropped his eyelids, and affected disinterested feeling.

“I am ready to serve you, Mr. Godwin,” he said; “and in serving you it is very pleasant to serve also the cause of humanity. Your noble offer to protect this friendless young man is indeed worthy of a Christian. Let me see him. My friend here, Mr. Granger, is prepared to give a certificate, I believe.”

“Yes,” answered the surgeon, shaking his head mournfully; “I am really very sorry, but I am afraid there is no doubt about the case—the young man is mad. That rooted delusion, that morbid idea about an imaginary murder, can only result from madness. The fever has been got under, but the hallucination still remains. There are all the symptoms of insanity.”

Rupert Godwin sighed heavily.

“It is very sad,” he said. “My poor Julia will feel it deeply, for she had such a high opinion of the unfortunate young man’s talents. I trust that you will bring the calmest deliberation to bear upon this case, gentlemen, and that you will decide nothing hastily.”

The banker rang a bell, and ordered a servant to conduct the two medical men to the invalid’s apartment.

The two men left him—one impressed with the generosity of his employer, the other delighted at the promise of profit.

Dr. Wilderson Snaffley was an unprincipled adventurer, who was a disgrace to the science which he made subservient to his own schemes. He was a man who throughout his life had enriched himself by preying upon

the weakness, or trading upon the wickedness of his fellow-men. The Retreat was a kind of tomb, in which guilty secrets could be very easily hidden; and some of the mysteries buried within those dismal walls were terrible ones.

Dr. Snaffley was the last man to be deceived by hypocrisy, for he was himself an accomplished hypocrite. He penetrated the pretence of generosity beneath which Rupert Godwin sought to conceal his real purpose, and he perceived that there was some mysterious reason for the banker's benevolence towards a stranger.

"I understand," he thought, as he followed the servant upstairs. "I have only to keep quiet, and I may make this business very profitable. One thing is perfectly clear: Mr. Godwin wants to get rid of his young friend."

Dr. Snaffley entered the room, while his fellow-practitioner waited in an adjoining apartment.

Lionel Westford was lying in an uneasy slumber; but he was awakened by the entrance of the doctor, and opened his eyes in a wild, wondering stare.

The proprietor of the Retreat seated himself in an easy-chair by the bed, and laid his hand softly on the wrist of the invalid.

Lionel looked at him, and then turned away, murmuring some low incoherent words. The doctor bent over him, listening intently; but the young man's mind had gone back to the scenes of his early youth. He fancied himself a student once more, amidst light-hearted companions—now at a boat-race, now at a wine-party. His feeble voice had a strangely melancholy sound as it strove to shape itself into a jovial shout or a cry of triumph.

"Brazenose wins!" he cried; "ten to one upon

Brazenose! Bravo! Brazenose!"

The doctor knew that his patient was acting over again the scenes of a University career.

"Ha, ha!" thought he; "this nameless, friendless, penniless young man has been educated at one of the Universities. That looks rather strange, Mr. Godwin. We shall find out something more by-and-by."

He kept his place by the bedside, listening intently to Lionel's half-broken words.

Presently the young man started up from his pillow, erect as a dart.

"Murdered!" he cried. "My poor father—my brave, noble-hearted father, murdered by the hand of a villain, in the cellars below the northern wing!"

Dr. Wilderson Snaffley's flabby face was always pale, but it grew livid as he listened to these words.

"The cellars below the northern wing," he muttered; "why, the man is talking of this house! I knew that there was a mystery. Murder! That's a big word. So, Mr. Godwin, you seem to want my services very badly. People do not send their friends to the Retreat for nothing. A private madhouse is rather expensive—an expensive luxury; but when people want to get rid of a troublesome acquaintance, they don't mind coming down handsomely."

Again the doctor bent over the patient, and listened breathlessly. The young man had fallen back upon his pillow, and lay prostrate and exhausted. For some time the silence was only broken by incoherent murmurs; and then Lionel spoke once more of the northern wing, the cellar-stairs, the foul deed that had been done in that accursed spot—all in broken sentences; but the doctor had been accustomed to listen to the ravings of a maniac,

and he knew how to put those broken phrases together.

“My father’s blood!” exclaimed Lionel, in a hoarse whisper. “Yes, father, I saw the traces of that blood spilt by a murderer’s hand. But the crime shall not go unpunished. Yes; your son shall track that guilty wretch to the gallows. Rupert Godwin—Rupert—*her* father!”

It was such broken sentences as these which Dr. Wilderson Snaffley heard as he bent over the prostrate form of the invalid. He saw that Lionel Westford was suffering from brain-fever, and that his mind was distracted by the memory of some deed, the discovery of which had been the chief cause of his illness.

The proprietor of the Retreat was able to discover what the simple Hertford surgeon had been utterly unable to understand; for to him the idea of any guilty deed done by Rupert Godwin seemed so utterly preposterous, that he attributed Lionel’s persistent accusations to the ravings of insanity.

Dr. Wilderson Snaffley had made a fortune by the crimes of other men; and he was only familiar with the darkest and most hideous side of human nature. He was ready to believe anything. Cunning, false, designing, he knew how to turn guilty secrets to his own advantage without betraying his knowledge of them.

He went downstairs presently, leaving his fellow-practitioner to enter the sick-chamber alone, and form his unbiassed opinion as to the condition of the patient.

Dr. Snaffley found Rupert Godwin in his study. By no look or gesture did the banker betray impatience or uneasiness; and yet the doctor knew very well that he was both impatient and uneasy.

“Well, doctor,” he said, “is there any hope for this poor young man?”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and pursed his lips.

“It is a very difficult case,” he said; “a most critical case. I never met one at all resembling it. I can only see one chance of cure, and that is very hazardous.”

“What is the nature of this one chance?”

“I will tell you. This young man appears to be possessed with a monomania—a single delusion. Once dispel that, and you may restore the brain to its balance. Our patient has formed some idea about the cellars below the northern wing of this house. Your servants have told him some ghastly legend, I suppose, and he has dwelt so long upon its details, that his imagination has become completely distempered by queer fancies. Now, what I think is this: Why not attempt to cure him by proving to him the absurdity of his delusion? He fancies that a murder has been committed in one of the rooms, or in one of the cellars, belonging to the northern wing. Have a public investigation of those rooms and cellars. Call in the assistance of the police, and let them search for traces of this imaginary murder. If there has been any foul deed done there, the secret of it will be brought to light, and that would, of course, be a satisfaction to you, as owner of this house. If not—if this horrible story is only the invention of a distempered brain, there is every chance that, when the young man has witnessed a practical investigation, he will see how foolish his fancies have been, and the balance of the mind will be restored.”

Throughout this speech Wilderson Snaffley had kept his eyes fixed upon the banker’s face. When he had finished speaking, Rupert Godwin shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

“My dear Doctor Snaffley,” he said, “I begin to think that madhouse physicians do indeed catch a little of their patients’ disease. Can you for a moment imagine that any

revelation of the groundlessness of this unhappy young man's fancies will dispel them, and restore him to reason? What arguments can ever induce the ghost-seer to disbelieve in his phantom? No; he believes to the end, and perhaps dies a victim to the visitations of a shadow which he conjures out of his own brain."

"Then you will not attempt my plan? You will not cause any investigation of the grounds for this man's story?"

"There are no grounds. No, Doctor Snaffley. Cure your patient if you can; but you must devise some better means than this before you will cure him."

"Be it so, then," answered the proprietor of the Retreat, still watching the face of the banker with a fixed and searching gaze. "Be it so. I am prepared to certify to this young man's insanity; and I am willing to take him under my charge, and to keep him in my establishment, pledging myself to ensure his safe keeping. I am willing to do this; but I shall expect a liberal compensation for my trouble."

"Name your terms."

"Five hundred a year."

"Humph!" muttered the banker. "Are not those absurdly extravagant terms, taking into consideration the position of the patient?"

"No, Mr. Godwin; the terms are not by any means extravagant, taking into consideration the *nature of the case*," answered Doctor Wilderson Snaffley.

The two men looked at each other. It was only for a moment that their eyes met; but Rupert Godwin knew that his secret was divined by the doctor.

"Agreed," said the banker; "I accept your terms."

At ten o’clock that night Lionel Westford was removed from Wilmingdon Hall to the Retreat, which was situated in a very lonely part of the county, some ten miles from the banker’s mansion. He was taken away in a close carriage, lying upon a mattress. An opiate prepared by Dr. Snaffley had been administered to him; and he slept too soundly to give any trouble to those who conveyed him to his new home.

CHAPTER XLII.

GIRT WITH FIRE.

Rupert Godwin did not quit Wilmingdon Hall quite so soon as he had told Mrs. Melville he intended to leave it; but he contrived that the widow should take her departure some time before the removal of Lionel Westford by Doctor Snaffley and his myrmidons.

In the solitude of her own apartments, Julia Godwin heard nothing of what was passing in her father's house. She lay upon a sofa in her own room, not sleeping, but oppressed by a kind of stupor. She felt as though she would have been glad to die, that in the repose of death she might no longer be haunted by the memory of her father's guilt.

Mrs. Melville had tried to gain admission to Julia's room, but found the door locked. The unhappy girl feigned to be asleep, and made no reply to the widow's anxious entreaties for admittance.

The banker had behaved very liberally to his daughter's companion; but, accomplished hypocrite as he was, Mrs. Melville could not help suspecting that he must have some reason for wishing her to leave his house so suddenly.

The widow thought there was something wrong, but imagined that the banker was harassed by some commercial difficulty—perhaps threatened by ruin; and she considered herself fortunate in securing an advance of six months upon her very handsome salary, when

other people might lose by a bankruptcy.

She left the Hall, therefore, in excellent spirits, after bidding adieu to Mr. Godwin, who promised to communicate with her as soon as he and his daughter were settled at Brighton.

At eleven o'clock that night all was quiet in Wilmingdon Hall, and the banker strode up and down the dining-room, after dismissing the servant who had attended upon him.

The habits of the household were early. At ten o'clock all except the servant who waited on Mr. Godwin had retired to their several apartments. By eleven all was still as the grave; and, pacing to and fro the large empty room, Rupert Godwin was able to contemplate his position with something like calmness.

"*He* is safe," the banker muttered, "and will remain so, while I can pay that man, who has fathomed my secret and means to profit by it. So long as I can satisfy his exorbitant claim, all will be secure in that quarter. How much simpler would have been the effect of that draught, had not some devilry interfered to prevent its being administered! Nothing could have been more natural than that young man's death; and a decent funeral would have won for me the reputation of a kind and liberal patron. However, at the worst, he is safe. The next thing from which I have cause for fear is my daughter's suspicions. She knows something; but how much does she know? That is the point. Was hers the hand which interposed so mysteriously between that draught and the lips for which it was intended? Was it she who baffled my plans, and put my neck in danger of the gallows? And will she consider it her duty to betray her father? These are fearful questions; but, come what may, I must know the worst. I will face this girl, hear what she has to say, and learn how far she dare accuse me."

The banker took one of the candlesticks from the dining-room table, and went upstairs to his daughter's room.

He knocked, and waited, listening for some moments; but there was no answer.

He knocked again, with the same result.

Then he spoke:

"Julia," he said, in a low but resolute tone, "it is I—your father. I beg you to admit me immediately."

He heard his daughter's footsteps slowly approaching the door, and then a low voice answered, in broken accents:

"Pray pardon me, papa. I cannot see you to-night. I am distracted with an excruciating headache, and really cannot see anyone."

"I cannot accept that excuse, Julia; I must see you, and immediately. I command you to admit me. I insist upon knowing your reasons for this most extraordinary conduct."

"Father, for pity's sake—" cried the miserable girl, in an imploring voice that was broken by hysterical sobs.

"If you do not unlock your door immediately, I will burst it open," rejoined the banker resolutely.

He had the desperate resolution of a man who feels that despair is close upon him, that death and danger are tracking his footsteps, and that only indomitable courage can save him from the fate he has merited.

The key turned in the lock. The banker opened the door, and entered his daughter's apartment.

He shuddered, as he stood in presence of the girl, whose glorious beauty had been wont to shine upon him

radiant with youth and happiness. To-night, he beheld the pale face of a woman whose heart has been racked with the anguish of despair.

That colourless face looked soddened with tears. The dark luxuriant hair hung loosely about Julia Godwin's shoulders; her hands were locked together, her white lips trembled convulsively, as she averted her gaze from the father whom she had once loved so dearly, but whose presence now inspired her with horror.

"Julia," said the banker, "I want to know the meaning of your conduct to-day. Why have you secluded yourself in this unusual manner, so obstinately refusing to admit anyone to your room?"

"I have been very ill."

"In that case you must see the doctor. I will send one of the servants for Mr. Granger immediately."

"There is no occasion. My illness is not one that can be cured by Mr. Granger. It is an illness of the mind, rather than of the body."

"Julia!" cried the banker sternly, "are you going mad? There was something in your manner when you spoke this morning that was unlike the conduct of a rational being. What is amiss with you?"

His daughter was silent. For a few moments she stood quite motionless, with her hands clasped, and her eyes fixed upon her father's face with a heart-rending expression.

"Father," she said, after that brief silence, "I had a dream last night—a dream so horrible, that it has oppressed me throughout the day, and I cannot shake it off. It clings to me still. It will haunt me till I find forgetfulness in the grave. Shall I tell you that hideous dream?"

"Yes, if telling it will give you relief."

"Nothing can give me relief. There is nothing but misery for me henceforward upon this earth. But I will tell you my dream. I dreamt last night that the sick man lying in this house was menaced by some terrible danger. I did not know the nature of the peril; but I knew that it was deadly peril, and close at hand. I thought that—guided always by some subtle instinct that was stronger than reason—I left my room in the dead of the night, resolved to watch over the helpless invalid, to save him if possible from the danger that threatened him. I did leave my room, and crept along the corridor with stealthy footsteps. I went into Mr. Wilton's room, and found that the old woman who was set to watch him had fallen asleep at her post. That was the first part of the danger."

"Humph!" muttered the banker, "a commonplace dream enough, and a very natural one. You have troubled yourself a good deal more than was necessary or becoming about this protégé of yours."

"That is only the beginning of my dream, father," answered Julia, "you will find the end of it neither commonplace nor natural. I had not been in the sick-room many moments, when I was startled by the sound of stealthy footsteps in the corridor outside. The same instinct that had prompted me to seek the sick man's apartment prompted me now to hide—or it might be only a feeling of embarrassment at my strange position. I had no time for reflection; so, obeying the impulse of the moment, I concealed myself behind the curtains of the bed. From that hiding-place I saw a man enter the room. I saw the hand of a murderer mix poison with the medicine which was to be administered to the sleeper. I saw the assassin's face; yes, father, as plainly as I see yours at this moment. O, Heaven! have pity upon me; when shall I forget the horror of that time?"

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Rupert Godwin; "distempered dreams like these arise from a disordered brain. Beware how you indulge in them, Julia. They are the forerunners of madness. Such youth and beauty as yours would be sadly wasted in the padded room of a private lunatic asylum. Take my advice, Julia, and do not give way to the influence of evil dreams, lest such a fate should be yours."

This advice sounded like a threat. But Julia Godwin did not quail beneath her father's stern gaze or threatening tone.

"It would be better to be really mad than to suffer as I do," she said.

"Why should this dream affect you? It is as absurd and inconsequential as dreams usually are. What motive should anyone have for murdering your protégé? Besides, how did you know that the liquid mixed with the draught was poison?"

"Because—in my dream—I caused the draught to be analyzed—or, at least, I consulted a surgeon as to its nature, and he told me that it contained prussic acid."

"A very strange dream. Come, Julia, let me hear no more of this folly. I shall remove you from here to-morrow, and shall take you with me to Brighton. If I do not speedily find you recovered from these morbid fancies, I shall conclude that your mind is seriously affected, and I shall place you under the charge of a medical man accustomed to deal with mental disorder."

"You would do that, father?" asked Julia; "you would declare me to be mad, and give me over to the care of a stranger?"

"Yes, I would do so without a moment's hesitation," answered the banker resolutely, "if I saw reason for such

a course. Once for all, I tell you, I will endure no folly of the kind which you have practised to-day. I know how to act when I am assailed by the morbid fancies of madness; and to prove my power to protect myself from the folly of others, I will tell you of something that has happened to-day—something that is *not* a dream. But, first, come with me."

Rupert Godwin led the way to the apartment which had lately been occupied by Lionel Westford.

"You see, Julia," he said, pointing to the bed upon which the young man had so lately been lying, "this person, in whom you take so much interest that you must needs dream horrible dreams about him, has disappeared: you will never see him again."

"Great Heaven!" cried Julia, "he is dead! And you—*you* dare tell me this!"

"He is not dead; but he is as completely lost to the living as if he were buried in the deepest grave that was ever dug for mortal man. He was like you, Julia; and he had foolish fancies. He was tormented by some absurd idea about a murder—a foul deed which had no existence save in his own distempered imagination, but which, little by little, had shaped itself into a reality. Poor fellow! he could not abandon his dream, and the end of it is, that two qualified practitioners have pronounced him a confirmed maniac, and to-night he will sleep in that living tomb—a private lunatic asylum. And now, Julia, you can return to your room; I think we shall understand each other in future; and you will trouble me no more by the relation of ghastly dreams, that are as meaningless as they are unpleasant."

Once more the eyes of the father and daughter met—the girl's expression sorrowful, despairing; the man's gaze proudly defiant, with the defiance of a fiend.

Julia did not utter another word. She turned from her father, and left the room with a slow step and a drooping head. It seemed to her as if the end of the world had come. She felt that she could not endure life now that her father had revealed himself to her in his true character.

And the man she loved, what of him?

“Heaven give me power to think calmly!” she murmured on her knees in her own room. “Let me plan some means for watching over him. An impulse, inspired by Providence, enabled me to save him from an untimely death. May the same Providence watch over him now in his helplessness, and enable me to rescue him from a life that can be little better than death!”

Early next morning the banker went to his daughter’s room to order her immediate preparation for departure from Wilmingdon Hall. He intended to take her to London by an early train, and thence to Brighton.

He found her rooms empty. Julia Godwin had fled from the home which had sheltered her from her girlhood.

This was the last blow that fell upon him before he left Hertfordshire, and the stroke was a crushing one.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE CLERK'S STORY.

While Gilbert Thornleigh was employed in putting the case of Harley Westford's disappearance into the hands of the police, Clara sat in her shabby lodging, brooding over the troubles which environed her, until it seemed as if there was not one ray of sunshine to illumine the darkness of her fate.

The mysterious disappearance of her daughter—her beloved Violet—was almost more horrible to contemplate than the dark fate of her brave and true-hearted husband.

Harley Westford might have died the victim of treachery—he might have perished by the pitiless hand of the assassin; but the fate of Violet might be something worse than death.

Shame—disgrace—degradation! These were the dangers which the mother dreaded for the daughter she loved. And she was quite helpless. She knew not what step to take—how to attempt a rescue of the lost girl. Sorrows had crowded upon her with a bewildering rapidity, and the sufferer succumbed beneath the force of a burden which hourly grew heavier and harder to bear. The revelation made by Gilbert Thornleigh had been the last overwhelming blow; and Clara Westford sat in a listless attitude, helpless, nerveless, apathetic, like a creature who had outlived all sense of sorrow. "Who am I? and where am I?" she asked herself; "are these troubles real, or are they part of some long feverish dream?"

There comes a stage in human sorrow when the sufferer seems to lose all hold upon reality. The victim cannot understand why the chastisement should be so heavy, the cup of anguish so bitter and so deep. The brain refuses to grapple with the horrible realities that crowd upon it. There is a merciful pause in life's fever, a dull apathy, which may perhaps be designed to save the anguish-stricken sufferer from madness.

For Clara Westford this pause, this apathy, did not last long.

One joy, at least, was in store for the woman upon whom so many sorrows had come with crushing force during the last twelve months—one joy, so wild and deep in its intensity, that the overwrought brain could scarcely sustain the sudden shock of so much joy.

While Clara Westford sat by her bedside, with her head lying wearily upon the pillow, her tearless eyes fixed on the dingy ceiling above her with a blank unseeing stare, carriage-wheels sounded in the street below, and a vehicle drew up close at hand.

The bedchamber opened out of the sitting-room, and the door of communication between them was open. Clara rushed to the window, and looked down into the street. Her heart throbbed tumultuously. She was in that over-excited state in which every incident alarms the mind.

A very handsome close carriage, simple in its appointments, but drawn by a superb pair of horses, was standing before the door of the house. A bright face appeared at the window of the carriage—a lovely face, framed in clustering golden hair; a face which seemed like that of an angel to Clara Westford, for it was the face of her daughter.

A servant opened the door of the carriage, and Violet alighted. She rushed into the house, and her mother heard the light familiar footstep hurrying up the stairs.

She burst into a torrent of tears, the first she had shed since her daughter's disappearance, and in the next moment Violet was clasped in her mother's arms.

Clara Westford saw that this was no heart-broken, dishonoured girl, who returned thus, radiant and smiling, to bury her beautiful face on her mother's breast, and to cry amidst her passionate sobs:

"Dear mother, I have come back to you! I have been rescued by a kind and noble friend; and we shall be happy together once more."

As she spoke the door was opened, and an elderly lady entered—a lady with a pale gentle face that had once been beautiful, and smoothly banded silver hair. This lady was the Dowager Marchioness of Roxleydale.

"I have brought you back your daughter, Mrs. Westford," said the Marchioness; "and I feel that I deserve your thanks, for the treasure I restore to you is a priceless one. If I have learnt to love this dear girl in a few hours, how tenderly must you love her who have known her for a lifetime!"

The mother's heart was full to overflowing. She uttered no word relating to Gilbert Thornleigh's return, or to the ghastly mystery involved in Captain Westford's disappearance. Her child was restored to her, and she taught herself to smile, while her heart was still racked by anxiety, that no cloud should overshadow the joy of Violet's return.

The Marchioness did not remain long with the mother and daughter.

"I will not intrude upon your happiness," she said; "but

I shall hope not to lose sight of this sweet girl, whom my son's wicked folly, instigated, I am sure, by bad advisers, has involved in so much trouble. I shall pay some visits while I am in town, and return to Essex this evening. But whenever I come to London I shall make a point of calling upon you. Violet has told me a good deal of her history; and if I can find any way of serving either herself or her brother through the influence of my friends, I shall not be slow to do so. In the mean time, she has given me a promise not to return to the perilous life of a theatre, as with her attainments and accomplishments, assisted by my hearty recommendation, she cannot fail to obtain very remunerative employment as a daily governess. There *are* people in the world who know how to respect the ladies to whom they intrust the education of their children. I shall make it my business to find a lady in whose employment Violet will feel that she is respected and esteemed."

The Marchioness pressed Clara Westford's hand, and kissed Violet almost as affectionately as if the grateful girl had been indeed her daughter.

When she was gone, the mother and child sat down side by side, happy in the delight of being once more together; so happy in this, that the wife forgot for a few moments the mystery of her husband's disappearance.

But that bitter memory was very swift to return; and it was only by heroic self-control that Clara contrived to keep her daughter in ignorance of the anxiety which was gnawing at her heart.

While they were sitting together, talking of Violet's escape from danger, and of the warm friend she had found at a moment when she seemed to be surrounded by enemies, the servant of the house came into the room, and handed a visiting-card to Mrs. Westford.

It was a dirty-looking, old-fashioned card, and upon it was inscribed a name that seemed vaguely familiar to Clara:

MR. JACOB DANIELSON.
Who entreats Mrs. Westford to grant him a private interview.

These words were written in pencil below the name on the card.

“Danielson!” murmured the widow; “I have an idea that the name was once familiar to me. And yet that may be only fancy—it is such a common name.”

“The persing seemed very anxious to see you, mem,” said the girl who had brought the card.

“What sort of person is he?”

“A little old man, mem; very shabby and common-looking, with a hump on his pore old back, mem. He said he had somethink very particular to tell you.”

“Something particular to tell me! If it should be—I will see him, Susan,” exclaimed the widow, with sudden agitation. “Go to your room, dear. I must see this man alone.”

The slipshod maid-of-all-work ran down stairs to admit the stranger; and Clara Westford half led, half pushed Violet into the inner room, before the anxious girl had time to inquire into the cause of her mother’s agitation.

In the next minute Jacob Danielson entered the little sitting-room, his hat in his hand, his head bent in a respectful attitude.

“What is your business, sir?” asked Clara Westford, looking at him very anxiously.

“You do not remember me, madam?”

"Remember you? No!"

"And yet it is only a day or two since you saw me. I am Mr. Rupert Godwin's confidential clerk—the person of whom you and a young sailor made some inquiries respecting your missing husband."

"Yes, yes!" cried Clara eagerly; "I remember. And you have something to tell me? For pity's sake do not trifle with me! If you knew what I suffer—"

"I have something to tell you, madam—I have much to tell you. But I cannot yet give you any information about your husband. I came to you to-day to make you the offer of my friendship. But perhaps you will despise such an offer from such a person as I am?"

"Despise your friendship! No, indeed, Mr. Danielson; I am in too much need of friends to despise the kindly feeling even of a stranger."

"You are changed, Mrs. Westford," murmured the old clerk; "very much changed since I knew you."

"Since you knew me!" exclaimed Clara. "Have we ever been known to each other? Your name just now seemed familiar to me; but I have no recollection of you."

"No, Mrs. Westford!" cried Jacob Danielson, with a sudden burst of passion; "you cannot remember me, because the stamp of degradation is upon me. It is more than twenty years since I knew you. I was a man then, with some remnant of self-respect, though the world had begun to teach me how vile a thing I was, in my misshapen form, my low birth, my hopeless poverty. But I was a man then, with a man's ambitious yearnings to climb some few steps of life's great ladder. Now you look only upon a degraded ruin—the hideous wreck of that which was once a man. Mrs. Westford, do you remember, when you were completing your education at your

father's country seat, the humpbacked village schoolmaster who was employed to teach you classics? Do you remember reading Virgil during the summer afternoons, before you had grown too grand a lady to care about old Latin fables?"

"I do remember the schoolmaster at the dear old park!" cried Clara. "Yes; and he was called Danielson. I knew that the name was familiar to me. And you are that very Mr. Danielson? Ah, then indeed you are sadly changed. I should never have recognized you."

"Yet I am not so much changed as the daughter of Sir John Ponsonby," said the clerk, with an intensity of bitterness, "if she can deign to feel one spark of compassion for the wretch who stands before her."

"What do you mean, Mr. Danielson? It has not been my habit to refuse pity to anyone who needed it."

"Indeed!" cried Jacob Danielson, with sudden vehemence. "Ah! I see you have a convenient memory, Mrs. Westford. You have quite forgotten the day on which the humpbacked scholar was beaten like a rebellious hound at your bidding!"

"Beaten!" exclaimed Clara, "at my bidding! What, in Heaven's name, do you mean?"

"O, Mrs. Westford, you have indeed forgotten the past," said the clerk, in tones of quiet irony.

"I have forgotten nothing," answered Clara. "Pray sit down quietly and explain yourself. There must be some mistake in all this."

The clerk dropped listlessly into a chair.

"It is so easy for the person who strikes the blow to forget," he murmured, "but not so easy for the victim on whom the blow falls."

Clara looked at him, with perfect mystification in her countenance.

“I am weary of these enigmas,” she said coldly; “pray speak plainly, Mr. Danielson.”

“I will,” answered the clerk; “I will go back to the day when you were seventeen years of age—yes, it was your seventeenth birthday; and I had been teaching you for a year then, and had found you the brightest pupil whose apt intelligence ever sent a thrill of pride through a master’s heart. It was your birthday. You and some happy girls of your own age were to celebrate the day by a rustic *fête*. You were busy, decorating your favourite rooms with garlands of flowers, when I came that morning to give you your usual lesson. You told me that you were to have a holiday—there were to be no studies that day; but when I would have turned to leave you, Heaven knows how sorrowfully, you called me back, and invited me—me, the humpbacked, low-born, village schoolmaster—to share the day’s pleasure, to join in the simple festival.

“Can I ever forget that day? Have I ever forgotten it? No, Mrs. Westford, not once in all these long dreary years has the memory of that bright summer morning faded away from me. I have drowned it in fiery drink—I have maddened my miserable brains with brandy; but I have never forgotten, and I never shall. Upon my deathbed the memory of my youth’s one passion will haunt me still, as it has haunted me all my life.

“I can see you now as I saw you that day, Clara. Ah, let me call you Clara once more, as I did on that fatal day—as I have called you in my dreams ever since, as I shall call you with my latest breath when I die! What can it matter to you if such a wretch as I am insolent in the madness of my idolatry? What am I but a worm beneath your feet? Yes, Clara, I can see you now as I saw you

then, with your soft brown hair falling in ringlets to your waist, and shot with wandering gleams of gold; your large dark eyes, blue with the serene azure of the skies; your parted lips, more lovely than if they had been sculptured out of coral. I had Catullus and Horace at my fingers' ends in those days, and all manner of poetic fancies used to arise in my mind as I looked at you. A garland of white lilies crowned your brow; but the loveliest of them was not fairer than yourself. You were pleased to be gracious to me; you bade me help you with the baskets of June roses, the honeysuckle, the seringa, which you were twining into wreaths and festoons to decorate your pretty rooms. The proud baronet's lovely daughter did not know that the humpbacked schoolmaster was so mad, so presumptuous, as to love her with a devotion which the fairest of womankind does not always inspire even once in a lifetime—the devotion of the slavish idolater, who cries, Give me leave only to lie upon the ground under your feet, that I may be trampled out of life by the creature I adore!

"Clara!" cried the clerk, with subdued vehemence, "I went mad altogether that day—I lost all consciousness of who and what I was. I might have had the rank of a duke, the wealth of a millionnaire, the beauty of an Adonis, for all the recollection I had of the monstrous gulf that separated you and me. I remembered only that you were beautiful, and that I loved you. In an evil moment my folly reached its climax. I spoke. I told you all. In one instant I was reminded of the audacity to which my wild passion had urged me. The daughter of Sir John Ponsonby answered my mad burst of passionate prayer with quiet dignity. She did not rebuke my presumption, but she let me understand how much I had presumed. Had all ended here, Clara, I could have borne my deserved humiliation, and I should have cherished your image as that of the purest and best of womankind, as

well as the loveliest. But my punishment did not so end. Your wrath was not appeased by my humble apology. I slunk away from you abashed, repentant, and, as I thought, forgiven. You had deceived me by an appearance of mercy which you did not feel. As I was crossing the park, dejected, miserable, with my heart bleeding, and tears that were not all unmanly in my eyes, I was pursued, seized roughly, violently, by a couple of lacqueys, and dragged by brute force to your father's study, where the infuriated baronet sprang on me, and horsewhipped me until I was unable to crawl from his presence. Then only was his fury appeased. He sent for a surgeon, and under the cover of night I was carried home to my lonely dwelling, where I recovered from my wounds as I might, unnoticed and unaided—except by a deaf old village crone who succoured me in my helplessness, and never thought of questioning the nature of my illness, which I told her arose from rheumatism.

"Call it cowardice, if you like; I sought no redress from the man who had assaulted me; I kept the secret of my wrongs, and, as soon as I was sufficiently recovered, I threw up my situation and came to London, leaving my native place for ever, and leaving it a heart-broken man.

"You had found it impossible to forgive the wretch who dared to love you, Clara, and who in an evil hour told you of his love. You urged your father to avenge a wrong which some women would have been merciful enough to pardon—for even the love of a Caliban is a kind of tribute."

"It is false!" cried Mrs. Westford, with passionate energy; "I never mentioned your name to my father on that day. I never knew until this moment that you had suffered an indignity, such a cruel wrong, at his hands. I remember, now, that my French governess was in the conservatory adjoining the room in which we were

standing when you made that foolish avowal which I forgave as completely as I regretted that it should have been spoken. She overheard all, and threatened to tell my father. I implored her not to betray you, and I believed until this moment that she had kept your secret. For myself, I should have been the last to inflict humiliation upon a man whose learning I respected, and for whose patient kindness as a tutor I had good reason to be grateful."

"Mrs. Westford, is this true?" asked the clerk earnestly.

"Look in my face, and doubt me if you can," answered Clara.

"No, I cannot doubt you," answered Danielson, with a burst of emotion. "Truth beams from the eyes whose loveliness has haunted me throughout a lifetime. O, how I have wronged you! But it is not yet too late to repair that wrong; and it shall be repaired. Trust in me, Clara Westford; you have found a friend who will restore you your rights—an avenger who will bring your enemy, Rupert Godwin, to justice."

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE DUKE OF HARLINGFORD MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Esther Vanberg was buried in a churchyard north-west of London, a rustic spot on the summit of a hill—a churchyard in which a poet might love to lie and dream away the summer hours. Old yew-trees spread their solemn shadows on the velvet grass, and the pure hues of white marble monuments glimmered here and there among the dark foliage.

The Jewess had noticed this spot once when riding a little way out of town with her devoted lover; and she had said, half playfully, that if she could choose her own grave she would desire nothing better than to be buried in that sequestered churchyard.

Vincent Mountford, who forgot no sentiment that those beloved lips had ever expressed, took care that this wish should be religiously observed.

The Jewess was buried in one of the fairest spots in that rustic churchyard. The funeral was entirely without ostentation, and there was only one mourner; but perhaps there are few graves over which such tears are shed as those which filled the eyes of Vincent Mountford, while the rector was reading the solemn service of the dead.

All was over, and the young man drove slowly back to town. All was over! Alas, how much anguish is conveyed in those three little words!

The last office of love had been performed, and there was no more to be done but to leave the quiet churchyard where the loved one lay in a tranquil slumber,

Deeper than the frost can bite,
Deeper than the hail can smite,
Deep asleep by day and night,
Our delight.

For a time at least the Duke of Harlingford was a broken-hearted man. The glories of his four-in-hand, the finest team in England, had no further charm for him. Other men of his class were deep in the delights and excitements of English races and regattas, or hurrying off to ride in continental steeplechases, or to lose their money at German spas. But Vincent Mountford felt as if these things could give him no more pleasure; they were all alike “stale, flat, and unprofitable,” and he turned from his familiar friends with a kind of loathing.

“I never saw a fellow so awfully cut up,” said the Duke’s intimates to each other dolefully. “There’ll be no shooting at Mountford’s place this season, and no chance of his standing in for a moor with Bothwell Wallace, as he talked of doing.”

It is a bad day for wild Prince Hal’s companions when the prince takes to wearing sack-cloth and bestrewing his head with ashes. There were some irreverent worldings who complained that it was a hard thing Miss Vanberg must needs break her back before the shooting-season, and at a time when the grouse promised more than usually good sport.

Vincent Mountford wrote to one of the first sculptors in England, begging him to design a monument for the grave of a dearly-loved friend—a lady who had died in the zenith of her days; but he did not reveal the name of her whose tomb that monument was to adorn.

"Let her sleep far away from the memories of her wasted life," he thought sadly; "and let those who look upon her resting place know only that she was young and beautiful and beloved."

A sad task remained for Vincent Mountford after the burial of the Jewess. He had promised to examine her papers, to arrange the many valuable things she left behind her, and to see that the proceeds of their sale were handed over to the girl whom Esther Vanberg had so deeply injured.

This girl was only known to the Duke as Miss Watson, the *figurante* of the Circenses. From the stage-doorkeeper at the theatre he obtained Violet's address; then sent for his lawyer, and placed in his hands the carrying out of Esther's last wish.

But before the day appointed for the sale—before the auctioneer's assistants entered the *bijou* little residence in Bolton-row, and those expensive frivolities on which Esther had squandered a small fortune *pour se distraire*, were duly set forth in the flourishing language of a fashionable auctioneer's catalogue—Vincent Mountford went alone to examine and destroy the papers left by the Jewess, so that nothing which she might have wished to keep sacred should fall into the hands of strangers. The task was a very painful one; and the young man would have encountered death in its most terrific form with a pang less keen than he now felt as he went up the familiar staircase in the bright summer noontide,—that staircase at the top of which he had so often seen her standing looking down at him, ready to scold or to praise him, as the humour of the moment prompted her, but always charming to that one faithful slave who never found his chains too heavy.

He entered alone into those elegant little rooms, which Esther's beauty had adorned, as some priceless jewel

adorns the casket that contains it.

The same exotics were blooming in the conservatory—the faded bouquets, on whose fresh bloom the eyes of the dead had looked, still remained undisturbed in the vases in which her hands had arranged them.

The birds were singing gaily in the sunshine, though the white hands that had so often tended them lay still and cold in their last resting-place. A little dog, Esther's favourite, whined piteously as he looked up at the Duke, and this faithful creature was the only object in those rooms that bore witness of the melancholy event which had almost broken Vincent Mountford's heart.

He took from his pocket the little bunch of keys given him by the Jewess, and seated himself before the piece of furniture, half cabinet, half writing-table, in which she had kept her papers.

Nothing could have been more careless than her habits. The Duke sat for long hours, that would have wearied another man, trying to introduce some order into that mass of bills and letters, notes of invitation, tradesmen's circulars, catalogues of pictures, playbills, programmes of concerts, and crumpled receipts.

At last he had looked over them all, and had placed on one side every fragment of paper which bore any of the beloved handwriting. These he sorted and folded, as tenderly as a miser might fold a packet of bank-notes; and when he had collected the last of them, he packed them very neatly in a sheet of foolscap, and sealed the packet in several places with his signet-ring.

Upon this packet he wrote only these few words:

"Esther's papers. To be burnt immediately after my death—unopened."

He had no wish that the prying eyes of strangers should ever inspect those records of the woman he had loved; frivolous, meaningless, though the greater number of them were. Nor yet could he bring himself to destroy the smallest paper on which the beloved hand had inscribed the most commonplace words.

The rest of the papers, with the exception of tradesmen's bills and receipts, he burnt.

Then he turned his attention to the few remaining contents of the odorous sandal-wood pigeon-holes into which Miss Vanberg had thrust papers, trinkets, faded flowers, and worn gloves, without the smallest attempt at classification.

Among these there was a miniature set in a rim of pearls.

It was the picture of a lovely woman, a Spanish Jewess, whose face proclaimed her at once the mother of the dead girl.

On the back of the gold case which contained the miniature was engraved the inscription:

"FROM RUPERT TO HIS BELOVED LOLA."

The Duke examined the miniature very closely and then it suddenly occurred to him—

Was there not, perhaps, something more than this inscription—some hidden spring in the case of the miniature, which might reveal a secret that Esther Vanberg had been too careless to discover?

"I will take it to my jeweller," muttered the young man; "if there is anything hidden in this massive case—which seems needlessly thick and heavy—he is the most likely person to find it out."

The Duke was not slow to carry out this idea. He drove

straight from Bolton-row to a jeweller's in Bond-street, and handed the locket to one of the assistants.

"If there is anyone in your establishment who understands the mechanism of these things better than you do, I should be very glad if you would take him this, and ask him to examine it," he said. "I will wait while you do so."

The Duke seated himself by the counter, and after he had been waiting ten minutes, the jeweller's assistant returned with an elderly man, who held the locket open in his hand.

He had discovered a secret spring, the nature of which he explained to Vincent Mountford.

"Nobody except a working jeweller could have opened the locket," he said in conclusion; "for the spring has evidently not been used for years. It is a very peculiar piece of jeweller's work, and has been made by no English mechanic. The gold and the workmanship are both undoubtedly foreign."

The inner case of the locket contained a second miniature—the portrait of a young man; a dark handsome face, which seemed very familiar to the Duke of Harlingford.

As he drove away from the jeweller's he brooded thoughtfully upon that pictured face, trying, but without success, to remember when and where he had seen a face resembling it.

"Those dark eyes, that peculiar mouth, are strangely familiar to me," he thought; "and yet I cannot tell whom they recall to my mind."

The Duke drove across Waterloo Bridge, and sought out the obscure street in which Clara Westford and her children had lived during the days of their poverty. He

had obtained the *figurante's* address from the door-keeper at the Circenses, and he was now going to announce to her with his own lips the news of her good fortune.

All the practical part of the business he left to his lawyer; but he wished himself to tell Miss Watson of the money which had been left to her; as he fancied that he should thus more completely carry out Esther Vanberg's dying request. He found the house in which Clara and her daughter lodged; sent up his card by the servant with a request that he might see Miss Watson on most urgent business.

He was shown immediately into the shabbily furnished sitting-room, to which a certain air of refinement had been imparted by Mrs. Westford and her daughter at a very small cost. A few books, a vase of flowers, a caged bird, and a work-basket of graceful form, were the most expensive ornaments Violet had been able to buy; but even these small things relieved the sordid vulgar poverty of the room.

Clara Westford was sitting on one side of the little table, working; while her daughter sat opposite to her, reading aloud.

She closed the book as the Duke of Harlingford entered.

He remembered Violet at the Circenses only as a very lovely girl; he perceived now for the first time that she was a perfect lady—self-possessed, and yet modest; and to Vincent Mountford's mind, more beautiful in her well-worn black dress and simple linen collar than she had been in her brilliant stage costume.

He seated himself, at Mrs. Westford's request; and then he told Violet in a very few words that he was empowered to inform her of a small fortune that had been left her by a person whose name was to be kept a

secret.

“The bequest consists of a balance in the hands of the testator’s banker, and of personal property of a valuable character, which is to be sold, in order that the proceeds of the sale may be handed to you with the other money in one sum. The amount will not be a large one. Four or five thousand pounds at most.”

Four or five thousand! It seemed an enormous sum to Violet, who had felt the keenest pangs of poverty. She burst into hysterical tears; for she was completely overcome by the thought that henceforward her mother might be spared at least the anguish of want.

But suddenly she wiped her tears away, and addressed the Duke with imploring earnestness.

“O, sir,” she exclaimed, “are you sure that no degradation attaches to this mysterious bequest? Why should this money be left to me by a person who conceals his name? Can you assure me, on your honour, that I am justified in accepting this unexpected wealth?”

“I give you my word, as a gentleman, that you are justified in taking the money that has been left you,” answered the Duke gravely. “It is bequeathed by a lady who once did you an injury, and who most sincerely repented that wrong before she died. The thought that the gift of her fortune might do something to repair that injury was a solace to her on her deathbed. And I assure you that you would be actuated by a false pride were you to reject this bequest.”

“In that case, I will accept it, gratefully, gladly,” returned Violet. “You would wish me to do so, would you not, mamma?”

“Yes, Violet; for if I can believe in the evidence of an honest face, I am sure this gentleman would not advise

you to take a false step," said Mrs. Westford.

The Duke bowed.

"I am here to execute the last wishes of the dead," he answered mournfully.

"But I never knew that anyone had wronged me," exclaimed Violet, "except one person; and that was not a lady, but a gentleman—or, at any rate, a person whose rank gave him a right to be called a gentleman."

"You will never know the entire history of that wrong," answered the Duke. "I rejoice to see you here in safety with your mother, and to know that you have therefore escaped from all serious peril. As for the bequest, of which I have informed you, I beg you to accept it when it reaches you without question, and let the dead be forgiven."

Little more was said; and the Duke departed, pleased, even in the midst of his grief, by the knowledge that Esther Vanberg's fortune had fallen into the hands of a deserving girl.

From Lambeth he drove to his club, where he dismissed his cab and strolled into the reading-room.

He had no wish for society; but solitude was very terrible to him, for it was haunted by the shadow of the dead—the mournful memories of the loved and the lost.

He fell back, therefore, into his old habits, and took his accustomed seat in the public reading-room, though not without a strange sense of wonder that he should be able to take his place amongst other men, to read the evening papers, and talk in the conventional manner about the events recorded in them, while she was lying in that quiet churchyard.

Could she indeed be there? Was it true? Was it

possible? The catastrophe which had caused her death he could realize—her death itself; but not the fact that all was so completely finished, so entirely a thing of the past; and that she was lying in her grave—never to look upon him again on this earth, unconscious of his love, regardless of his anguish, a creature for ever removed from him and the world of which he was a part. He sat for upwards of an hour, with a newspaper before him, brooding over the great mystery. There were very few people in the reading-room at this time, for it was late. The dusk was closing in already; and the *habitués* of the club were almost all of them dining in one of the larger apartments.

The Duke left his seat by-and-by, and walked to the window. The room was very dreary in the waning daylight, and the street below the windows was almost deserted, the West-end world having gone home to dine.

A gentleman was seated close to the open window reading a paper; he lowered the sheet from before his face and looked up, as Vincent Mountford approached him.

This gentleman was Rupert Godwin, the banker. He had come to town in search of Julia, and had dropped into the club, pale and worn out by fatigue, to take a hasty dinner. He had heard nothing of his missing daughter; and he had just returned from the office of a private detective, whom he had been consulting as to the best means of seeking her.

In his own words, the web was closing round him. Narrower and narrower grew the fatal circle; and he scarcely knew which way to step without finding himself face to face with some new danger.

As he looked up at the Duke of Harlingford, whom he had met very frequently in society and in the familiar

intercourse of the club reading-room, he tried to affect some of his old ease of manner, though the effort was a painful one.

"Good-evening, Duke," he exclaimed. "How is it that I find you here at an hour when you ought to be glorifying some Belgravian dinner-table by your presence?"

The young man looked intently at that pale face, those un-English black eyes, dimly seen in the gathering dusk. This face—the face of Rupert Godwin the banker—was the image which had floated before his mental vision since he had seen the hidden miniature in Esther Vanberg's locket. The face in the portrait was the youthful likeness of that face on which Vincent Mountford now looked.

The Duke knew something of the banker's history. He knew that Rupert Godwin had, in his early manhood, been a resident in Spain, where a branch house belonging to the banker had been carried on by a junior partner.

Rapid as lightning an electric chain of ideas flashed through the mind of the Duke.

This man, this banker, half Spaniard, half English, was the betrayer of the beautiful Spanish Jewess, and the father of Esther Vanberg.

Occupied as Mr. Godwin was with his own thoughts, he could not help perceiving the strange expression, the solemn earnestness, in the Duke of Harlingford's face.

"There is something amiss with you to-night, is there not?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Vincent Mountford: "I have lately lost one who was most dear to me. It is but a very short time since I stood beside the grave of the only woman I ever loved. Do you know the name of Vanberg, Mr. Godwin?"

The banker started; and pale though his face had been, it grew a shade paler as he looked up nervously at the Duke.

The young man handed him the miniature of the beautiful Jewess.

“Did you ever see this before?” he asked.

The shrinking, half-shuddering movement with which Rupert Godwin recoiled from that faded miniature in its jewelled case told enough.

“Your daughter, your abandoned, forgotten daughter, would have cursed you on her dying bed, Rupert Godwin,” said the Duke, solemnly, “if the shadow of death had not softened all things before her eyes. She uttered no word of love or forgiveness—she only told me the story of her life. The days of duelling are past, or I might tell you more plainly what I think of a man who leaves two helpless women to starve in the streets of London. As it is, I will say only that you and I had better meet as strangers after to-night.”

The Duke bowed gravely, and turned his back upon the man who had once carried his head so proudly amongst the noblest frequenters of that room. Now he had no word of defiance to utter. He felt that the fatal circle was narrowing. A strange influence had been upon him for the last few days, and all his old hardihood of spirit seemed to have deserted him.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE FACE OF THE LOST.

The Retreat, the abode in which Dr. Wilderson Snaffley received his patients, was a place which seemed eminently calculated to drive the sanest person mad.

Dismal walls of an unusual height, and ornamented at the top with iron spikes, surrounded a dreary wilderness of tangled bushes and tall lean poplars, which was designated a garden. In the centre of this garden stood a high square house; a house which had once been white, but from whose damp-stained walls the stucco had peeled off in great patches. Long rows of curtainless windows, every one the precise pattern of its neighbour, looked out upon the dismal wilderness. There were not even blinds to shut out the glaring heat of the sun; but wooden shutters, painted black, swung to and fro before the windows with every gust of wind, and the rusty hinges made a dreary creaking noise, that was like the groaning of a human creature in pain.

This was the place of which Dr. Snaffley spoke so pleasantly to the friends of his patients, describing it always as “a delightful country mansion, standing in the midst of its own grounds.”

But the doctor knew his patrons; and he was not deluded by the sympathetic looks or compassionate phrases of the people who intrusted their relatives to his keeping, and who took no trouble to ascertain the nature of the place that sheltered the afflicted creatures, or the

comforts that softened their calamity. Dr. Snaffley knew that no one who entered the gates of the Retreat would have committed a beloved relative to his care. The unfortunates who came to that dark abode were people who were to be *got rid of*. No matter how cheerless the home, how wretchedly furnished the room, how miserable the daily fare, how chill and damp the atmosphere; the patients were only likely to die the sooner, and the bitterly-grudged stipend cease to be paid.

Dr. Snaffley took patients at different rates, for he varied his charge according to the circumstances of the persons who employed him. His policy was neither to ill-use his patients nor to starve them; his policy was to keep them alive at the smallest possible cost. He was not personally cruel; but he allowed the men and women he employed to do pretty much as they liked; while he lived his own life, and enjoyed himself after his own manner in London, only putting in an appearance at the Retreat now and then.

In that joyless, comfortless mansion there was, it may be hoped, less actual cruelty than in some of those dens of iniquity which have encumbered this beautiful earth. There were padded rooms, into which the dangerous lunatics were thrust, and kept under lock and key; but the harmless lunatics were allowed considerable liberty. The walls were so high, and the neighbourhood so utterly desolate, that there was little chance either of escape or of communication being held with the outer world.

By far the larger number of his patients, and those for whom Dr. Wilderson Snaffley was the most liberally paid, *were not mad*, but were the wretched victims who, for some reason or other, had been put out of the way by their unnatural relatives upon the infamous pretence of insanity.

These patients were very quiet. At first they were loud

in their complaints. They cried out bitterly for justice; they threatened—they implored—they wept—they wrote letters, and tried with piteous persistence to hold some communication with the outer world—to find some means of reaching the ear of mercy, of enlisting the voice of justice in their cause. But no eye save that of Heaven saw their sufferings; no mortal ear but that of merciless gaolers heard their complaints; and in time they were all wearied out, one after another, and submitted with a stupid apathy to an inevitable fate. A hopeless, changeless melancholy took possession of them. They sat motionless at the windows, staring blankly out upon the gloomy prospect. They rarely conversed with one another; for what could they talk of in that living grave?

Sometimes they roamed listlessly in the dreary wilderness, staring at those walls which shut them out from all they had ever loved or cherished. They ate their scanty meals in despondent silence. The wild chatter of the really mad patients tortured them with its discordant jargon; and they had no heart to speak amidst the Babel that surrounded them.

Thus it was not strange that many who entered that place as sane as the wretches who sent them there became at last raving maniacs.

All Dr. Snaffley wanted was the liberty to enjoy himself abroad, and the power to save a fortune for his old age from the profits of the Retreat. He was already rich; but every day brought him new wealth, and every day made him more greedy of gain.

Still, notwithstanding the *good luck* that had attended his dreary abode for many years, Dr. Snaffley had never before caught so rich a prize as the patient committed to his care by Rupert Godwin the banker.

The proprietor of the Retreat knew his power; he knew

that the patient called Lewis Wilton, who had been placed under his care, was capable of revealing a secret that might have condemned Rupert Godwin to a felon's doom.

The patient once within the walls of the Retreat, the secret was safe—as safe as if it had been buried in the grave of a second victim.

"If Rupert Godwin had dared, he would have murdered this young man," thought Dr. Snaffley; "he only pays me because he hasn't pluck enough to play the bolder game."

For some days and nights after his removal to the Retreat, Lionel Westford remained still unconscious—still a prey to delirious fancies, to terrible visions, to all the wild delusions of a violent attack of brain-fever.

But Dr. Wilderson Snaffley, although a scoundrel and a charlatan, was not without a certain cleverness in his professional capacity. He prescribed for the young man with a watchful care that he did not often bestow upon a patient, for Lionel Westford's life was worth five hundred pounds a year to him—more than the income derived from five ordinary patients.

For this reason the invalid enjoyed privileges that had never before been shown to any inmate of the Retreat.

A private bedchamber was allotted to him, instead of a miserable truckle-bed in one of the bare wards, where twenty patients slept side by side, with the wind whistling round them from the chinks in the worm-eaten doors and window-frames. The battered furniture of the dreary mansion was ransacked in order that a tolerably comfortable bed and a dilapidated easy-chair might be found for Lionel's private room.

The fever-stricken young man progressed very rapidly in the hands of his new attendant; and in little more than

a week after his removal from Wilmingdon Hall the patient had recovered consciousness.

That recovery of consciousness was the most awful hour in Lionel Westford's life—more awful even than the hour in which, stricken by the revelation of his father's murder, he fell senseless on the turf in Wilmingdon Park.

As he opened his eyes and stared stupidly about him, trying helplessly to remember where he was, the bare and wretched aspect of the chamber sent a deadly chill to his heart.

Where was he? Never before had he seen those dreary, dirty walls. That dingy paper, with its geometrical pattern in dirty yellow and faded brown, falling in tattered shreds here and there, and looking as if it had not been renewed for twenty years, and those bare carpetless boards, belonged to no chamber that he could remember; for, poor and shabby though his Lambeth lodging had been, it had at least been clean, and here all looked dirty and disorderly. At first the invalid's mind was too weak to arrive at any definite conclusion. He could only lie staring at the wretched chamber, with a vague wonder in his mind.

He knew he had never before been in that room; but for a time that was all he knew or sought to know. He was not terrified by its strangeness. He did not recollect where he had last been, or what had happened to him. His mind was almost a blank.

Then, little by little, memory came back, with all its power to torture. He remembered his pretty bedchamber at Wilmingdon Hall—the perfume of flowers blowing in at the open window, the luxurious furniture, the comfort and beauty of all around him.

Then the image of Julia Godwin arose before him in all the splendour of her beauty. Then a dark form pushed

that brilliant image aside, and the face of the banker scowled at him with hate and fear in every lineament.

It was the countenance that had so often looked down upon him in his delirium. It looked on him now, as it had looked then; and it recalled the memory of the crime that had been committed in the northern wing.

Then the picture was complete. Lionel remembered all the past—the mystery which it had been his fate to discover; the secret which Providence had revealed to him; the evidence that had been link by link united into one perfect chain, identifying the Captain of the *Lily Queen* with the victim of Rupert Godwin.

But where was he? How had he been removed from the luxurious chamber which had been his to this dismal and poverty-stricken room, such as no gentleman's servant would have occupied without complaining bitterly of the master who allotted it to him?

He fancied that he must have been removed into some desolate and disused chamber in Wilmingdon Hall. He was in the north wing, perhaps, in one of the bedchambers of that forgotten building, which ignorant people believed to be haunted by the shadows of the dead.

It was noon when Lionel Westford lay helpless in his lonely chamber, with the anguish of consciousness, instead of the childish fancies of delirium. The sunlight streamed into the room through the narrow opening of a shutter which had been blown against the outside of the window.

The window reached to the ground; and the young man was still scrutinizing his apartment with curious eyes, when the shutter was blown back from the window, and the chamber, which had been only dimly lighted before, was suddenly exposed to the full glare of the mid-day

sun.

Lionel Westford turned his gaze from the chamber itself to the prospect without.

In all this time he had never once doubted that he was still an inmate of Wilmingdon Hall. He fancied that he had only been removed to some remote and uninhabited part of the house, where his ravings could not be heard—where no prying ear could listen to the ominous words which might fall from his lips.

He believed this, and he was not disabused of his error; for, by a strange coincidence, the scene which met his eyes beyond the window of his room was not unlike the neglected garden which was to be seen from the windows of the northern wing.

There all was ruin and desolation—overgrown shrubs, whose straggling branches were strangers to the gardener's pruning-knife, long rank grass, ill-looking weeds, moss-grown gravel. Here were the same weeds, the same rank grass, blown to and fro by the autumn wind, the same weird tangled bushes, withering under the autumn sun.

The northern garden at Wilmingdon Hall was shut in by an old brick wall; a noble mass of brickwork, with buttresses that might have served to sustain the ramparts of some mediæval castle. Here too the wall loomed, dark and dismal-looking, against the blue autumn sky.

"Yes," muttered Lionel Westford; "they have removed me to the northern wing. The murderer feared to hear himself denounced by the lips of his victim's son; and he has banished me here—here, where I may lie forgotten and neglected; here, where *she* may never know my fate! I only wonder that he has let me live; for he must know that, if I am ever able to leave this place, I shall devote the rest of my life to the task of bringing my father's

assassin to justice."

Then, as he put the story of the past together bit by bit, Lionel Westford remembered that he had entered Wilmingdon Hall under an assumed name. He did not think of his mother's letter, or his father's miniature—two things which bore direct evidence to his identity.

"I am only a stranger to Rupert Godwin," thought the young man, "unless in my delirium—for I suppose I have been delirious—I have revealed who I am, and my knowledge of his iniquity. Surely, if I had done so, he would have murdered me while I lay helpless in his power, as he murdered my father; and since I live, I may be sure that I owe my life to his ignorance."

For some time he lay too weak to move, gazing straight before him at the desolate garden, the neglected weeds waving drearily to and fro in the wind.

"Strange," he thought, "very strange, that they should have banished me to the building within whose walls my father met his fate."

Then, with a faint thrill of that latent superstition which lurks in almost every breast, he remembered the ghastly stories he had heard about that northern wing—the shrouded form which had scared ignorant intruders, and sent them shrieking from that deserted edifice.

He remembered all this now. He had smiled at the foolish stories when they were told him, and had laughed to scorn the servants' talk of ghosts and goblins; but now, weakened by his illness, prostrate, lonely, and wretched, Lionel thought very differently of the gloomy regions of which he fancied himself an inhabitant.

As the dreary moments crept on, intolerably long while they left him in such miserable uncertainty with regard to his fate, the invalid's spirits sank lower and lower, and

the agonizing tears of despair filled his eyes.

Then a kind of superstitious horror took possession of him. His utter loneliness, the strange quiet of the place, oppressed him to an extreme degree. The thought of his father's assassination became every moment more vivid, until he pictured the scene of horror in all its hideous detail.

"O, God!" he exclaimed, bursting into a flood of hysterical tears, "if Rupert Godwin does know who I am, it must have been by the instinct of a refined and hellish cruelty that he decided upon banishing me to this deserted building. If ever the dead yet haunted the living, surely my father's shadow will haunt me."

The words had scarcely escaped his lips, the tears were still wet upon his cheeks, when a dark form suddenly came between him and the sunlight.

A white death-like face looked in at him with a wan melancholy gaze.

Lionel Westford lifted himself from the pillow, uttered a wild prolonged shriek, and then fell back unconscious.

It was his father's face that had looked at him through the sunlit window—the face of the Captain of the *Lily Queen*, the face that had smiled upon him in the days of his careless boyhood; but changed into the face of death.

CHAPTER XLVI.

SUSPENSE.

Rupert Godwin was too desperately circumstanced, and too hardened a sinner, to be much affected by the revelation made by the Duke of Harlingford with regard to Esther Vanberg's identity with his deserted daughter. Are there human beings created without that attribute of the mind, that natural love and tenderness, pity and remorse, which we blend into one general whole and call "a heart"?

It would seem so; it would seem as if there are some natures in which there is no such element as heart or conscience. These are the exceptional criminals whom men wonder at, and whose iniquities the merciful are apt to ascribe to mental disease.

The banker had been struck by Esther Vanberg's likeness to the lovely Spanish Jewess whom his treachery had lured from the home of a doting father, a rich wine-merchant of Seville, who had toiled long and patiently in order to amass the fortune which was to secure the future welfare of his only child, Lola. The girl was engaged to be married to the cashier in the Seville banking-house belonging to the Godwin firm, when the young *roué* saw her, and at once determined to oust his inferior.

Rupert Godwin was handsomer and more polished than his *employé*. He was already a man of the world; the cashier was only an honest and devoted lover, eager to achieve a better position in life before he claimed the

heiress of old Isaac Mendez. While the young man worked at his bureau, the employer hung about the footsteps of the merchant's daughter, followed her to church and bull-fight, bribed her old nurse, flattered and fooled her doting father, and turned the poor girl's head by his impassioned pleading. The end came only too quickly—the hackneyed conclusion of the hackneyed story.

Lola let herself quietly out of the paternal dwelling one starless, airless summer night, and left Seville under the protection of Rupert Godwin. They started at once for Paris, where Lola had been told the marriage would take place. There were reasons why it could not be performed at Seville. Mr. Godwin's father had formed plans of his own for his son's matrimonial settlement, and for a time the marriage would have to be kept secret.

"There is no safer place than Paris," said Rupert; and Lola, who had heard Paris talked of as a kind of earthly elysium, was quite ready to agree to this proposal.

In Paris the banker lodged his divinity in one of the prettiest villas in the Champs Elysées, a *bijou* mansion built and decorated in the Moorish style, at a fabulous outlay, for a Muscovite prince lately deceased, and bought under the hammer by Mr. Godwin at about ten per cent of its original cost. In this luxurious nest Lola Mendez found herself a kind of fairy princess—flattered, beloved; but she never became the wife of Rupert Godwin.

Rupert Godwin had thought it quite probable that the *figurante* might be his own daughter; but he had concerned himself no more about her fortunes in her lovely and reckless womanhood than he had done in her deserted girlhood.

But when the Duke showed him the portrait of his

victim, the proud man did feel the humiliation of his position. He winced beneath the cold contempt of the generous young patrician, for he was not without the plebeian's natural reverence for rank, and it was hard to be despised by a duke. He had sunk so very low now, that every new stroke wounded him to the quick. Hemmed in on every side by danger, a superstitious terror had taken possession of him, and he saw in every incident of his troubled life a new omen of ruin.

His daughter's flight had filled him with unspeakable fear. He had loved this girl with the bad man's selfish love, which sees in the beloved object only a source of pleasure or happiness to himself; still, he had loved her, and he felt her desertion deeply.

But this was the least element in his trouble. Julia knew his guilty secret; she doubtless possessed the proof that in intention, if not in act, he was a poisoner.

Would she betray him? Surely, not willingly. But she might be seized with a fever, such as that which had stricken Lionel Westford, and in her delirium she might utter the accusing words which would lead, perhaps, step by step, to the discovery of all his crimes.

Ah, if the criminal could only foresee the agonies that follow the commission of crime, even when the torturing voice of conscience is dumb; if he could calculate the labour, the patience, the self-abnegation, the watchfulness which will be required of him during every hour of his ensuing existence, in which the one end and aim of his life will be to keep *that* secret,—surely the very selfishness which suggests the crime would restrain the hand of the criminal.

The search for Julia had been, so far, made in vain. Advertisements had been inserted in the papers; inquiries had been made in every direction, but without avail. If

she had read the appeals in those advertisements, Julia had been inexorable, for she had never answered them.

But Julia had not read those advertisements. While private detectives were searching for her in every direction suggested by Rupert Godwin, the missing girl had fled to a neighbourhood which the banker had never dreamt of suggesting.

She had dressed herself, upon the morning of her flight, in some dark homely garments which she had been making for the poor; and, thus disguised, with an unfashionable straw bonnet, and a thick veil over her face, she had walked to Hertford in the dewy morning, while it was yet scarcely light. She had taken the first train for London, stepping quite unobserved into a second-class carriage. From the station at King's Cross she had driven straight to Waterloo, going thence by express to Winchester. At the Winchester station she had taken a fly, which drove her to a quiet retreat in the New Forest.

In her journey thither she had evidently a settled purpose, for her conduct from first to last had betrayed no hesitation as to whither she should go.

Three or four days after the old clerk's visit to the lodging in the Waterloo-road, Clara Westford received a letter in the handwriting which had been so familiar to her in her early girlhood, when the deformed schoolmaster had devoted himself to her education, inspired by a passion which had been the keynote of his life,—such a passion as Quasimodo felt for the beautiful dancing-girl—such a passion as in the breast of Quasimodo's master, the priest of Nôtre Dame, called itself fatality.

The old clerk's letter was very brief:—

"I told you I could atone in some measure for the wrong I inflicted upon you when I imagined your father's treatment of me was inspired by your express request. You shall see that I can make some amends for having thus suspected you of conduct which was foreign to your noble nature. If you will come with your daughter to the bank parlour this day week, at twelve o'clock, you will receive my atonement; and at the same time you will, perhaps, experience the greatest and the happiest surprise that you have ever known in the whole course of your life.

"—Your respectful and obedient
"JACOB DANIELSON.

"*Tuesday morning.*"

A surprise! An atonement! It was quite in vain that Clara Westford perused and reperused the old clerk's letter in the hope of discovering something of its meaning.

A surprise—a happy surprise—wrote Jacob Danielson. Alas, what happy surprise could there be for her, since her husband, the lover of her youth, the adored friend and companion of her womanhood, met his fate at the hands of an assassin?

"Unless Jacob Danielson can bring the dead back to life, I know not what happiness he can give me," thought Clara mournfully.

She was almost crushed down by the weight of her sorrows. They had come upon her, one after another, without even a brief interval of peace. Only a short time had elapsed since her daughter had been restored to her, and already a new grief was racking the mother's heart.

Her son had never responded to that letter in which she

had told him of her meeting with Gilbert Thornleigh—a letter which was of a nature to demand an immediate answer.

Day after day she had expected the reply; but none had come—for the reader knows the cause of Lionel Westford's silence, and how little power he had to respond to that appalling communication. The mother wrote again and again, imploring some answer to her anxious letters; but still the post brought no tidings of the beloved son.

Mrs. Westford had no address, except the Hertford post-office, to which she could direct her letters. She believed her son to be living in the town of Hertford, and she had imagined that forgetfulness alone had prevented his sending her the address of the house in which he lived.

But as time wore on, and still no answer came to her letters, Clara Westford felt that something must have happened to her son. Lionel was the last in the world to neglect a mother's supplicating letters; he had always been the most attentive and devoted of sons.

"My boy is ill," exclaimed Clara, when she found herself no longer able to keep her uneasiness hidden from Violet. "He must be dangerously ill," she cried; "dying, perhaps; for if he were able to hold his pen, if he were able to dictate a letter, I am sure that he would not leave me in this state of suspense."

On the day after she had received Jacob Danielson's letter, Mrs. Westford determined on going to Hertford. Her little stock of money was nearly exhausted; but she had just enough to pay the expenses of the journey, and she had no longer the grim visage of starvation frowning upon her darkly in the future, for Violet's mysterious good fortune had changed the worldly position of the

widow and her daughter.

“Do not despair, dearest mother,” pleaded Violet; “even amidst all our bitter miseries, Providence has not wholly deserted us. What can be more providential than the chance by which I inherit a fortune from some mysterious benefactress, whose name I do not even know? Depend upon it, dearest mother, the turning-point has come on the dark road, and in future our path will be smoother than it has been during the last year, even though we may have little sunshine to illumine our lives,” murmured Violet sadly.

She was thinking of George Stanmore, the lover whose fancied inconstancy was the settled sorrow of her life—a grief endured so patiently, a burden borne with such Christian resignation, that it had left no shadow on the calm loveliness of her pensive face. Her beauty was altered in character since the days when she had wandered, light-hearted as some wood-nymph, in the depths of the New Forest; but it was even more exquisite now in its pensive gravity of expression than it had been when radiant with the smiles of careless girlhood.

Mrs. Westford set out alone for Hertford. Violet had entreated to be allowed to accompany her mother, but Clara refused.

“No, Violet,” she said; “Heaven only knows what I may have to go through. I may find my boy lying in his grave, buried by strangers who did not even know of his mother’s existence. I may find him on a sick-bed: in that case I need not tell you that I shall remain with him. But, whatever may happen, I will telegraph to you, Violet, if I am detained.”

It was with a very heavy heart that Clara Westford started on that journey. She seated herself in the corner of a second-class carriage, with her face hidden by a

shabby crape veil; and she took little notice of her fellow-passengers, or of the autumn landscape that spun past the open windows of the carriage. Her heart was oppressed by the anticipation of some calamity. The image of her beloved son, racked by sickness, or lying still in death, haunted her brain with a torturing persistence. The voices of her companions jarred upon her ears. It was so terrible to hear their careless laughter—their gay discussions of the pleasures awaiting them at the end of their journey—their eager talk of business to be done, and money to be gained, at this or that market-town—their speculation and argumentation about the state of the crops in the country they were passing through—while before her there was only a blank horizon, darkened by the shadow of a hideous fear. It seemed to her that her life and her sorrows must be exceptional in a world where people could be so busy and so free from care as all these fellow-passengers appeared to be.

At last she reached her destination, and a sickness like death itself came over her as she told herself that she would soon learn the worst. She went at once to one of the porters, and inquired her way from the station to the post-office.

Here she fancied that her suspense would end. The people belonging to the office would be able to tell her the address of her son, and she would have nothing to do but to go straight to his lodging.

But an unutterable despair took possession of her when the woman who answered her inquiries told her that she knew nothing whatever of the gentleman whose letters had been addressed to him under the name of Lionel Westford.

“We have so many people call for letters,” she said, “that it is quite impossible we can remember them all.”

On looking into the pigeon-hole where the letters addressed under the initial W. were deposited, the woman found three letters directed to Lionel Westford.

Clara asked permission to look at them, and found that they were her own three letters of inquiry, written one after the other during the period of her alarm respecting Lionel.

The woman returned them to the pigeon-hole, as she could give them up to no one but the person to whom they were addressed.

Mrs. Westford asked the postmistress if she remembered the gentleman who had been accustomed to call for letters bearing that address.

Yes, the woman remembered him perfectly. She had been struck by his good looks, his affable manner. She remembered the last time he called. It was on a very bright afternoon, but she could not say exactly how long ago.

Had he ever told her in what part of the town he lived?

No, he had been very reserved, though so pleasant-spoken. He had never said anything about himself.

After this, Clara Westford wandered hopelessly about the town until long after dark, making inquiries in every direction where she thought there might be the smallest chance of obtaining a clue to Lionel's whereabouts.

She went to a printseller's, to several booksellers', to all the inns, even to humble little taverns in obscure by-streets and alleys, where poverty alone would seek a resting-place. But there was only one answer to her inquiries. No one had heard the name of Westford—no one had met with any stranger from London answering to the description which Mrs. Westford gave of her son.

It was ten o'clock when Clara returned to the railway station, disconsolate and broken-hearted. Fortunately for her, the last train had not yet left; and after waiting some time she took her place in one of the second-class carriages, and was conveyed back to London as ignorant of her son's whereabouts as she had been when she set out that morning to seek for him.

Violet knew by her mother's face, the moment she looked at her, that no good tidings had greeted her at Hertford.

She knelt by Mrs. Westford's side, removed the heavy black shawl from her shoulders with gentle, caressing hands, and tried by every means in her power to console the unhappy woman.

"You have not found him, mother," she said. "I can see that by your face. But is it not better to be still uncertain of his fate than to know, perhaps, that we have lost him? There is always hope where there is uncertainty. Ill news travels fast, you know, dearest. I am sure we should have heard if anything serious had happened to my brother. If he had been seized with illness, we should have been told of it. He must have had letters about him containing our address, and in such cases there is always some good Samaritan to summon a sick man's relations. Do you know, mamma darling, I have an idea that the surprise alluded to in Mr. Danielson's letter must be something that concerns Lionel. Try to hope this, dearest; and do not give way to grief which may be entirely groundless."

With such a loving comforter, Clara Westford could not quite despair. At the worst, it was a relief not to have heard ill news of Lionel. He had left Hertford most likely. His letters had been intrusted to strangers, perhaps, to carry to the post, and had never been posted. And again, in spite of herself, Clara could not help feeling some confidence in the mysterious hints of the old clerk.

A surprise, and a happy surprise, he had written. Ah, surely some great joy must be in store for her. She had suffered so much, that it was scarcely unreasonable she should expect some blessing at the hands of Providence.

“But they cannot give me back the dead,” thought Clara. “I can only hope to go down to the grave in peace, with my children by my side. No power on earth can restore the lost, nor give me back the happy days in which my husband and I walked side by side in the dear old garden at the Grange.”

As she mused thus, the widow’s thoughts went back to that happy time. She fancied herself once more leaning on her husband’s arm—proud of him, and of his love; the happiest wife whose heart ever beat faster at the sound of a husband’s footstep.

On the day which had been mentioned in the clerk’s letter, Clara Westford and her daughter dressed themselves neatly in their mourning garments and walked into the City.

Clara’s mind had been much disturbed by the mysterious tenor of the old man’s letter.

That he should ask her to meet him in the bank parlour was in itself very extraordinary. That room was the sanctuary of Rupert Godwin; and the clerk must have unusual power if he could venture to make any appointment of his own in that apartment.

But the entire contents of the letter were a mystery to Clara, and she resolved on obeying the old clerk in blind confidence, since she was quite unable to penetrate his motives. His manner had impressed her with the perfect sincerity of his wish to serve her.

Thus it was that she presented herself at the bank in Lombard-street at the appointed hour, accompanied by

her daughter.

The two ladies were shown at once into the parlour, where they found Rupert Godwin seated at the table, with Jacob Danielson standing at the back of his chair.

CHAPTER XLVII.

RESURGAM.

Rupert Godwin had been summoned to the bank by a letter from his clerk.

“My dear sir,” wrote Jacob, “things are looking very black in the City, and the old rumour is beginning to get afloat again. You had better come to the office and look into matters yourself. I have made a business appointment for you to-morrow, at twelve sharp; and as it is an affair of some considerable importance I would recommend you to be punctual.—Obediently yours, J. D.”

This letter had been addressed to the banker’s West-end apartments; and it was this summons which had brought him to the bank about three minutes before Clara and Violet entered it.

For some time Rupert Godwin’s affairs had been gradually sinking back into the state in which they had been before his theft of the twenty thousand pounds intrusted to him by the sea captain.

That sum was not the tenth part of the amount that would have been needed to restore the firm to a solvent position. But it had been enough to stop the leak in the ship, and to enable the rotten old vessel to right herself for a time, while her captain sailed in search of new gold-fields.

Small depositors—always the first to take alarm—had been appeased. Suspicion had been set at rest by the

promptitude with which all demands were satisfied; and customers who had withdrawn their balances in a fever of alarm, had brought back their custom when the panic was over.

Unhappily for Rupert Godwin, this halcyon state of things could not endure for ever. The effects of the preceding year's commercial panic were still felt. The edifice of credit had been shaken to its foundations, and the enchanted temple still tottered, frail as some confectioner's fairy fabric of spun sugar.

There were prophetic rumours of an approaching crisis more alarming than that through which the commercial classes of London had passed, more or less scorched and scathed by the ordeal, so lately. There were those who said that the first blast of the trumpet which sounded the alarm in the halls of the Stock Exchange would ring the death-knell of Rupert Godwin's credit.

There was one who knew this only too well; and that one was the banker himself. He knew that an hour's run upon his bank would demonstrate the fact of his insolvency.

He had been insolvent for more than ten years, and had borne the burden of that guilty secret, knowing that whenever the crash came thousands of innocent people would suffer for the inordinate extravagance which had sapped the capital of one of the most respectable private banks in the metropolis.

Utterly indifferent as to the sufferings of other people, this knowledge had troubled Rupert Godwin very little. But he was considerably disturbed by the thought of his own ruin—his disgrace, and perhaps even poverty; or, at any rate, a miserable state of existence which to him would be little better than absolute indigence—a kind of suspension between the heaven of wealth and the hell of

penury. “Better to be an outcast and Bohemian, begging in the high-road by day and sleeping in an empty barn by night, than to drag out the remnant of my days as a dreary old twaddler in some suburban cottage, with a maid-of-all-work to wait upon me, and a garden thirty feet square to walk in,” the Sybarite said to himself as he contemplated the future. He had tried to make a purse for himself; but of late his mind had been entirely absorbed by considerations that were even more alarming than his financial difficulties; and he had not been able to garner any great store against the day of ruin. He had set aside something; but even that something would be wrested from him if he did not make his plans for a speedy escape from the financial storm whose first hoarse thunders already rumbled ominously in the distance. And those commercial tempests travel so quickly!

Upon his confidential clerk’s fidelity the banker relied with implicit confidence; not because he believed the clerk to be attached to his person, or bound to him by any sense of honour. Mr. Godwin had directed his attention to the vices rather than the virtues of his fellow-men. He had paid Danielson handsomely for fidelity in the past, and had promised him ample payment for fidelity in the future; and, as he looked upon good faith as a marketable commodity, to be purchased in any quantities at the current market rate, he was troubled by no doubt of his ally’s fidelity.

He came to the office this morning in no very pleasant frame of mind; but distrust of Jacob Danielson had no part in his conflicting doubts and difficulties.

“Well, Jacob,” he said, as he seated himself at his desk, “how are things looking?”

“As black as they can look,” answered the clerk, with a mixture of respect and indifference that always galled his master—“as black as they can look. People have begun to

talk; and when they once begin, it is not very easy to stop them. There may be a run upon the bank any day, and then the murder's out."

Rupert Godwin's nerves had been terribly shaken of late. He could not control a slight shuddering movement as the clerk pronounced that ghastly word "murder."

Before he could speak, one of the junior clerks opened the parlour-door and ushered in Mrs. Westford and her daughter.

The banker started violently, and half rose from his chair with a convulsive movement at the aspect of those two slender figures draped in solemn black.

"Who are these people?" he gasped. "I cannot see them. —Walters, take these ladies back to the public office; they can have no business here.—What is the meaning of this, Danielson?" added the banker, turning indignantly to the old clerk. "You told me you had arranged an important business meeting here at this hour. These people cannot possibly have any business to transact with me."

"O, yes, they have, sir," answered the clerk quietly. —"Sit down, ladies, pray. Mr. Godwin is rather unprepared for your visit, you see, as I have not found time to explain matters to him before your arrival. But he will find the business very simple—quite simple. Pray sit down."

The mother and daughter obeyed. Clara had not in any manner saluted the banker, nor he her, though they had looked at each other fixedly for a moment.

Mrs. Westford's face was pale, and rigid as the face of a statue.

Rupert Godwin's countenance had grown livid. The sudden appearance of those two women had inspired him with a strange fear.

As he turned indignantly towards the old clerk, something in Jacob Danielson's face told the banker that he was about to find a deadly foe in the man who had so long been his tool and accomplice.

"Insolent scoundrel!" he exclaimed, "how do you dare to defy me thus? Take your friends out of my room! I will not be intruded on by any one."

"These ladies are no friends of mine," answered the clerk; "though I shall be proud indeed if I can render them any service. They are no intruders here. They have a claim upon you, Mr. Godwin, and a very large one."

"You are mad!" exclaimed the banker contemptuously. "What claim can these ladies have upon me?"

"A very terrible one, it may be, Rupert Godwin," replied Clara Westford solemnly. "What if I come to claim justice upon the murderer of a beloved husband? Retribution is very slow sometimes; but it is none the less certain. Sooner or later the day of reckoning comes; if not in this world, in the next. Heaven have pity on those who are not allowed to expiate their iniquities upon earth!"

Rupert Godwin tried to carry matters with a high hand —but even his bravado failed him in this supreme moment of fear. His livid countenance, convulsed every now and then by sudden spasms, betrayed the state of his mind.

"We will not talk of retribution here," said Jacob Danielson. "It is only on a matter of business that these ladies have called on you this morning, Mr. Godwin. They come to claim the sum of twenty thousand pounds, intrusted to your care by Captain Harley Westford, of the *Lily Queen*, with five per cent. interest thereupon for the time the money has been in your hands."

Rupert Godwin laughed aloud. It was a wild spasmodic

kind of laugh, and by no means agreeable to hear.

"My good Danielson," he exclaimed, "you are evidently going mad. I had better send for the parish authorities and the parish strait-waistcoat."

"Not just yet," replied the clerk coolly. "You are rather fond of putting people into lunatic asylums, I know. But as I am not mad, your philanthropic and compassionate nature need not be troubled by any concern about me. Perhaps you'll be so kind as to pay these ladies the money they claim—twenty-one thousand pounds. Mrs. Westford's husband died suddenly; but he made his will, bequeathing all he possessed to his wife, with undivided power to administer his affairs. She has not yet gone through the usual formula; but as this is an exceptional case you can afford to waive ceremony, and pay Captain Westford's widow the money that belongs to her, without waiting for legal formalities. Here is the receipt signed by yourself, and witnessed by me."

The clerk produced an oblong slip of paper, which he held before the eyes of his master. Those eyes glared at the document with a blank stare of mingled astonishment and horror.

"Where," he gasped,—"where did you——"

"Where did I find it?" said the clerk, with supreme coolness. "Ah, to be sure. I was prepared to hear you ask that question. I'll tell you where I found it. On the night on which Harley Westford came to you at Wilmingdon Hall, to claim the money which this receipt represents, he wore a light overcoat. Ah, you remember it, I see. The night was warm; and when the Captain came into the dining-room, where you and I were lingering over our dessert, he carried his outer coat across his arm. When he left the dining-room he flung it down upon a chair. *I* found it there when I returned to the Hall, after missing

the train. I'm rather of an inquisitive disposition, and I had peculiar motives for my curiosity that night; so I took the liberty to examine the pockets in the Captain's overcoat. I was very well rewarded for my pains, for in the small breast-pocket I found *this*. You recognize it, Mr. Godwin, I can see. It is the receipt for which *you* searched the same pocket that night, but a little too late. You only half did your work when you stabbed Captain Westford in the back, and flung him down the cellar-steps, to lie and rot there unburied and forgotten."

"O, great Heaven!" shrieked Clara, with a wail of agony. "My husband was murdered then—by him; and you know the secret of his murder! You know, and you have never denounced the hellish assassin!"

"Hush, Mrs. Westford," cried the clerk, almost imperiously; "not a word! I told you that the greatest surprise, the *happiest* surprise you had ever experienced in your life, would come upon you to-day. Wait, and trust in me."

Mrs. Westford had risen in her sudden agony and terror; but overawed,—influenced, in spite of herself, by something in the old clerk's manner,—she sank back upon her chair, pale and breathless, waiting to hear more.

"Come, Mr. Godwin," said Jacob Danielson; "the best thing you can do is to pay this money quietly, and immediately. You would scarcely care to have any public inquiries made as to how I came into possession of this receipt."

"It is a forgery!" gasped the banker.

"Is it? That's a question which must be decided by a court of law, if you dispute the settlement of Mrs. Westford's claim. And if this case once gets into a court of

law, you may be sure it will be sifted to the very bottom. The mystery of that summer night at Wilmingdon Hall will be brought before the public, and then——”

Jacob Danielson uttered the last words very slowly.

“I will pay the money,” cried Rupert Godwin; “but you must give me time!”

“Not a day! Not an hour! I know the state of your affairs. This money shall be paid before these ladies leave this house. If you have not that amount of ready cash, you have convertible securities, and they must be melted at once. Nor is that all, Mr. Godwin. You must sign a paper acknowledging that the document under which you took possession of the Grange——”

“I will do no such thing!” answered the banker defiantly. Then, with a sudden burst of fury, he sprang upon the old clerk, and seized him by the throat.

“Villain! hypocrite! dog!” he cried, “you have taken my money, you have pretended to serve me, and now you turn upon me and betray me—you, my slave, my foot-ball, the creature that I have paid as I pay the lowest scullery-maid in my house! But I——”

He released his hold, for the door was opened, and one of the clerks looked in with a scared face. He had overheard the noise of the scuffle in the outer office.

But as Rupert Godwin had sunk back exhausted into his chair, and as Jacob Danielson was standing quietly by him in his usual deferential attitude when the man looked in, he murmured an apology and withdrew, closing the door behind him.

“You perceive, Mr. Godwin, that violence here is not quite so secure from detection as in the cellars of the northern wing. Every man’s house is his castle; but there is some difference between a haunted abbey in

Hertfordshire and an office in the heart of Lombard-street," said Jacob, with quiet significance. "I tell you again, you had better call your cashier, and order him to realize stock to the amount of twenty thousand pounds. How about those Canadian Grand-Trunk Debenture Bonds which you bought the other day? Ah, I had my eye upon you, you see, when you were quite unconscious of my watchfulness. That's a capital form of security. Safe as a bank-note; easy to realize; no fuss or bother involved in the transfer. You can sell those in the open market. We will talk of the forged documents afterwards."

Never was baffled fury more strongly visible in a human face than it was in the scowling visage of the banker, as he turned from the clerk and touched a little handbell on the table.

His summons was responded to in less than a minute. The same clerk who had looked into the room before looked in again.

"The cashier," said Rupert Godwin briefly.

The clerk retired, and another man presented himself.

"You realized some Mexican securities yesterday, by my order?" said the banker.

"I did, sir."

"To what amount?"

"Twenty-four thousand three hundred and twenty pounds."

"You will hand over bank-notes to the amount of twenty-one thousand pounds to this lady."

The banker pointed to Mrs. Westford. The cashier looked surprised; but he bowed in assent, retired, and presently reappeared with a packet of bank-notes.

"Twenty notes of five hundred each, and eleven notes

of a thousand each," said the cashier, as he handed the packet to his employer.

"Good. And now your deposit-receipt," said the banker to Jacob Danielson.

The clerk gave Rupert Godwin the oblong slip of paper with one hand, while with the other he received the packet of notes.

"There, Mrs. Westford, is the fortune amassed by your husband in years of hazardous adventure," said Jacob Danielson. "The documents relating to the Grange will be admitted as forgeries by Mr. Godwin. And you will be able to return to your home whenever you please."

"I cannot accept this money," answered Clara.

"But it is your own."

"It has passed through the hands of my husband's murderer. There is not one of these notes that, to my mind, is not stained with my husband's blood. It is not money which I want, Mr. Danielson, but justice—justice on the man who murdered my husband."

"She is mad!" cried Rupert Godwin hoarsely. "I will not be thus defied in my own house by a mad woman and a scoundrel. I will——"

His hand moved towards the bell, but he did not touch it.

"Ring that bell, Rupert Godwin," cried the old clerk; "or if you will not, I will."

The clerk's skinny fingers pressed the spring of the bell, —not once only, but three separate times.

"What is the meaning of this?" gasped the banker.

"It means that you have failed in the capacity of assassin as completely as you have failed in your

commercial career, Mr. Godwin," answered the clerk coolly.—"You shall have justice, Mrs. Westford," he continued, turning to Clara, "but not on the murderer of your husband, for he survived the stroke that was intended to be his death-blow. He is here to denounce, in his own person, the would-be assassin and the daring swindler."

As the old clerk spoke, the powerful form of the merchant captain appeared upon the threshold, and in the next moment Clara Westford flung herself into her husband's arms with a wild hysteric shriek.

It was indeed as if the dead had been restored to life.

Harley Westford had changed terribly since the hour when he had last stood in that room, in all the pride and vigour of manhood. His stalwart figure had wasted, though it still retained its noble outline. His handsome face was pale and careworn; dark circles surrounded his frank blue eyes, and haggard lines had been drawn about his mouth; but as he clasped his wife to his breast, his countenance was illumined by a light which restored to it, for a moment, all its former brightness.

"It is not a dream!" cried Clara; "it is not a dream! O, Harley, Harley, is it really you? I have suffered so much —so much! I can scarcely bear this surprise."

These words were spoken amidst hysteric sobs that almost choked their utterance. Violet was sobbing on her father's shoulder. The Captain looked from his wife to his daughter. Unspeakable affection beamed from his countenance; but he was unable to utter a word. He sank into a chair presently, quite overcome, and his wife and child knelt one on each side of him.

Rupert Godwin looked on this picture with the gaze of a baffled fiend. He had the passions of an Iago, but not the triumph which gladdened the heart of the Venetian

schemer even in the hour of defeat. He had not the grim satisfaction of seeing the ruin he had worked. He had achieved nothing—not even the misery of the rival he hated.

“I told you you only half did your work that night at Wilmingdon Hall. With all your cleverness, you’ve proved no better than a bungler!” exclaimed the old clerk triumphantly.

The banker groaned aloud; but he uttered no exclamation of surprise—no questioning word. Ruin had fallen upon him—so entire, so unexpectedly, that he was quite unable to struggle longer with the awful shadow of Nemesis. He could only abandon himself to a sullen despair. Remorse was a stranger to *his* nature: remorse is the sorrow we feel for the wrong we have done to others. It was only on his own account that Rupert Godwin suffered.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

“VENGEANCE IS MINE.”

After the first wild confusion of that scene in the bank parlour there was a pause, a brief silence, which Jacob Danielson was the first to break.

“When you flung your victim to his dark hiding-place in the cellar under the northern wing,” said the old clerk, addressing himself slowly and deliberately to his employer, “you might as well have taken the trouble to ascertain that he was really dead. It would have been a more business-like mode of proceeding, and I am surprised that you, a business man, should have failed to adopt it: but, perhaps, your courage failed you at the last moment, and you had not sufficient firmness to remain by the body of your victim, and to listen for the last pulsation of the heart which you had done your best to put to silence. However this may have been, you left your work half undone. And when I returned to Wilmingdon Hall, after contriving to miss my train, I returned in time to save at least the life of your intended victim. I had suspected some sinister motive in your desire to get rid of me, and I managed to lose the train, after having dismissed your servant. I was thus free to hurry back to the park, and to re-enter the grounds unobserved. I made my way rapidly towards the house, and the nearest way took me past the north garden. In one of the windows of the deserted wing I saw a light shining through the chinks in the shutters. Heavy and ponderous though those shutters are, they were not strong enough to conceal the

secrets which you would have hidden behind them. I crept softly towards the window, and should have looked in through the chink, but the post of spy was already occupied. An old man, a gardener, was standing with his face flattened against the window, peeping into the room. When I saw this I crept away as quietly as I had approached, and went round to the occupied portion of the house. I went to the dining-room, where I took the opportunity to secure that deposit-receipt which has just proved so valuable to Mrs. Westford. Five minutes after I had seated myself, you made your appearance. Your face, your manner, both told me that something terrible had happened in that deserted room, in spite of your wonderful self-command. When you left me, I went straight to the window where I had seen the light. There the old gardener was lying senseless on the ground. I stooped over him, and found that he was in a kind of swoon. Then I felt convinced some hideous crime had been committed in that room, and that the witness of it had fallen senseless, horror-stricken with the awful sight he had beheld. I peeped into the room, but I could see nothing. All was dark. Then I remembered that during my earliest visits to the Hall I had heard of an underground passage leading from the grotto to the cellars of the northern wing, and communicating by means of a staircase with the ground floor. I determined on groping my way into this passage, and from thence to the room where I felt convinced a horrible deed had been done. I returned to the house, and waited in the dining-room till you had gone to your own apartments. I then went to the servants' hall, where I procured a dark lantern, under pretence of searching for a purse I had lost in coming through the grounds; and, armed with this, I reached the grotto unobserved, entered the subterranean passage, followed its windings to the cellars, and then groped along to the cellar staircase, intending to penetrate to the

room above. But I had no occasion to do so, for at the foot of the cellar-stairs I stumbled upon the body of the captain yonder.

“I tore open his waistcoat, which was soaked with blood; and when I felt for the beating of the heart, a faint throb told me that the murderer had not completed his work. I found the wound, and staunched it with a woollen handkerchief from my neck; then of a heap of straw and rubbish which I discovered in a corner I made a kind of bed, on which I laid the unconscious victim of an intended assassination.

“Having done this, I hurried back to the gardens, returned to the house, allowed one of the servants to conduct me to my room; and to all appearance retired for the night. But no sooner was the household wrapped in slumber, or at least in silence—for surely *one* member of that household could have slept little that night—no sooner was all quiet, than I crept from my room, left the house, and went to a little inn in the neighbourhood where I was known, and where I hired a horse and gig on the plea of having lost the mail-train, and wanting to drive to London in the dead of the night rather than miss an early appointment on the following morning.

“With this horse and gig I returned to the park, and drove to a sheltered spot near the entrance of the grotto. Then the most difficult part of my work had to be done. Alone and unaided I half carried, half dragged the unconscious sea captain from the cellar to the place where I had left the gig. I contrived to fasten him securely in the vehicle, and then drove at a walking pace to a house I had known in the past, and where I was sure of finding easy admission for my almost lifeless charge.

“That house was the Retreat; a private lunatic asylum, kept by a man whose life I knew to be one long career of charlatanism and villany. There I knew that only one

question would be asked: Was I prepared to pay for the care of the patient? If my answer to that inquiry was satisfactory, all would be settled.

"I drove slowly along the lonely road leading to the Retreat. I met only one solitary horseman, and he asked me if my friend sitting in a heap at the bottom of the gig was ill or drunk. I answered, 'Drunk,' and passed on without further question.

"Arrived at the Retreat I rang up the attendants, and was received by Dr. Wilderson Snaffley, who rose from his comfortable bed to see me. I told him that my charge was a relation who had stabbed himself in a fit of lunacy, induced by delirium tremens; and that in order to keep his infirmity a profound secret, I had brought him straight to the Retreat, where I knew every effort would be made to save his life. I said that I was prepared to pay liberally for his maintenance.

"That was quite enough. Dr. Wilderson Snaffley examined his still unconscious patient; but he did not ask me any troublesome questions, nor did he even remark that people do not usually stab themselves *in the back* when they endeavour to commit suicide.

"You will ask me, Clara Westford, why I acted thus—why I did not denounce the would-be assassin, and restore Harley Westford to the wife and children who loved him. I answer you, that one fatal passion had warped my nature, and transformed me into something between a madman and a drunkard. It pleased me to think that, by keeping the secret of Mr. Godwin's crime, I should be revenged upon you, Clara; for I had loved you, and I believed that my presumptuous love had been revenged by you with the cruel pride of a woman who thinks it sport to trample on the heart of the plebeian wretch who dares to adore her. I sought for power over Rupert Godwin—for since my blighted youth had passed

into premature old age, avarice had been the ruling passion of my life; and, possessed of the secret of Harley Westford's supposed murder, I knew that I should have unlimited command over the purse of my employer. Thus a double motive prompted me to secrecy. And for more than a year I have kept my secret, disturbed by no pang of remorse, moved by no contrition, until destiny brought me once more face to face with the woman I had once so fatally loved.

"Then all at once the ice melted, the hardened nature softened, and I could no longer endure the thought of what I had done.

"I sought you out, Mrs. Westford, and from your own lips I discovered how deeply I had wronged your noble nature. From that moment my course lay clear before me: the only atonement in my power was to undo what I had done. For that purpose I went to the madhouse where your husband was hidden. A few words to Dr. Wilderson Snaffley, informing him that circumstances were altered with me, and that I was no longer able to pay for my patient, were quite sufficient.

"The learned and conscientious physician discovered immediately that his charge was quite well, and perfectly able to enter the world again. I was thus enabled to quit the Retreat with Captain Westford as my companion. But we were obliged to leave behind us a patient whom we should have been glad to bring with us. That patient, Mrs. Westford, is no other than your son, to whom the finger of Providence had indicated the secret of his father's attempted murder, and whom Mr. Godwin incarcerated in a prison which was intended to entomb him until he was transferred from that living grave to a more comfortable resting-place in some obscure churchyard. Had Lionel Westford been placed in any other lunatic asylum than the Retreat, you might have

had some difficulty in discovering his prison house. Fortunately, he was confided to the care of Dr. Wilderson Snaffley and father and son met beneath that gentleman's hospitable roof.—A strange meeting, was it not, Rupert Godwin, between the son who believed his father had been murdered, and the father who never thought to look upon a familiar face again?

"But Providence sometimes brings about very strange meetings. Lionel Westford's release from imprisonment under Dr. Snaffley's tender care will be easily managed, I daresay. The doctor will not be particularly anxious to retain his patient when he discovers that his wealthy patron is a bankrupt and a felon.—That is all I have to tell, Captain Westford; it is for you to seek redress for the wrongs that have been done to you and yours. An aggravated attempt at assassination is a crime rather heavily punished even by our mild legislature."

"Stop!" cried Harley Westford, holding up his hand, with a warning gesture; "'Vengeance is mine' saith the Lord. The law of the land will have very little hold upon that man. Look at Rupert Godwin's face. Send for a doctor, some one." There was sudden confusion and alarm. The clerk loosened his employer's cravat, while Captain Westford opened the door of the outer office and despatched a messenger post haste for the nearest surgeon.

Rupert Godwin had fallen back in his chair a lifeless, shapeless heap of stricken mortality. The fevered, unresting brain, so long kept on the rack, had succumbed at last to a paralytic shock of an aggravated character. For weeks past the banker had been subject to convulsive starts and unwonted nervous sensations; but these sensations had affected him at long intervals, and had been very transient in their nature. They had therefore caused no alarm in the breast of the unhappy wretch who

had so many other reasons for fear.

The shock of Danielson's demand, of Harley Westford's reappearance, the overwhelming sense of failure and ruin, had been too much for even that vigorous intellect. The chord, so long strained to its utmost tension, snapped suddenly, and Rupert Godwin became a creature whom his worst enemies could afford to pity.

A medical man came in hot haste to the bank parlor, and then another, and another, till there was quite a bevy of solemn-looking gentlemen hovering over the prostrate man. The tidings of Rupert Godwin's affliction had spread like wildfire; and before his attendants had carried the heavy lifeless form to a sofa in an adjoining room, the fact that the banker had been stricken by paralysis was common talk on 'Change. Those who had prophesied the downfall of his house shrugged their shoulders, and lowered the corners of their mouths ominously.

"This will bring matters to a crisis," said one.

"How do we know that he hasn't made away with himself?" asked another.

The medical gentlemen announced that the spark called life was not extinguished, although the other and more subtle flame called consciousness had gone out, never again to illumine this earth for Rupert Godwin.

There was very little hope of his recovery, the doctors said; but their looks and tones implied that there was no hope. The stricken wretch lay with his dim eyes half shut; and his medical attendants said that he might lie thus for hours—or, indeed, for days.

It was even possible that he might continue to live in that miserable state; and thus the Westfords left him to the care of his clerk Danielson.

"He hasn't a friend in the world, or a creature who ever

loved him, except his daughter," said the clerk; "and even she has deserted him. I'll look after him somehow or other for the rest of his life. I've nothing particular to do with myself or my money, so I may as well take care of him. I must get him away from this place, by hook or by crook; for there may be a run on the bank to-morrow, and when people find out the state of the case they may want to tear Mr. Godwin to pieces."

In the course of that afternoon the clerk contrived to remove the awful wreck of humanity which had once been his employer. He carried Mr. Godwin to a place of safety. Not to Wilmingdon Hall; for that splendid mansion, with all its treasures, would in all probability fall very speedily into the hands of the officials of the Bankruptcy Court, to be dealt with for the benefit of the banker's creditors, or to be mysteriously absorbed in the legal costs attendant on his bankruptcy.

The shelter to which Jacob Danielson took his employer was a very humble one. It was a second floor in a little square behind the Borough, where Mr. Danielson had been for some years a lodger.

Here, upon a flock-bed, the banker lay for some dreary days and nights, staring at the bare wall opposite him; and even the man who watched him so closely failed to discover the precise moment in which the vacant stare of idiocy changed to the blindness of death.

Thus closed the existence of a man who had drained the cup of life's excitements and enjoyments to the very dregs, and who had tasted to the uttermost the bitterness of the drops at the bottom of the chalice. There was an inquest, very quietly conducted, and the usual verdict of "Death from natural causes;" and this was all. The secret of Rupert Godwin's crimes was known only to his confidential clerk, and those who had suffered so heavily at his hands.

But many knew and lost by his commercial disasters, his reckless speculation, his unjustifiable extravagance, by which the foundations of a once substantial house of business had been undermined, until the whole fabric fell in one mass of ruin. Many an innocent victim suffered—many an impoverished creditor cursed the name of Rupert Godwin.

Let us turn to a brighter picture. Let us turn to that pleasant home on the borders of the New Forest, that quaint old dwelling-place surrounded by picturesque gardens, the beloved home in which Clara Westford had passed all her happy married life.

Once more she could call that dear home her own. Once more she wandered in the well-kept gardens, where the autumn flowers bloomed gaily under a bright October sky—where the rustle of the forest leaves fell upon her ear like a soothing murmur of loving voices, as she walked on the smooth lawn, leaning—O how proudly!—on her husband's arm. Once more she occupied the pretty rooms, which bore no evidence of a stranger's occupation, for an old servant of the Westfords had been left in charge of the Grange during Rupert Godwin's brief hold upon the estate, and the smallest trifles had been held sacred for the love of an exiled house.

She did not return alone with her loved husband. Lionel went with them, and Violet—happy in the society of the father and mother they loved so tenderly.

But the brother and sister soon found another kind of happiness in other society; for in one of their forest walks they came upon a young man sketching, with a beautiful girl dressed in deep mourning by his side.

The girl was Julia Godwin, and the artist was Edward Godwin, the young man whom Violet had known under the name of George Stanmore.

It was to the protection of her brother that Julia had fled, when her father's presence had become unendurable. Edward Godwin had returned to England after an artistic tour in Belgium, and had established himself again in the little cottage in the New Forest, hoping to meet his promised wife once more among the shadowy walks she had so dearly loved.

His surprise on hearing that the Westfords had left the Grange, and that the estate had become the property of a Mr. Godwin, a banker in Lombard-street, was extreme. He wrote immediately to his sister announcing his whereabouts, and asking her if she could throw any light upon the circumstances under which his father had acquired this new property.

The reply to that letter came in the person of Julia herself. She told her brother that she had left home because that home had become intolerable to her; but he could not extort from her any account of the causes that had made it so. She was loyal to the father whom she had once so dearly loved, whom she still thought of with a passionate regret.

Here, in this quiet haven, the news of her father's death reached her. That event, which at one time would have been so bitter a calamity for her, seemed now a kind of relief. He was dead—and at rest. He could be called before no earthly tribunal to answer for his crimes. He had gone to be judged by the All-just, and the All-merciful.

If he had but repented—

That was a question which no earthly lips could answer. Julia fondly hoped that repentance had come to the sinner before the closing-in of that dark scene, which she contemplated with unutterable horror.

Strange explanations followed the first surprise of that

meeting. The presence of Julia Godwin compelled the revelation of a secret which until this moment the painter had hidden from the woman he loved. He was compelled to tell Violet that his name was not George Stanmore, but Edward Godwin; and that he was the son of that unhappy man whose bankruptcy and death had lately been recorded in all the newspapers.

Violet did not tell her lover that his father had been the cruel enemy of her family—the sole cause of the sad interval of poverty and suffering during which she had been absent from the Grange. The generous girl had not the heart to tell Edward Godwin this; but she received his explanations very coldly notwithstanding.

“I wonder you remember me now, Mr. Godwin,” she said proudly, “for when you saw me last, on the stage of the Circenses, you did not seek to renew your acquaintanceship with me.”

And then Edward’s earnest protestations convinced her in a few moments that he had not recognized her, and that he had only been struck by what he imagined was a most wonderful accidental likeness. After that all went smoothly between the reunited lovers, and they began to talk of how the secret of their love was to be broken to the merchant captain and his wife.

They were alone together under the arching trees; for, by the merest accident of course, Julia and Lionel had strolled one way, while Edward and Violet went the other.

“I can ask for your hand boldly now, Violet dearest,” said Edward Godwin. “Fortune has been very good to me since last we met. My pictures have been successful, both in English and Continental Exhibitions, and I have received very liberal prices for my work. I am growing rich, darling, and I have splendid prospects for the future.

I want nothing but a dear little wife to sit beside my easel —a sweet household divinity, whose fair young face will inspire me with all kinds of poetical ideas. My life has been a very hard one, Violet; and when I was reticent as to my own history, it was because the subject was a most painful one. There was bad blood between my father and me. I cannot speak harshly of the dead, and therefore I will say nothing as to the cause of our quarrel. But we did quarrel, and we parted at once, and for ever. I went into the world penniless, and I have lived by my pencil ever since, having sworn to starve sooner than touch a sixpence of my father's money. There is no spur so sharp as poverty. I have worked hard, and I have been amply rewarded for my work."

It is needless to linger with these lovers. They walked long under the shadow of those solemn forest trees, and they could have walked there for hours with no sense of weariness, with no consciousness of the monotony of their conversation, though it was very monotonous.

While they lingered in the red westering light, another pair of lovers strolled near them, arm-in-arm. Lionel had declared his affection for Julia, and had won from her the confession that he had been loved almost from the first. But she did not tell him how she had saved his life when he had so nearly fallen a victim to a midnight assassin.

That night Lionel and Violet confessed all to their parents.

The communication was by no means a pleasant one to Harley Westford and his wife. Imagine the countenances of Signor and Signora Capulet, when informed that their sole daughter and heiress has set her affections on the young scion of the Montagues!

It was difficult for Clara Westford to believe that the son of Rupert Godwin could be worthy of any woman's

love, much less of the love of that pearl amongst women, her own idolized daughter.

But idolized children generally have their own way, however irrational their caprices may appear. And after considerable pleading, Violet and Lionel won Clara and her husband to consent to receive Rupert Godwin's children.

When once this consent had been gained, all the rest was easy. Edward Godwin was not a man to be misunderstood by his fellow-men; and the acquaintance which Harley Westford had so reluctantly begun speedily promised to ripen into friendship. "Is the young man to suffer because his father was a scoundrel?" the sailor asked himself. "That may be the letter of the old Jewish law, but I'm sure it isn't Christianity. The Teacher who refused to cast a stone at a guilty woman would have been the last to punish her innocent children. Let young Godwin stand upon his own merits; and if I find he's a good fellow, he shall marry my daughter, in spite of the scar under my left shoulder which bears witness against his father."

Mrs. Westford had been still less inclined than her husband to look kindly on the children of her merciless enemy; but even she was not inexorable. Julia's grace and beauty—to say nothing of her evident devotion to Lionel —were quite irresistible; and before long the visitors from the forest cottage were as gladly welcomed at the Grange as any guests who had ever crossed the hospitable threshold.

It was early in the following June, yet quite midsummer weather, when the bells of the little village church pealed gaily for a double wedding.

Two fairer brides have rarely stood before an altar; two nobler bridegrooms seldom pledged the solemn vows

which influence a lifetime.

Captain Westford and his wife looked on with eyes that were dimmed by a mist of happy tears. Their own life lay before them, bright and sunny as it had been when they too had stood side by side before the altar of a sacred fane. Might these two young lives, now beginning, be as happy! That was the prayer breathed silently from the heart of husband and wife.

Two pretty little rustic villas arose in the neighbourhood of the Grange. Not the builder's ideal of Italian-Gothic, with a rickety-looking campanello tower for the stowage of empty crates and servants' luggage, but trim little Tudor cottages, with broad stone-mullioned windows and roomy porches—a happy blending of the substantial and picturesque.

Edward Godwin's pencil soon won for him a world-wide fame; but he was known only to the world by the name he had assumed when he first met Violet at the county-ball and in the forest glades.

Lionel, who had always been at heart a painter, followed the profession of his brother-in-law, and in his own style was almost equally successful.

If he had loved art for no other reason, he would have loved it very dearly for the sake of that meeting in the printseller's shop, when he looked for the first time on the beautiful face of his wife.

And thus the curtain falls upon three happy homes—three united households, in which the days glide smoothly by, across whose threshold the demon Discord never passes; households on which the angels may look with approving smiles—households wherein "Love is lord of all."

THE END

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Transcriber's Notes

Obvious typographical errors and punctuation errors have been silently corrected after careful comparison with other occurrences within the text and consultation of external sources.

Some hyphens in words have been silently removed and some silently added when a predominant preference was found in the original book.

Except for those changes noted below, all misspellings in the text and inconsistent or archaic usage have been retained.

- Contents: 'Julia's Protege' replaced by 'Julia's Protégé'.
- Page 8: 'the penniless hidalgoes' replaced by 'the penniless hidalgos'.
- Page 61: 'doated with senile fondness' replaced by 'doted with senile fondness'.
- Page 74: 'the nose, Anatasia' replaced by 'the nose, Anastasia'.
- Page 94: 'a doating father' replaced by 'a doting father'.
- Page 110: 'words in replp' replaced by 'words in reply'.
- Page 141a: 'horror took possesion' replaced by 'horror took possession'.
- Page 141b: 'would be necesary' replaced by 'would be necessary'.
- Page 149: 'in the civiliszd world' replaced by 'in the civilized world'.
- Page 154: 'for the first sime' replaced by 'for the first time'.
- Page 157: 'to the effect thal' replaced by 'to the effect that'.
- Page 173: 'the chief subects' replaced by 'the chief subjects'.
- Page 176: 'there's an undergound' replaced by 'there's an underground'.
- Page 178: 'For sometime she' replaced by 'For some time

she’.
- Page 194: ‘had scrupuously avoided’ replaced by ‘had scrupulously avoided’.
- Page 203: ‘drawing-room as cooly’ replaced by ‘drawing-room as coolly’.
- Page 237a: ‘Good-morning, Mr. Grainger’ replaced by ‘Good morning, Mr. Granger’.
- Page 237b: ‘Stay, Mr. Grainger’ replaced by ‘Stay, Mr. Granger’.
- Page 242: ‘swingeing canter’ replaced by ‘swinging canter’.
- Page 244: ‘instrusted his beloved burden’ replaced by ‘intrusted his beloved burden’.
- Page 266: ‘a practical investigaton’ replaced by ‘a practical investigation’.
- Page 267: ‘prepared by Dr. Snaffle’ replaced by ‘prepared by Dr. Snaffley’.
- Page 274: ‘escape faom danger’ replaced by ‘escape from danger’.
- Page 280: ‘duly set set forth’ replaced by ‘duly set forth’.
- Page 305: ‘unable to struggel’ replaced by ‘unable to struggle’.
- Page 311: ‘stare of idiotcy’ replaced by ‘stare of idiocy’.
- Page 314: ‘reluctantly begun speedly’ replaced by ‘reluctantly begun speedily’.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK RUPERT GODWIN ***

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